Teaching trainee teachers to meet the needs of autistic pupils: 'How the devil do we do that in the time available?'

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As of this year, all Initial Teacher Training (ITT) must include training in autism. This is, of course, excellent news – but it does beg the question as to what this training should usefully include.

I have been asking this question of our trainee teachers. What would they find most useful in training to meet the needs of the autistic pupils in their classes? Given the intense demands on their time, what do they feel would be the most effective content for the session aimed at helping them to understand autism?

What comes through most clearly as an answer is that trainees want to hear from people with autism. They want the 'voice' if individuals who self-identify as autistic to help them to understand what having autism is like.

I think this makes sense. It ties is with the 'nothing about us without us' agenda which emerged from the disability activism movement of the 1990s which articulates that people with a disability should be fully involved in all decisions around that disability, and also – importantly – it is likely to be effective. As far back as 1997 Beattie, Anderson and Antonak compared the effect of showing positive film images of people with disabilities to trainee teachers to that of showing the same film with an additional input by a lecturer with an overt physical disability. They found that the attitudes of the trainee teachers were not altered by the film, but only after the input from the disabled lecturer. It seems likely that input into ITT will be more effective if it is delivered by, or at least enriched by, input by autistic individuals.

But there is a problem. It is generally recognised that autism is a heterogenic condition. One person with autism is not going to experience the world, or even their own autism, in the same way as the next. The perspective of a person with autism is just that: the perspective of that one person. As Alexander Pope would caution, 'A little learning is a dangerous thing'. May it not be that trainees, hearing one perspective, might believe this to be too neatly the key to understanding that of their pupils? And equally, how does the autistic population feel about being represented

by one voice? I was recently lucky enough to hear a talk given by Ros Blackburn, who is an articulate and engaging speaker who describes her own experience of autism with remarkable clarity and insight. I left the talk feeling that it had taught me a great deal - yet when I asked a student with autism what he thought, his response was, 'I didn't really learn anything because she's not like me'.

So, there is a conundrum. It must be good practice to include the voice of people with autism in ITT, yet that practice may of itself be restricted and inherently limited.

Yet, perhaps we are missing something fairly obvious here. Although statistically in the minority, people with autism are also – well – ordinary. They are all around us; one in every 100 of us is autistic. Why are we suggesting that the only way to capture the autistic perspective is by inviting in 'others' to address our societal group?

I asked a class of some 80+ second year BA Education undergraduate to self-categorise themselves as either 'knowing' or 'not knowing' someone with autism, a term which I left deliberately vague. There was no-one in that class who self-identified as autistic themselves, which was sad but statistically possible. Worryingly, though, 64% of the students self-classified as 'not knowing' someone with autism. I say worryingly, as these numbers do not add up.   If people with autism make up over 1% of the population (Brugha, T. et al., 2012), 2nd year undergraduate students should have had far greater exposure to people with autism than they are aware. Estimating 'personal network size' is a complicated business (for example, McCormick, Salganik & Zheng, 2010), but even conservative estimates on the amount of people the average person 'knows' puts it at over 400. Statistically, then – and I acknowledge that my approach here is seriously unscientific – surely it should be the norm for everyone to 'know' someone with autism?

So, being autistic is both ordinary and extraordinary. We are very good, I believe, at seeing it as 'extraordinary' and specifically as seeing people with autism as being 'other'. In educational terms, we see it as being 'special', and having autism as having 'special' educational needs. I fully endorse this view: people with autism certainly do have needs that are different from those of the predominant neuro-type, and there is a great deal we should and sometimes do put in place to

support their learning. But autism is also 'normal'; it is one way of being a human being; it is an intrinsic element of our society and it is certainly 'normal' to that person. We need, I believe, to take a close look at our positioning of it as 'other'.

The 'mere-exposure effect' (Zajonc, 1968) suggests that familiarity with an object will tend to increase a subject's preference for that object. This theory has been used to explore racial prejudice (Zebrowitz, White and Wieneke, 2008), attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities (Li and Wang, 2013; Rillotta, 2007) and on peer attitudes on first meeting with adults with autism (Sasson and Morrison, 2017). Each of these studies suggests that exposure to members of the targeted group may result in a positive response from the participants. Awareness of autistic people in society may not simply help with the education of educators but may help those educators to respond to those pupils at a fundamental level. The 'voice' of people with autism is not, I suggest, something that needs to be flown in to training as an addition to the main curriculum, however valuable. Rather, we need to encourage the emergence of a society where having autism is both visible and accepted.

This is all a long way from considering what the content of the perhaps 90-minute input on autism that teacher training might include. We need to think long and hard about how to make the best use of that valuable input, but it must not end there. Values and attitudes begin in childhood, and teachers have a huge impact on the formation of those values and attitudes.   I believe that it is essential that we ensure that our trainee teachers are not only prevented from being ignorant about autism, but are supported to recognise, respect and properly understand the perspective of people with autism in the wider society which surrounds us.

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