

CLARE KERMOND

WHAT AUTISTIC SECONDARY
STUDENTS TELL US ABOUT SCHOOL
AND THE CHANGE THEY WANT TO SEE

The literature tells us:

Poorer outcomes across broad experience of school, social and academic

- Fewer friends, more limited social networks
- More teasing, verbal aggression, bullying. More reactive aggression
- Poorer grades, lower test scores. Severely challenged by executive function (planning, time management, organization)

Autism and adolescence

Autism and teenage years, a perfect storm

- Communication challenges magnified as social demands become more complex
- Higher risk of social isolation, depression
- Anxiety far higher rate than typically developing adolescents. More than 50% have anxiety/depression. Risk of suicidal behaviour increased

Talking about them, not listening to them: Limited research into experience of autistic secondary students; often fails to include firsthand perspective of students (Milton, Mills & Pellicano, 2012);



Autistic perspective absent from educational planning, policies, professional development; students/families excluded from developing processes at schools, eg Individual Learning Plans, transition programs

How do we address this gap?

Research question:
What do autistic students, their families and educators identify as the enablers and inhibitors of a successful secondary school experience?



RESEARCH STRUCTURE

STUDY 1 Scoping Review. Map existing research into experience of secondary school for autistic students. Identify gaps.



STUDY 2 Critical Participatory Action Research. Recruited: 10 autistic secondary students, 10 parents of autistic students, 10 educators. Semi structured interviews. Feedback. Reference group (autistic adults, parents, teachers)



STUDY 3 Guidelines for autism-informed places of learning. Based on participant interviews, iterative feedback. Focused scoping review.

STUDY 2 FINDINGS:

What autistic students report

Most felt negative about school: nervous, sad, stressed, not looking forward to it

All said peers a key reason for feelings about school (positive and negative)

Classrooms too noisy, crowded, exhausting, hard to take breaks

Yard too noisy, not comfortable participating

Most felt teachers did not like them 'just the way they are'

What the students said:

- “They have no idea, they try to be supportive, but they really don’t know what they’re doing. They accept you but it doesn’t mean they like you” (M2).
- “Because you get good grades, they don’t see that you’re struggling” (FS1)
- “Teachers like the way I am when I’m like all the other students, but they get a bit annoyed at me when I need extra time” (FS1)
- “A perfect school would be one where you have well trained teachers who are trained to handle both the normal kids (sic) and every other kids with any form of disability.”(M3)
- “None of them are really trained to deal with anything other than neurotypical, so when you don’t behave like they expect, they don’t know what to do” (M2).
- “I like a teacher who’ll just listen to me ... I’m under your care, I’m looking for a way to share ... you want to listen, to encourage me” (M4)

If you could imagine your ideal school

Teachers who understand autism, and how it impacts me

Teachers who have had training in autism

Flexible teaching and assessment, eg based on special interests

Easy to take breaks and a quiet, safe place

Quiet areas

Support to participate

CONCLUSION

Key findings

Autistic students tell us a difference story about school to parents or educators

They often find school stressful, uncomfortable and isolating

Autistic students prioritise friendship, want peers/teachers to understand autism and individual impacts

Students want change at school around friendship, participation, flexible learning/assessments

Parents, educators and students agree: educators need more/better training in autism



LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY



Olga Tennison
Autism Research Centre



**THANK YOU
FOR LISTENING**

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