Innovative approaches to preparing children on the autistic spectrum to be citizens of the twenty-first century

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Abstract

The debate remains within England as to how to provide the best possible educational provision for children on the autistic spectrum. Some argue for complete integration of these children in mainstream schooling; others support the development of bases outside mainstream education to support these children with diverse needs. The paper presents a case study from one local authority in England of its strategy for supporting children with autism and some of the challenges which this strategy meets in implementation. It considers the local authority's provision of specially developed small units (eight children) to cater for these children's needs. These bases have been developed over a period of eight years and the paper will report on some of the challenges in creating these bases. The collected data also include children's own comments together with those of their parents and educators within the units. Field notes and classroom observations are also analysed alongside these comments. The data suggests that a focused approach in a small unit setting can provide significant increases in the ability of young people to develop more appropriate social skills and emotional resilience and awareness – key attributes for future citizens. The paper concludes with recommendations for future practice which emerge from the data.

Necessary social attributes of citizenship

Citizenship may be perceived in many ways by researchers and scholars from different disciplines and perspectives. In basic practical terms, and in an education context, Citizenship may be seen to include: the ability to interact with others in a way which is mutually beneficial; the ability to understand others, especially their perspectives and feelings (social empathy); and the ability to gauge social situations (appropriate cognitive awareness). This allows individuals an ability to access social networks and to feel part of a wider network. At the same time, knowledge and skills derived from areas of the curriculum such as Geography, History, Social Sciences and the study of Literature provide the basis for informing the development of citizenship and ability to consider citizenship in a wider context, than simply the local community.

Challenges posed by autism

There are numerous difficulties posed by autism for individuals: poor social interaction; lack of social empathy; poor social communication; high levels of anxiety; rigidity of thought; and sensory issues. Any or all of these can have a negative effect on an individual attempting to develop the social and emotional skills needed to interact with peers and the wider community.

Difficulty in developing appropriate social interaction is perhaps an aggregated effect and the reason behind this need consideration. A lack of social empathy, linked in with poor theory of Mind (Baren-Cohen et al, 1985) makes it more difficult for the individual to engage in an appropriate way with others, but so do difficulties with social communication. Rigidity of thought, associated with poor central cohesion, may prevent individuals from seeing the 'wider picture'. In addition to these factors, high levels of anxiety (found in 45% of children with anxiety) (White et al, 2009) exacerbates this problem, leading the individual to shy away from social interaction; in the event of high anxiety and subsequent stress and its negative effect on cognitive functioning, to simply 'get the interaction wrong'.

There may also be exacerbated difficulties in the school situation. Harnett (1990) in a longitudinal study of pupils transferring from primary to secondary school, found elements in school regimes highlighting levels of anxiety. Harnett further concluded, drawing on the work of Sullivan (1953) and Sarason (1960) and others, that there might be a phenomenon which could be described as 'school evaluation anxiety'. This sees schools as overtly judgemental organisations, where individuals are prone to feel judged in areas, where they do not have much control, with consequent lowering of self-esteem, higher levels of anxiety and, possibly, the development of 'learned helpless' (Seligman, 1974). When this is taken into account, school environments may well present as particularly challenging for many children with autism.

Impact on citizenship skills

A wide range of the literature including Wing (1988), sees difficulties in social interaction as one of the underlying features of autism – part of the Triad of Impairments. Part of this is due to difficulties in understanding the needs/perceptions of others; but part is due to the difficulties in social communication: knowing how to effectively communicate with others and knowing how interpret the communication of others.

Rigidity of thought interferes with problem solving and flexibility demanded in the process of socialising; similarly rigidity of thought interferes with the studying of subjects such as history, where there may be a need to understand different interpretations of facts and event. This would also apply to the study of other cultures and religions.

Excess anxiety interferes with social interaction and the necessary cognitive functioning to achieve this and further complicates the process of socialising. Bellini (2004) stresses the increasing impact of anxiety on youngsters with autism emerging into adolescence, whilst Hill (2014) provides anecdotal evidence to support the feelings of anxiety caused by the nature of large mainstream schools.

Whilst all of this does not mean that children and young people with autism cannot develop the skills to become citizens in a meaningful sense, they may need much more

help than their peers in achieving this and this has implications for the ways in which they receive their schooling and the environments in which they receive their schooling.

The national context in England

It is anticipated that 1% of the population has autism. In the school system, those with autism and learning disabilities tend to attend special schools, usually catering for a range of difficulties; pupils with autism who are able to access a mainstream age appropriate curriculum are often in mainstream or units attached to mainstream schools. (Mainstream is defined here as what would usually be provided for pupils, who did not need specialist support for learning or other difficulties). There are also private schools for children with autism. The National Autistic Society (NAS) estimate that 70% of individuals with autism develop mental health difficulties. People with autism find it difficult to get employment, including those with high functioning autism.

The challenge in a local authority in South West England

This paper describes how one local authority responds to the above challenges. Within this local authority, there is support for pupils in mainstream schools from a specialist autism team, education psychologists, speech and language therapists and others. There is a constant training programme for mainstream schools and schools have become more aware of the needs of pupils with autism.

However, many children cannot cope with the social, sensory and logistical demands of a mainstream school. Some children with autism survive in the mainstream school, yet cannot cope with the social demands of the wider world or college and thus cannot access true citizenship. For some children, this results in total breakdown of schooling and they face periods of staying at home with an often inadequate programme of educational support.

In the past, some of these children were found places in the private sector (at major expense) and often away from their communities. Parents were faced with limited options for educating their children. As a result, the local authority has carried out a programme of developing specialist autism provision in units in mainstream schools and in two separate off-site units. As a result, there are now three models of provision.

In Model A, pupils remain in their local mainstream school. The school provides support, which may include teaching assistants who work with individual pupils. This is backed up with advice from the local authority Autism Team.

In Model B, pupils are placed in a specialist autism resource base (unit) of 6 to 10 pupils attached to a mainstream school. Here they have access to a unit, which has been purpose built as an autism friendly environment and is staffed by autism specialist staff. The pupils are able to access as much or as little time in the mainstream as they are able to cope with.

In Model C, pupils are placed in an autism unit, which is not attached to a school (8 to 12 pupils). These two units exist as mini schools, delivering the age appropriate curriculum, in tandem with an autism curriculum.

Why develop these specialist autism units?

Some pupils with autism

- find it very difficult succeed academically and, especially, socially and emotionally in mainstream classes
- often find it difficult to form relationships with peers, in spite of being motivated to do so
- need a calming environment for part of the school day
- need support from specialist staff with whom they can form a confident relationship
- need specialist support to help them prepare for life beyond school, including a particular approach to the social and emotional aspects of citizenship

Specialist bases attached to mainstream school address these issues. They allow pupils to access a mainstream school, if it is appropriate, yet provide an autism friendly environment. This can help decrease anxiety in pupils and thus allow them to focus more on academic, social and emotional development in a safe and secure space.

Autism units, which are not attached to schools, provide a more sheltered and highly specialist environment. In this much smaller environment, pupils with autism can discover a place of safety and security and gradually begin to learn how to interact with others, how to learn without anxiety and how to express themselves without irking negative feedback or simple antagonism.

What we have learnt from our specialist off-site units to date

The units have been established for four years. Our data set is derived from: informal interviews with pupils; observations staff; structured observations using standardized measures; interviews with parents and the observations of outside professionals, including inspections carried out by consultants. We are continuing to collect data; however, the data to date can be compared with local mainstream expectations for pupils and with the previous achievement of pupils, prior to being admitted to the units.

Pupils have achieved academic levels, well above those predicted by previous achievement in mainstream. This has led us to set the target of five GCSEs (exams taken at 16) grade C or above (considered to be a national benchmark). For the few pupils, who have moved on so far to college (16+ provision) academic success has continued.

Pupils have reported highly positive feelings about the units. The ability to 'be oneself' has figured frequently in pupil feedback. The small nature of the units has figured as

well, which appears to allow pupils to make relationships that might not have happened elsewhere.

Parents have reported major positive developments in family life. They report major developments in their children's ability to interact both in the family and also in the wider community. They report that their children have begun to socialise in a way that would have been impossible before. In terms of school work and experience, parents report substantial developments. One parent recently said: 'we never thought he would go to school again.' Yet that pupil attends regularly and is succeeding.

Staff have been able to report the slow, but steady progress that the pupils make in the social life of the unit. Pupils often have to be taught on their own, but slowly begin to be able to spend some time with other pupils. Staff have observed how the pupils are able to make contact with other pupils at the local mainstream schools and gradually increase in confidence in these contacts. Staff have observed the pupils increasing in confidence in relationships in the unit with peers and with adults.

Emotional and social progress is monitored through observational schedules and the informal observations are thus seen in the light of these results.

Whatever is going on in these units, the pupils appear to be increasing in social confidence and resilience, whilst progressively demonstrating much less anxiety. This leads to an increased opportunity to explore social interaction and to practise the social skills necessary for successful interaction. What needs to be further explored is how these pupils are developing their cognitive approaches to social areas: is social empathy evolving?; are they better able understand the social communications of others?; and is their problem solving developing, so that they can adopt better strategies to aid interaction and communication? Again, the informal data (staff, parent observation) suggest that this is the case.

These small and highly specialised units appear to have allowed pupils to become safe, to begin to re-explore social interaction and to develop some of the skills necessary for the social aspects of citizenship. The environment appears to have played a major role in this: the small scale and autism friendly nature of the unit may have made them feel safe and secure. At the same time, the social environment, created by specialised staff with high levels of commitment and excellent empathic and social skills may have added to this security, yet also provided the opportunity for development. The question then emerges: 'has an autism curriculum been created to operate in this supportive and safe environment and what does it look like?'

A curriculum for autism and citizenship?

The units follow a mainstream, age-appropriate, and academic curriculum for 25% to 50% of the time. Time for mentoring work with staff is built into the timetable. Activities that allow opportunities to explore and develop social skills include cooking, gardening, regular visits outside the unit, trips to farms, and time in the local school for physical education. Open days and afternoons, when visitors are invited in to the units

allow the pupils to extend their social interaction to people whom they do not know. Pupil discussion and joint decision making forms a part of regular activities (important for individuals developing better empathy and the ability to understand others). In a safe space, it is easier to take risks and tackle the challenges of expressing views and opinions in public. It may be the balance in the nature of activities that helps these pupils to develop emotionally and socially, but also in cognitive social terms.

Conclusion

Clearly this work is at an early stage and existing data needs further clarifying and analysing. Yet it seems that these small units of 8 to 12 pupils respond to an immediate need: that of finding provision for pupils with autism who have failed in the mainstream; but they also seem to prepare pupils to develop their citizenship, at least in social terms. Earlier in the paper, reference was made to the impact of high levels of anxiety, associated with individuals with autism. The literature, for example, White et al (2009), suggest that this anxiety becomes more acute as adolescence is approached. It may be that anxiety reduction is the key factor in the success of these units. If this is the case, then there are major implications for the ways in which all educational establishments address the needs of pupils with autism.

This paper has alluded to 'an autism curriculum'. For many schools, this would conflict with providing all children with exactly the same regimes; yet for children with autism, part of the curriculum needs to address the issue of 'preparing for citizenship', as well as other personal and independence skills.

There is much to done here in terms of presenting a synthesis of research in the areas, referred to in this paper. There is also a major challenge in obtaining recognition for 'an autism curriculum'. If we do not do this, individuals with autism will find it increasingly difficult to live and act as integrated and participating citizens in their communities, their political constituencies and, above all, in their local social networks.

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