

Autism, School Environments, Mental Health, & Burnout

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The Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012)

- It's not just autistic people who “lack” empathy – neurotypicals also have trouble understanding the autistic perspective
- My sensory sensitivities are an example – they were interpreted by some teachers as a “behaviour problem,” a strategy I was using to get around the rules and evade participation in activities
- The sensory sensitivities weren't constant; depended on many factors, including anxiety



Mental health: individual or environment?

- There are things about autism that might make mental health problems worse, e.g.:
 - Monotropism: intense focus (or difficulty switching attention)
 - Intolerance of uncertainty; need for control over overwhelming world
- And we can have negative experiences that make our mental health problems worse, such as:
 - Sensory sensitivities (Mazurek et al., 2013)
 - Social isolation, bullying (Wright & Wachs, 2019)
 - Feelings of inferiority
 - The idea that there is something wrong with us (Cage et al., 2018)
 - *And many more...*

Autistic burnout

- Frequently discussed by autistic advocates online (but not really explored in research, not in DSM)
- Exhaustion from the effort of having to constantly meet demands in environment, such as:
 - Trying to cope in environments constructed by neurotypicals
 - Trying to appear more neurotypical, “mask” or “camouflage” autism
- Can lead to loss of skills, mental health problems
- NOT “excessive expectations” but the wrong kind of expectations



Things schools can do to help

- Being flexible

Things schools can do to help

- Autistic pride, identity, community. Neurodiversity.
- We often grow up unaware of the community of autistic people
- Value of having autistic peers, autistic mentors, autistic role models
- Most of us take these things for granted

Things schools can do to help

- Respectful, equal interactions in educational & therapy settings
- Not suggesting, through words or actions, that there is something wrong with autistic people – that we are “disordered,” have “deficits,” that we need to change who we are
- All people can learn new skills, but that doesn’t mean there was something wrong with who they were before they learned the skill!
- And normalization should never be a goal in and of itself...

A positive example: my old theatre program

- Was explicitly NOT presented, described, or structured as therapy
 - (It still worked, though. Greatly reduced my anxieties, offered good social practice...)
- Included both autistic and neurotypical people, but there was never any notion that the neurotypicals were there to “help” the autistics
- These are principles that could be applied to a variety of different programs, not just theatre



Fit of individual and school environment

- Ultimately, though, the environment around the individual needs to fit the individual
- The school environment is particularly important – dominates childhood
- Getting a good fit for everyone is hard when one has 20, 25, 30 kids in a classroom with very different (and sometimes conflicting) needs, so the environment usually ends up fitting the needs of the majority, but not everyone

Implications for School Placement

- At present, our system is set up so that people want to get rid of students who are perceived to be “difficult”:
 - e.g., students with “behaviour problems” (Lauderdale-Littin et al., 2013)
 - e.g., students with intellectual disabilities (Segall & Campbell, 2014)
- What about mental health challenges? Burnout? Silent suffering that does not interfere with the functioning of the system?
- My opinion: a right to be in the mainstream schools if that is the preference of the individual and family – but not a duty

References

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- Mazurek, M. O., Vasa, R. A., Kalb, L. G., Kanne, S. M., Rosenberg, D., Keefer, A., ... Lowery, L. A. (2013). Anxiety, sensory over-responsivity, and gastrointestinal problems in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 41(1), 165–176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-012-9668-x>
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- Wright, M., & Wachs, S. (2019). Does peer rejection moderate the associations among cyberbullying victimization, depression, and anxiety among adolescents with autism spectrum disorder? *Children*, 6(3), 41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children6030041>

Resources (1 of 2)

- Video regarding autistic burnout (but focusing on adults):
<https://www.facebook.com/seattlechildrens/videos/vl.948687718589668/380037906042266/?type=1>
- News article on camouflaging (focuses on girls, but anyone can try to mask autism, regardless of gender):
<https://www.spectrumnews.org/features/deep-dive/costs-camouflaging-autism/>
- Book on the experience of being autistic in schools: Sainsbury, Clare. (2009). *Martian in the Playground: Understanding the Schoolchild with Asperger's Syndrome*. Lucky Duck Books.

Resources (2 of 2)

- Armstrong, T. (2012). *Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strengths-Based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life*. ASCD.
 - *Note that some of the discussion of autism is rather dated (e.g., the book refers to controversial theories such as the “extreme male brain” account, which frames autism in terms of deficient empathy and which conflicts with empirical evidence of more diverse gender identities in autism), but it makes important general points about the need for person-environment fit, the damaging effects of “deficit” language, etc.
- Open-access article on autistic community: Sinclair, J. (2010). Being autistic together. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 30(1).
<https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v30i1.1075>
- My blog (which talks about lots of things, including mental health and schools): <http://www.autisticscholar.com/>