Your Voice Counts: Listening to the Voice of High School Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Beth Saggers[1], Yoon-Suk Hwang[2] and K. Louise Mercer[1]

[1] *School of Learning and Professional Studies, Queensland University of Technology, Australia*
[2] *Centre for Learning Innovation (CLI), Queensland University of Technology, Australia*

Supporting students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) in inclusive settings presents both opportunities and significant challenges to school communities. This study, which explored the lived experience of nine students with ASD in an inclusive high school in Australia, is based on the belief that by listening to the voices of students, school communities will be in a better position to collaboratively create supportive learning and social environments. The findings of this small-scale study deepen our knowledge from the student perspective of the inclusive educational practices that facilitate and constrain the learning and participation of students with ASD. The students' perspectives were examined in relation to the characteristics of successful inclusive schools identified by Kluth (2003). Implications for inclusive educational practice that meets the needs of students with ASD are presented.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders, inclusive education, lived experience, student voice, high school

While the need to embrace and empower all members of the school community has been recognised (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Carrington, 1999), significant inequalities still exist in the education of children and youth, especially those who are perceived to be disadvantaged in some way. Despite the large number of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) attending mainstream schools, these students often face difficulty in benefitting from inclusive education environments (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Addressing diversity, particularly disability, within an inclusive framework can be challenging. It requires schools to look at alternatives to traditional deficit perspectives of disability based on the medical model (Grenier, 2010) and 'socially constructed difference' (Molloy & Vasil, 2002, p. 662). Inclusion is still often considered as mere placement of a student with special needs in a general education setting, regardless of the outcome for that student and other students (Batten, 2005; Waddington & Reed, 2006). This type of inclusion, however, does not address how such an environment can effectively meet the individual needs of students in the least restrictive ways and maximise their learning potential.

Address for correspondence: Dr Beth Saggers, School of Learning & Professional Studies, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park, Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, QLD 4059, Australia. E-mail: b.saggers@qut.edu.au

All states of Australia have state and Commonwealth legislation and policies to guide education reform. In Queensland, Australia, policy and guidelines have been developed to assist state schools to deliver educational services within the inclusive context of local communities (Carrington & Holm, 2005). This state has an overarching Inclusive Education Statement, which clearly states that inclusion 'is for everybody and is everybody's business' (Department of Education and Training, 2005, p. 1). As a result, there is an expectation that inclusive education will be the preferred option. The expectation is that school environments, including high schools, will work in an inclusive manner and, as such, will provide educational opportunities for all students (Forlin, 2006).

Research indicates that inclusion of students with mild disabilities in mainstream classroom environments is successful (Forlin & Bamford, 2005; Osgood, 2005; O'Rourke & Houghton, 2008) and the potential positive outcomes of the inclusion of students with ASD have been highlighted (Barnard, Prior, & Potter, 2000; Konza, 2005; Pearce, 2009; Pearce & Forlin, 2005; Pearce, Gray, & Campbell-Evans, 2010). Kluth (2003) has identified six characteristics of successful inclusive schools for students with ASD:

- committed leadership
- democratic classrooms
- reflective educators
- a supportive school culture
- engaging and relevant curricula
- responsive instruction.

Nonetheless, effective teaching strategies for students with ASD constitute a critical gap in the knowledge base for meeting the needs of students with special educational needs (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Humphrey, 2008). The complex nature of ASD and the heterogeneity of individual differences necessitate carefully designed teaching and learning programs for the successful inclusion of these students to occur (Lynch & Irvine, 2009). Inclusive education has become well rooted in general education reform (Carrington & Holm, 2005). Aspects of the high school environment can be particularly challenging for the student on the spectrum and require teachers who will approach these challenges with flexibility and ingenuity (Konza, 2005). In more recent years, research in the high school environment has identified a number of effective teaching strategies to support students with ASD in this environment (Carrington & Holm, 2005; Konza, 2005; Osborne & Reed, 2011; Pearce & Forlin, 2005). Strategies that provide support for social inclusion, behavioural issues, organisational skills and less structured times, as well as teaching of the 'hidden curriculum' and facilitation of communication skills, are all beneficial (Carrington & Holm, 2005; Konza, 2005; Osborne & Reed, 2011; Pearce & Forlin, 2005). In addition, consideration has been given to ensuring professional learning for teachers, standardised curriculum, assessment and reporting, and the importance of building collaborative partnerships (Carrington & Holm, 2005; Forlin & Bamford, 2005). Much of the discussion on successful inclusive educational practice for students with ASD has focused on seeking ways to assess current inclusive practices. Within this discussion, listening to the voices of students has been suggested as one of the most valuable ways to assess whether a student has been successfully included within a particular school or environment (Davidson, 2010). The importance of seeking the views of individuals with disabilities has long been suggested by various researchers (Billington, 2006; Minkes, Robinson, & Weston, 1994; Morris, 1998). Our professional knowledge of ASD can be expanded by listening to and reflecting on insider accounts (Davidson, 2010; Hay & Winn, 2005; Waddington & Reed,

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2006). Davidson has stressed the value of trying to understand 'what it feels like' to have ASD rather than 'what it looks like' to the observer (Davidson, 2010, p. 311). Similarly, Humphrey and Lewis (2008) asked students with ASD to write, draw and talk about their thoughts, feelings and experiences in order to reach a deeper understanding of how their participants made sense of their educational experiences. Carrington and Graham (2001) have concluded that 'more qualitative research in the field of autism is necessary to achieve an in-depth exploration of the real-life experiences of these individuals from their own perspective' (p. 48).

The Current Study

Recognising the importance of listening to the voices of students with ASD, the first phase of this study explored the lived experience of students with ASD in a mainstream high school. It examined current inclusive education practice from the perspectives of the student on the spectrum. In doing so, this study focused on identifying practices that facilitate and constrain the learning and participation of students with ASD. The students' perspectives on their experiences in a mainstream school were also examined in relation to the key characteristics of successful inclusive practice identified by Kluth (2003). The goal of this second phase of the study was to be able to make recommendations that could facilitate the ongoing successful inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream schools.

Methods

This qualitative inquiry was conducted in order to examine the lived experience of an inclusive education from the perspective of a group of adolescent students with ASD.

Participants and Setting

By means of purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), nine high school students with ASD (seven boys and two girls) between the ages of 13 and 16, who were all receiving an inclusive education, were invited to participate in this study (see Table 1). The participants, who had been diagnosed with ASD by medical practitioners, all met the requirements for additional government-funded education support. The students were enrolled in a large mainstream high school in Brisbane, Australia. The school has an extensive special education support program and assists 70 to 80 students with disabilities including visual impairment, intellectual disabilities and ASD. Inclusive education in this school involves special educatos case managing the students with ASD and their needs. The students attend the mainstream classes but obtain any necessary support from the special educators and ancillary staff based on their individual needs. Support varies, depending on the needs of the student, but some examples include liaison with mainstream subject teachers, pre-teaching of specific knowledge, additional support within the mainstream class, or small group or individualised support out of class for specific subjects or concepts. The specific support needs of the student would be determined through collaboration and negotiation with all stakeholders involved including mainstream staff, special educators, caregivers, ancillary staff and the student themselves. The type of support provided would be reviewed on an as-needs basis but set review dates were also established to coincide with the development and review of individual education plans (IEPs) every 6 months. In relation to the categories Kluth (2003) puts forward as indicating a successful inclusive school, this high school had a good reputation within the broader community of actively providing committed

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

leadership, democratic classrooms, a supportive school culture, engaging and relevant curricula and responsive instruction. This reputation had resulted in many parents of students with ASD choosing to enrol their children in this school over other schools in the area.

Data Collection

To gain access to the experiential world of the participants, data were gathered through two sets of interviews. Each interview lasted for 20 to 30 minutes. The first interview was conducted in the middle of the second school term, and was followed by a second interview two weeks later. A semistructured interview schedule (see Appendix A) was developed to guide the structure and content of the first interview. This semistructured schedule enabled the interviewer to pose follow-up questions and become involved in longer conversations with the participants where they had particular observations to share about their experience of schooling in an inclusive setting (Patton, 2002).

While the first interview enabled the researchers to begin developing an understanding of the students' experiences, the second interview facilitated exploration of key experiences that had emerged from the analysis of the data from the first interview as well as any new experiences that the participants wished to describe. Both interviews were conducted at the school by the first author in a quiet room where all of the participants felt comfortable. School staff and the participants were consulted as to preferred interview times so that disruptions to the students' schedule of classes and activities was minimised. The students were advised of the confirmed time and location of both of their interviews prior to each session. All interview data were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the ethics committees of the Queensland University of Technology and the Department of Education, Training and the Arts in Queensland. In addition, informed written consent was gained from the participants, their parents and the school administrator. All names (Table 1) used in this study are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using constant comparative methods (Glaser, 1992). In order to reconstruct and understand with the greatest veracity the experiences of the students

TABLE 1

Participant Demographics

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Diagnosis
1	Sally	Female	14	9	Autism spectrum disorder
2	Oscar	Male	14	9	Asperger syndrome
3	Tom	Male	13	8	Asperger syndrome
4	Steve	Male	13	8	Autism
5	Matthew	Male	15	9	Asperger syndrome
6	Hudson	Male	14	8	Asperger syndrome
7	Rebecca	Female	16	11	Asperger syndrome
8	Don	Male	14	9	Asperger syndrome
9	Jack	Male	15	10	Asperger syndrome

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with ASD, analysis began while interviewing the participants (Charmaz, 2005). This practice involved listening to the audio recordings of the first interview as part of a process of identifying key experiences to be addressed and further explored at the second interview.

The data analyses continued with a thorough reading of interview transcripts. This initial reading was followed by a second reading and active line-by-line coding. During this process, the question, 'What meanings can we make of our data?' was constantly asked. Codes, links between codes, and notes were recorded on copies of the transcripts (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259). This constant comparison process was continued until categories emerged that gave us insight into how students with ASD experienced their schooling in an inclusive setting.

The accuracy of the data collected and the reliability of the analyses were assured by using the following verification procedures. First, two external researchers assessed the accuracy of interview transcripts. Second, these external researchers reviewed the line-by-line coding to ensure the rigor of the qualitative analyses (Glaser, 1978). Finally, they conducted a comparison between the emergent categories and audio recordings to check whether the findings of the analyses were supported by the data (Creswell, 1998).

Results

Six categories emerged from the interviews as having either positive or negative effect on the participation and learning of students with ASD in an inclusive educational setting. The categories were:

- teacher characteristics (positive and negative)
- curriculum-related issues (workload, demand for handwriting, solutions to difficulties)
- support mechanisms (attitudes to specialist support, types of support, ways of receiving support)
- friendships (perceptions towards friends and friendships, attitudes towards socialising and solitude)
- environmental considerations
- teasing and bullying.

The relationships between these different categories can be viewed in the concept map in Figure 1.

Together, these categories provide a comprehensive account of the lived experience of students with ASD in an inclusive high school. These six categories are considered in depth below.

Teacher Characteristics

The students with ASD described the characteristics of their teachers as significant in successful inclusion. Students identified positive teacher characteristics such as relatedness and active listening. These features seemed to be connected to students' desire for fair treatment and understanding from their teachers. Teachers with these characteristics presented as being well equipped with knowledge about their students' strengths and weaknesses, and they created a structured but flexible learning environment. Students appreciated teachers who made learning fun as this made learning easier and more enjoyable, even for the subjects they were not particularly good at. We can hear this endorsement of particular teachers in the voices of Oscar, Sally and Don:

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mr H because, yeah. Even though I don't really like math that much, he's a, he's a, he's a good teacher …

Because, well he's just, he tells us stories and that. I think he's the most lenient of all my teachers I have and he's nice.

Well I like my SOSE teacher. Mr [H].

Well, well he's fun loving some — he's fun a bit sometimes. (Oscar)

Mr H's good. He's super cool. He's the one who teaches math.

Yeah, he's all that, but he makes learning so easy. He just explains everything super easy.

My fourth grade teacher was cool because he did magic tricks and he gave us lollies and he had fun with teaching too … He used to be a magician in the circus. (Sally)

He's nice, I like him, my favourite teacher.

I don't know, he's just funny …

Much better, he's not as strict and he likes the class and staff. (Don)

The students conveyed that they had difficulty in dealing with teachers who often expressed their anger by yelling at students. Don, Oscar and Steve viewed yelling as the opposite of what they look for in teachers. The following quotations illustrate students' negative views of teachers who yelled.

English, my teacher is horrible. She's very strict and mean. She yells at people. (Don)

Well, no not really. Most of its loud and it disrupts me a bit. Well I do mind sometimes if it is, well I do, wait what was it? Oh yeah, well I do sort of care if people are yelling at other students. Cause it does disrupt me from my work a bit. Yeah. (Oscar)

I don't like Mrs. H. because she's controlling me.

Angry at me. (Steve)

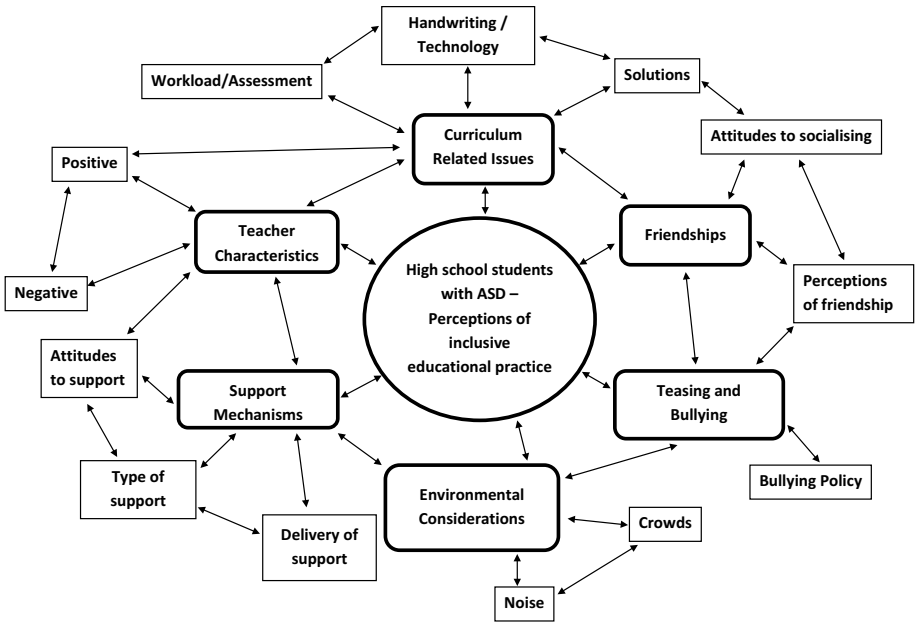

FIGURE 1

Inclusive educational practices identified by students with ASD in a high school setting.

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

By contrast, students related to teachers who related to them; that is, there was a situation of mutual understanding.

> *They were kind. Hardly ever yelled. (Tom)*
>
> *I think it's the feeling where you can talk to them like another student, kind of thing. So you can relate to them, they can relate to you and then they can help you through the hard work as well. So it's better looking up to them, kind of thing. (Jack)*
>
> *First of all they'd have to be understanding but firm. Any physical attributes I wouldn't care about … If they actually liked to come to work … Basically they would have to be able to relate to you a lot. (Matthew)*

Relatedness with their teachers was deemed important by the students because it allowed them to be understood and their voices to be heard. All nine students identified understanding of students' needs as a significant teacher characteristic. Don and Matthew, for example, talked about understanding students through listening.

> *I like my (SOSE) teacher. She's my second best teacher.*
>
> *I don't know, she's not strict but she does her job properly and she's just nice and she's understanding.*
>
> *Yeah, like she's not strict but she's not soft —*
>
> *Interviewer: So she gives people room —*
>
> *To breathe. But she still makes them do the work. (Don)*
>
> *For starters, the teachers are a lot more understanding. Well in primary school for instance, like some of my other ones, you try to basically go to school all the time, but then there's certain things — like you tell them something and they wouldn't just listen. (Matthew)*

Teachers who understood their students appeared to be firm but reasonable. They created a structured but flexible learning environment. These characteristics allowed teachers to address the strengths and weaknesses of their students, and helped them to reach their potential.

> *The teachers were firm but they weren't terribly over the top. They were nice to you. I have nice teachers who still do their job. (Don)*
>
> *A bit, a bit of structure yeah. I mean our math teacher does have structure, but well he just seems to have less of it than the other teachers I have ... Well, I mean he's still, he's a bit lenient, but not as much as my other teachers and he's, well he does, he is a bit, I think he's a bit strict sometimes. (Oscar)*
>
> *Maybe not just treating everyone the same. Thinking of their own strengths and weaknesses and stuff. (Don)*
>
> *My math teacher.*
>
> *Because she thinks I'm a good student because I'm really good at math. If I've finished my math she'll give me a Sudoku … (Rebecca)*

Teachers' knowledge of their students' strengths and weaknesses was closely related to curriculum issues.

Curriculum-Related Issues

Curriculum-related issues were discussed primarily by students in relation to the issues that they experienced at school. Of the nine students interviewed, eight found it hard to cope with a tight work schedule such as having exams or assignments due close together and submitting assignments on time. The problem of a heavy workload was one of the areas that the students worried about the most in relation to their schooling.

> *Sometimes it's a bit crazy how we all have to hand in all the assignments in at once. (Sally)*

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The work … well when it's hard and …

If I'm going to fail, sort of, yeah and if I want to hand it in on time. (Oscar)

Sometimes I get pretty freaked out about assignments. (Sally)

I don't really like English all that much.

It's too much work … too much writing, and too much assignments … I don't like homework. (Rebecca)

There's a lot more homework and assignments and we do poetry which I think is terrible, I don't like poetry. (Don)

You'll probably get this from most students, but homework … (Matthew)

It would be assignments I think. Getting them done I think. (Hudson)

The students found their workload overwhelming and stressful.

Maybe the stress of knowing that this is what is going to help me get into the workforce and the OPs and homework, that's about it. (Jack)

Only if things get too overwhelming with work and stuff. (Matthew)

Most students perceived the demand for handwriting as a significant problem in their school performance. They found it physically demanding and exhausting.

Well my arm, my finger here gets a bit sore because I, you know, I've got a callous here … And well it just sort of hurts my arm when I write a lot. Well I, I see my handwriting as neat. Well sometimes it is. Sometimes it isn't. (Oscar)

Probably just how much there is.

Yeah, it eventually gets … exhausting. (Tom)

Listening to the voices of the students helped to identify not only the learning difficulties they face in inclusive educational settings but also some possible solutions to these issues. While many students found the work assigned to them either too easy or too hard, Oscar did not have this problem. He said 'The work. Some of it's hard. Some of it's too much. Sometimes it isn't', implying that Oscar felt that there was a balance between ease and complexity of work.

The teachers also played a crucial role in the students' emotional responses to their workload. A teacher's flexibility helped the students to complete their work and stay calm. Rebecca provided an example from her Mathematics class.

Like in math class because I'm really good at math, I'll tell the teacher that if I need help. I'll ask them for the help, because if I don't, don't worry. Because I listen to music to help me with math.

Yes … I listen to my Mp3 or CD player …

Music sort of calms me down, like if there's a storm I'll listen to music and it calms me down, stuff like that.

Interviewer: So it just relaxes you?

Yes, and it helps me concentrate a bit better on what I'm doing. (Rebecca)

A similar problem experienced by some students was the demand for handwriting. These students felt that this problem could be solved by allowing typing as an alternative.

The fact that I don't really do any written work, I just make up or create or something.

Interviewer: You don't like writing?

Not really. I prefer typing. (Hudson)

If I had a computer it would be better.

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Because I'm faster on the computer than I am at writing, and some people can't read my writing. (Rebecca)

Students indicated that curriculum-related issues, mostly issues with learning, could be resolved in part by external supports. In the next section we discuss in more detail the support mechanisms students received in their inclusive educational setting.

Support Mechanisms

Most students perceived the support mechanisms at school as important. Their perceptions were divided into three categories:

- attitudes to specialist support
- types of support
- ways of receiving support.

The majority of students expressed their appreciation for being able to access specialist support from staff (such as special education teachers) who understood them. Students' comments on this support included:

Just if I didn't have it, I'd probably be in much worse condition. (Matthew)

They just support me more. (Tom)

Because you get more help and there's not that many kids in one class. (Rebecca)

I think I'm pretty fond of ———. It's for me, it helps me, so yeah, I'm fine with it. (Jack)

Students found support for managing personal matters and developing social skills, in addition to support for academic work, beneficial.

Like with some things it's sometimes not curriculum or stuff like that I need help with. It's maybe just personal stuff, which is good. It also helps. (Matthew)

Yeah, yeah. … and also unit tutorials we get down here in school, in the unit … And we also do this social skills which helps us socialise. (Oscar)

Although the students appreciated support given by specialists and paraprofessionals, they wanted it to be done subtly and skilfully, especially in the mainstream classroom. Neither Oscar, Don nor Sally liked to be singled out to get help.

Well, I sort of feel a bit well, just different, when I get, when I'm just the one getting help …

No, but I just don't like it when I get, sort of like, treated differently. (Oscar)

Sort of, I just don't like them making it so obvious. (Don)

Sometimes I guess, but I don't like it sometimes. Actually most of the time. I don't like teachers sitting next to me.

Interviewer: What if they're helping everybody in the class, not just you is that okay?

That makes me feel better. (Sally)

Tom described the most skilful teacher from whom he received assistance in his classroom as helping him when he was having trouble by giving him hints, not the answers themselves. He also noted that this teacher went around the classroom to help all students, so when she was helping Tom he did not have to feel embarrassed in front of his classmates.

Friendships and Socialising

Friendships were also regarded as another support mechanism. Students such as Matthew revealed that their perceptions about school were influenced by the possession of school friends. The students' experiences with friendships were characterised by:

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

- perceptions towards friends and friendships
- attitudes towards socialising and solitude.

The majority of students reported that they had friends at their high school. Friends were mostly from their mainstream classes, although Matthew and Jack said they had a mixture of friends from both mainstream classes and the special education unit. Some students like Tom and Jack shared friendships with peers by playing sports together in the playground or by visiting friends' houses. Some students, however, had difficulty in sharing a friendship. Hudson, for instance, said:

> *I've got a sort of semi-friend, David, although he gets a bit annoyed with me at times.*
>
> *Interviewer: So you sort of hang around with David a little bit?*
>
> *Just a little bit, yeah. You know, depending on which way the wind's blowing.*
>
> *Interviewer: When you feel in the mood or not?*
>
> *Not really whether it's my moods, rather it's his mood. (Hudson)*

Students had mixed feelings about socialising. For many of them socialising meant conversing, an activity that caused mixed feelings. The students noted that they enjoyed conversations if they could talk about things they liked. Otherwise they observed that it could be quite boring or even daunting. This aspect of friendship and socialising was clearly described by Oscar, who perceived that, although socialising was good, it was often boring and sometimes required a lot of effort.

> *I sit with my friends, but I hardly socialise with them.*
>
> *Interviewer: Don't you?*
>
> *No. I sort of find that boring … even though it is good to socialise …*
>
> *Interviewer: When you talk about socialise, what do you mean by socialise?*
>
> *Just, just like say, oh how did such and such go and stuff.*
>
> *Interviewer: Okay, so you don't tend to initiate anything?*
>
> *Just small talk.*
>
> *Interviewer: Yeah. You don't tend to … keep things going?*
>
> *No. Cause I just find it a bit, well, difficult cause I can't really remember … I mean when I say, when somebody says hello to me I say … I'll give you an example. It's just when somebody says hello, I sort of say the wrong thing and well, when they say hello, I hardly ever say hello such and such …*
>
> *(Omission) … Well I do like to socialise sometimes, but not that much.*
>
> *Interviewer: When? Like in what sort of situations do you like to socialise?*
>
> *When it's about something I like.*
>
> *Interviewer: So things like history or animals or?*
>
> *Some, yeah, and also military stuff. (Oscar)*

Oscar's difficulties in socialising were shared by Steve and Hudson, who deliberately chose solitude at lunchtime. Steve went under the building to be by himself, while Hudson tried to eat and read his book without being disturbed. Tom and Matthew, however, had different views towards socialising. They enjoyed playing with friends in their free time. Playing sport helped them both connect with their friends. Tom played soccer and tennis while Matthew played handball. For these students, playing sports

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with friends appeared to generate more structured and easier opportunities for conversation and socialisation.

Teasing and Bullying

Teasing and bullying are regarded as one of the most constraining factors for students' learning and participation in an inclusive education setting. While a bullying policy existed at school, and this reassured some of the students (e.g., Oscar), all of the students experienced teasing and bullying, from verbal to physical.

> *Everybody's teasing me. (Steve)*

> *I know now, never to respond to my name in public. It's been discarded forever and ever. … Don't respond when someone calls out your name. So I just keep on walking no matter how many times they call it — even if they're a nice person. I just won't turn around. (Sally)*

> *Some of the students just don't understand certain situations. And some of them call me mentally retarded. (Matthew)*

Students tended to be less sensitive to more subtle forms of bullying such as verbal aggression and were reluctant to disclose information to relevant staff, unless it became persistent and extreme in nature.

> *Some of it you just basically don't really need to, because as long as they don't do anything physically harmful to me, there's no point. (Matthew)*

Hudson was one student who disclosed bullying to his parents and a teacher. He worked as a member of the School Council and had experienced bullying in the form of sexual harassment.

> *It would depend on the problem.*

> *I'll tell you what, I had a problem down at the bus stop, a couple of students were pulling down their pants at me. I told my mum and dad and my SEU teacher and they got the problem fixed. (Hudson)*

Students' reluctance to report bullying and teasing to school staff seemed to be partly related to problems differentiating between an intention to bully and a desire to make a friendship. Students were aware that they often misinterpreted their peers' interactions as bullying or teasing.

> *There's one from the same grade, but there's some of the older ones but I don't know their names. I just know their faces. (Matthew)*

> *Well no, once you count the idiots who come over to me at lunch and reckon 'do you want to go to [unclear] because you're our friend, come on, you're my friend', sort of thing.*

> *Interviewer: Do you think that's teasing?*

> *I think it's a bit annoying, I think they're being total idiots, but no. (Hudson)*

> *Well nobody teases me that much. It's just I sort of interpret it the wrong way as teasing, when they're just jibing me. Just for fun I guess. Yeah. But friendly. (Oscar)*

Environmental Considerations

Learning and participation are also affected by the physical learning environment of an inclusive educational setting. Some physical factors, such as noise and crowding, make inclusive school life harder. Noise was a commonly expressed problem. More than a third of the students said that concentration on their work was hampered by noise. A quarter of students found it hard handling crowds and cramped spaces. Noise and cramped spaces seemed to go hand in hand, as conveyed by the solution suggested by some students (Matthew and Oscar) of quiet places with smaller numbers of people present.

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *… I think it would have to be — you know some children in class like to make a lot of noise and racket and they're just a bit too noisy and stuff like that. I reckon those type of students that try and stand out; those are the hardest thing here (Matthew).*
>
> *I don't like it when there's, you know, the rooms are — when they're cramped, well just small. (Oscar)*

Discussion

This study explored the lived experience of students with ASD in a mainstream high school in order to examine current inclusive educational practices for students identified as having an autism spectrum disorder. Consistent with the findings of researchers who value listening to the voices of students (Billington, 2006; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Davidson, 2010; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Minkes, Robinson, & Weston, 1994; Morris, 1998), the students who participated in this study deepened our knowledge about practices that facilitate and constrain learning and participation within an inclusive school.

From the voices of the students, six categories (positive and negative) emerged as being critical to their experience of inclusive schooling. These six categories have been examined in relation to the six characteristics of successful inclusive schools identified by Kluth (2003) in order to explore implications for more effective inclusive educational practices and make recommendations that could improve the capacity of schools to address diversity. Kluth's characteristics are:

- committed leadership
- democratic classes
- reflective educator
- supportive school culture
- engaging and relevant curricula
- responsive instruction.

Committed Leadership

Kluth (2003) explained that committed leadership is evident when staff in leadership positions play a critical role in 'articulating a vision for inclusive schooling, build support for the vision, and work with the school community to implement strategies and principles to make the school successful' (p. 24). This category was not specifically discussed by the students, and it is hard to imply committed leadership from their experiences.

Democratic Classrooms

According to Kluth (2003), democratic classrooms are evidenced when teachers support their students to challenge institutional knowledge and develop their own interpretations of learning materials. While direct evidence of teachers developing democratic classrooms was not apparent from the students' discussions, the students spoke positively of teachers who were flexible and reasonable, listened, and understood. The students' satisfaction with those teachers who demonstrated these characteristics indicated the presence of good teaching practice available to the students. The students expressed dissatisfaction with teachers who did not engage in active listening and were controlling. The students' voices indicated that there was need for improvement with regard to the practices of some teachers.

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Reflective Educators

Within effective inclusive school cultures, Kluth (2003) noted that teachers see inquiry, dialogue and reflection as central to their collaborative work. Kluth (2003) describes reflective teachers as 'asking students critical questions, observing each other, critiquing lessons, and sharing stories' (p. 26). Students did not specifically describe their teachers as engaging in reflection (generally a private act).

Supportive School Culture

The presence of a supportive school culture can be indicated by the keywords of open, accepting and caring. The importance of 'cultivating a safe, positive, and robust school culture' has been emphasised by Kluth (2003) because she perceived it as possibly 'the most difficult piece of creating an inclusive school', and at the same time 'the most critical piece' (p. 27). This view was clearly echoed by students, particularly in their experience with support mechanisms, bullying and teasing, and friendships. Concerning support mechanisms, students acknowledged the benefit of obtaining support from their teachers, specialists and paraprofessionals for academic, social performance, and personal matters. Although they appreciated access to professional support, students asked for that support not to be provided in a way that was obvious to other students in order to reduce their feelings of difference from their peers.

Although the school had a strict policy on bullying, all of the students reported that they experienced bullying and teasing to some degree. As Kluth (2003) has observed, a supportive school culture is difficult to create. Students hesitated to disclose their experience of being bullied, partly because they had less understanding of subtle forms of bullying such as verbal bullying and partly because they were aware of their difficulties in understanding the intention of their peers — that is, whether a particular encounter was verbal bullying or an attempt to develop a friendship. Although these problems negatively influenced the students' experiences of inclusive schooling, problems such as these can alert staff and community professionals of the need to strengthen the culture of support within a school and to ensure bullying policies are effectively implemented.

Friendships also played a critical role in creating a safe, positive and robust school culture. Apart from the students who genuinely enjoyed solitude, the students indicated that school was safe and likable when they had friends who could provide peer support to them. Nurturing a social environment that facilitates students in developing and maintaining friendships is one way to strengthen a culture of support within an inclusive school.

Engaging and Relevant Curricula

For Kluth (2003), engaging curricula are those that are personally and culturally appropriate and suitable for learners with various talents, interests and learning styles. Analysis of the students' voices indicates that they generally agreed with this understanding. For instance, the students described appreciating teachers who made learning fun, even in the subjects that the students disliked or knew they lacked skills in. In an inclusive school, engaging and relevant curricula that attend to diverse learning styles are crucial because it is through such responsive instruction that all learners can be motivated (Kluth, 2003).

Responsive Instruction

Kluth (2003) noted that inclusive schooling has been a valuable catalyst for educators to become more aware of individual differences and to differentiate instruction to meet the

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

needs of all students within a classroom. The experience of the students indicated that responsive instruction was effectively being practised in their school. The students described their teachers as generally being understanding of their needs and stressors. They acknowledged the academic and social support provided to motivate them in both mainstream classes and classes within the special unit. Responsive teaching was also evident in the positive teacher characteristics described by the students, as well as in their perceptions of enjoyable learning activities and a structured but flexible learning environment.

Nonetheless, the students also described concerns with overly tight work schedules, too many tasks requiring handwriting, academic work that was overly easy or excessively hard, and with the physical learning environment (e.g., noise, cramped spaces and large groups). They also expressed a desire for more active listening and understanding from some teachers. While these problems emphasised the need for more attention to responding to individual needs, the students' experiences with teachers who were understanding and were flexible in their teaching arrangements shows that responsive instruction was being implemented by some teachers in their school.

Conclusions

This study explored the lived experience of nine high school students with ASD in an inclusive high school in urban Australia. The study was based on two premises. The first premise was that these students would have valuable insights and information to share about their experiences as students with ASD in an inclusive school (Carrington & Graham, 2001). The second premise was that by listening to the voices of these students, families, teachers, and professional educators would have access to information that could facilitate collaborative efforts to improve schools and schooling (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004).

From the students' voices, six categories emerged: teacher characteristics; issues related to curriculum; support mechanisms; friendships, teasing and bullying; and environmental considerations. These categories were explored in relation to the six characteristics of successful inclusive schools identified by Kluth (2003). This examination demonstrated similarities and differences between the students' lived experiences and Kluth's (2003) characteristics. Significantly, although the students saw positive teacher characteristics as the most important aspect of their school life, they also saw the need for structure and flexibility in teaching practice and the classroom environment. Students placed greater stress than Kluth (2003) placed on the importance of the physical learning environment. Most of the students spoke clearly about the need to reduce noise and increase the availability of space in which to work. Characteristics of committed leadership, democratic classrooms and reflective educators were not, however, directly discussed by students.

At the level of current inclusive educational practices more generally, positive aspects revealed by the voices of the students include the development of a supportive school culture (providing personal and social support in addition to academic support), and the provision of responsive instruction (including making learning fun and learning environments flexible). The students indicated that each of these principles and strategies were, to varying degrees, currently being implemented and practised in their school.

As well as these positive aspects, our study also revealed some gaps between the characteristics of successful inclusive schools proposed by Kluth (2003) and the characteristics of their school as perceived by the students. These gaps indicate a desire

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for greater active listening and understanding on the part of some of their teachers. A lack of understanding of students' strengths and needs can generate a chain of difficulties. These difficulties range from failure to adapt curricula to suit academic levels and talents, non-incorporation of students' interests and not addressing students' learning styles and needs (e.g., typing rather than handwriting).

Students' experience with bullying and teasing suggested that, although a supportive school culture was well developed in terms of professional and paraprofessional support, the issue of peer support required additional consideration and action. It is suggested that this process could be strengthened by directly teaching students with ASD to differentiate between peers' attempts to initiate a friendship and instances of verbal aggression or bullying. This study indicates that students' views and experiences are a significant and useful part of accurately examining the inclusion process and pointing to the ways in which inclusive education practices can be enhanced.

Implications for Practice

The results of this research have implications for planning and programming in an inclusive school community with students on the spectrum. They reinforce the need to consider some the following things when catering to the needs of students with ASD:

1. Careful placement of students with ASD in all subject classes. Factoring in teacher characteristics when placing a student with ASD in a class, especially in non-preferred subjects.
2. Thought needs to be given to how the student workload is organised and presented to students on the spectrum.
3. In relation to support, the following questions need to be considered by staff and students:
   - What support will be provided to the student to support workload output?
   - How this will be implemented?
   - What input can the student provide into these decisions?
4. Helping the student with ASD identify key people within the school environment they could access for help if they needed it.
5. Homework presents as a major issue for students on the spectrum. Questions which need to be asked are:
   - Does the student need it?
   - What educational outcomes will be achieved and do these outweigh the issues?
   - If homework is necessary how much and how will this be done?
6. Handwriting was a common issue for many of the students interviewed. Thus students on the spectrum need as many options as possible in school to record information required. There are now a wide range of technological supports available which can be easily implemented and are user-friendly within inclusive contexts.
7. Noise and crowds were a common issue discussed. Providing quiet times and places for students who identify this as a need should be planned for and negotiated with the student involved.
8. Ensure teachers working with students on the spectrum focus on having a 'firm but fair and flexible' motto.

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

9. Student comments suggested they often felt overloaded with non-preferred activities. Wherever possible it is important to consider how to balance these activities with something more motivating or rewarding to the student.
10. It was evident during the interviews that support for exams and assessment is important to the student with ASD including a quiet place to work with additional time if required.
11. Teasing and bullying is an issue for students with ASD and it is important for them to know teasing and bullying is being followed through and appropriately dealt with through the bullying policies of the school.

Although these may be difficult to implement in the large high school environment, these issues support the notion of the student being a key stakeholder in the inclusive school community team. This team requires the teacher and student working in a collaborative and cooperative relationship to identify, map out and negotiate individual needs and support and work through issues as they arise.

While we acknowledge the limitations of our sample of participants, nine students from a single high school in a metropolitan area of Australia, we do offer a careful analysis of their thoughts and ideas. On the basis of previous research and of our own, we are convinced that listening to the voices of students can facilitate the improvement of schools (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004) and, importantly, direct our attention to important aspects of schooling that are often overlooked (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). The voices of these students have demonstrated that not only have their experiences been as valuable as professional views, their experiences have also taught us exactly where to look to in order to improve inclusive educational practice.

References

Ainscow, M., & Sandill, A. (2010). Developing inclusive education systems: The role of organisational cultures and leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 14*, 401–416. doi:10.1080/13603110802504903

Barnard, J., Prior, A., & Potter, D. (2000). *Autism and inclusion: Is it working?* London, UK: National Autistic Society.

Batten, A. (2005). Inclusion and the autism spectrum. *Improving Schools, 8*, 93–95. doi:10.1177/1365480205049341

Billington, T. (2006). Working with autistic children and young people: Sense, experience, and the challenges for services, policies and practices. *Disability & Society, 21*, 1–13. doi:10.1080/09687590500373627

Carrington, S. (1999). Inclusion needs a different school culture. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 14,* 257–268. doi:10.1080/136031199285039

Carrington, S., & Graham, L. (2001). Perceptions of school by two teenage boys with Asperger syndrome and their mothers: A qualitative study. *Autism, 5,* 37–48. doi:10.1177/1362361301005001004

Carrington, S., & Holm, K. (2005). Students direct inclusive school development in an Australian secondary school: An example of student empowerment. *Australasian Journal of Special Education, 29*, 155–171. doi:10.1080/1030011050290207

Charmaz, K. (2003). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed., pp. 249–291). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Charmaz, K. (2005). Grounded theory in the 21st century: Applications for advancing social justice studies. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 507–535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Davidson, J. (2010). 'It cuts both ways': A relational approach to access and accommodation for autism. *Social Science and Medicine, 70*, 305–312. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.10.017

Department of Education and Training (2005). *Inclusive education statement — 2005.* Brisbane, QLD: Queensland Government. Retrieved from http://education.qld.gov.au/studentservices/learning/docs/inclusedstatement2005.pdf

Forlin, C. (2006). Inclusive education in Australia ten years after Salamanca. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, XXI*, 263–277. Retrieved from, http://www.springerlink.com/content/t94k43j520481717/fulltext.pdf

Forlin, C., & Bamford, G. (2005). Sustaining an inclusive approach to schooling in a middle school location. *Australasian Journal of Special Education, 29,* 172–181. doi:10.1080/1030011050290208

Glaser, B.G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Glaser, B.G. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Grenier, M. (2010). Moving to inclusion: A socio-cultural analysis of practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 14,* 387–400. doi:10.1080/13603110802504598

Hay, I., & Winn, S. (2005). Students with Asperger's syndrome in an inclusive secondary school environment: Teachers', parents and students' perspectives. *Australasian Journal of Special Education, 29,* 140–154. doi:10.1080/1030011050290206

Humphrey, N. (2008). Autistic spectrum and inclusion: Including pupils with autistic spectrum disorders in mainstream schools. *Support for Learning, 23,* 41–47. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9604.2007.00367.x

Humphrey, N., & Lewis, S. (2008). 'Make me normal': The views and experiences of pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools. *Autism, 12*, 23–46. doi:10.1177/1362361307085267

Jordan, R. (2008). Autistic spectrum disorders: A challenge and a model for inclusion in education. *British Journal of Special Education, 35*, 11–15. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8578.2008.00364.x

Kluth, P. (2003). '*You're going to love this kid!*' *Teaching students with autism in inclusive classrooms.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Konza, D. (2005). Secondary school success for students with Asperger's syndrome. *Australasian Journal of Special Education, 29*, 128–139. doi:10.1080/1030011050290205

Lynch, S.L., & Irvine, A.N. (2009). Inclusive education and best practice for children with autism spectrum disorder: An integrated approach. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 13*, 845–859. doi:10.1080/13603110802475518

Minichiello, V., Aroni, R., Timewell, E., & Alexander, L. (1995). *In-depth interviewing: Principles, techniques, analysis* (2nd ed.). Melbourne, Australia: Longman.

Minkes, J., Robinson, C., & Weston, C. (1994). Consulting the children: Interviews with children using residential respite care services. *Disability & Society, 9,* 47–57. doi:10.1080/09687599466780041

Molloy, H., & Vasil, L. (2002). The social construction of Asperger syndrome: The pathologising of difference? *Disability & Society, 17*, 659–669. doi:10.1080/0968759022000010434

Morris, J. (1998). *Don't leave us out: Involving disabled children and young people with communication impairments.* New York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

O'Rourke, J., & Houghton, S. (2008). Perceptions of secondary school students with mild disabilities to the academic and social support mechanisms implemented in regular classrooms. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 55,* 227–237. doi:10.1080/10349120802268321

Osborne, L.A., & Reed, P. (2011). School factors associated with mainstream progress in secondary education for included pupils with autism spectrum disorders. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 5*, 1253–1263. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2011.01.016

Osgood, R.L. (2005). *The history of inclusion in the United States.* Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pearce, M. (2009). The inclusive secondary school teacher in Australia. *International Journal of Whole Schooling, 5*(2), 1–15. Retrieved from http://education.wayne.edu/wholeschooling/ Journal_of_Whole_Schooling/articles/5-2%20Pearce.pdf

Pearce, M., & Forlin, C. (2005). Challenges and potential solutions for enabling inclusion in secondary schools. *Australasian Journal of Special Education, 29,* 93–105. doi:10.1080/1030011050290202

Pearce, M., Gray, J., & Campbell-Evans, G. (2010). Challenges of the secondary school context for inclusive teaching. *Issues in Educational Research, 20*, 294–313. Retrieved from http://www.iier.org.au/iier20/pearce.pdf

Rudduck, J., & Flutter, J. (2004). *How to improve your school: Giving pupils a voice.* London, UK: Continuum.

Waddington, E.M., & Reed, P. (2006). Parents' and local education authority officers' perceptions of the factors affecting the success of inclusion of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders. *International Journal of Special Education, 21,* 151–164. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ843627.pdf

Appendix A

Semistructured Interview Questions for First Interview

The project involved collecting information from the participants using the following questions as a framework:

Describe what you like most about school.

Describe what you like least about school.

What do you find are the most difficult things to cope with at school?

What do you find are the easiest things to cope with at school?

What would make things easier for you at school?

What would make things harder?

What do you worry about the most in relation to school?

What do you find is the thing/s that helps you the most at school?

What do you find is the thing/s that is the least help for you at school?

What would your ideal school be like?

What does it look like, feel like, sound like?

What happens in this school that appeals to you?

How is that different to what happens at your school at the moment?

What would you like to see change about what happens at your school at the moment?

How are you currently supported in school?

What do you like about this support?

What do you dislike?

How would you like to be supported at school?

What would you prefer happened?

https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.173 Published online by Cambridge University Press