**Square Pegs in Round Holes (Harrington, 2014).**

The role of parents or other carers in all children’s lives is critical and is usually to most influential. The impact and shaping effect for autistic children can be significantly greater than those that are “neuro typical.” Parents of autistic students are typically the only advocate for their needs to allow them to access the most basic rights at a school, let alone so they can fulfil their potential by fully accessing the curriculum and other opportunities at school. How are teachers and education systems reinforcing that feeling? And how can it be changed?

Parents self-censored their demands or requests to avoid alienating teachers and staff. They were unwilling to risk their child’s inclusion to meet their educational needs. The onus of responsibility for student participation was on parents (Harrington, 2014). Through better education and understanding of various students’ needs, I will anticipate parent’s expectations to meet the needs of all students. Whilst this research specifically discusses ASD students, the generative practice will be effective and beneficial to all students.

Autism Queensland (AQ) is a non-profit that is the only provider delivering specialised education, therapy and support to autistic people and their families, in Queensland. It has two accredited schools delivering specific education and therapy to students aged six to eighteen.

AQ placement outcomes were low. Integration for mainstream learning outcomes and AQ learning outcomes differed therefore AQ impeded academic progress. Three of eight students later exited mainstream schooling. In contrast, Aspect satellite program success rate was higher, where students can access ASD specific education, training and therapy within their mainstream school environment. However, this was only available in in NSW and SA for 2023, with limited participating schools.

Issues with application to NT context, are that many of these schools are larger (400 or more students) and mostly non-government schools. The cost of these programs is likely much higher and required greater specialisation from staff, which Darwin and the NT are less likely to have available. With better education of individual and special education teachers separate spaces for autistic students to learn within mainstream settings.

Whilst the variety in autistic student needs is significant, if engaged early enough and genuinely, parents and students may be able to educate me in the best methods of enabling their learning and behaviour monitoring.

**Canadian First Nations Perspective on Autism**

**(Radio Canada International, 2022)**

Grant Bruno is a Canadian PhD student, Cree First Nations community member and father of two autistic boys. Whilst much of his research is in the deficit of services available to Canada’s First Nations people, some key comments struck me. Firstly, the only in non-Indigenous societies, autism is classed as a disorder, whilst his community describes them as “he/she thinks differently”, in Cree. He also comments that the focus of therapy before acceptance, is a backwards concept and describes autistic people as being born with a special gift (Stephanow (2019, as cited in Gerlach, et al. 2022). Whilst I first considered these comments to be revolutionary, they are in fact, very traditional.

He references the elders telling stories of uniqueness and how they were included in community, leading me to believe in this traditional way of living, people were valued as different, not deficient. (Radio Canada International, 2022. (Mohatarem, K, 2021))

This perspective causes me to reconsider how local education may be lacking, by requiring diagnoses before considering allocating extra supports and the seemingly consistent attitudes of teachers that there is a need to modify student behaviour rather than considering methods to develop whole classroom inclusive behaviour. I strongly believe that by beginning with a change in perspective can trigger significant improvement of relationships, therefore outcomes for students. The language change can be as simple as discussing autism as difference rather than deficit, then considering it as a potential benefit or gift rather than always as a disorder.

**Direct Instruction for Reading Comprehension**

Flores and Ganz (2007) discuss the results of conducting direct instruction for three students, two with autism and one with a significant developmental delay. The boys aged 10 and 16 were both diagnosed with autism, which will be the focus of my reflexion.

The younger boy, 10 years old, was given direct reading instruction during regular class hours of two sessions per day, of 30-minute periods, five days per week. Whilst the 16-year-old boy was given instruction after school. The results from this experiment or case study clearly benefited the students’ academic results. Due to the sample size, further research would need to be found or conducted to support additional resource allocation.

Whilst one-on-one direct instruction is clearly beneficial for a student, the additional workload placed on a teach may be too considerable for many. I strongly believe this could be worked into a learning plan with school leadership support, often, I have experienced the indifference in supporting lower academic students by other staff. This would likely be the greatest obstacle to ensuring these students’ success.

Other significant obstacles could include student opposition. If the student does not want to improve or, more likely, doesn’t want to invest additional time and effort into their education, in this case, literacy, the process becomes very difficult to be seen as valuable. Parent support could provide aid to better enabling these students, as I have found that most students diagnosed with ASD a very supportive of their child’s education. Given proper assistance parents would be able to deliver some of the direct instruction necessary to develop their literacy comprehension.

Further, if the parents were unable or unwilling, online video or voice calls could be used after school to support the delivery of these lessons.

**Autistic Students: Your Voice Counts**

This article clearly advocates a voice for autistic students, by directly quoting their lived experience and opinions. This perspective is critical to understanding how autism affects student learning and behaviour, but further reinforces my goal to develop opportunities to engage with autistic students directly and proactively, personally.

The key areas researched through the interviews are teacher attributes, curriculum/workload, support staff, friendships/socialising, teasing/bullying and environmental factors. The key area I want to explore from this article is the curriculum and workload, as the other factors have either been discussed in other articles or I am unable to effect in the early stages of my teaching practice.

One common complaint by students, particularly with autism but not exclusively, is the requirement to have neat handwriting. A relentless pursuit of this skill can motivate students’ self-withdrawal from mainstream schooling. Provided educators can generate a minimum standard from students, that meets basic requirement, there no longer is a need at secondary school levels for handwriting skills. NAPLAN from Year 5 is conducted online, through school provided computers. Most schools have ICT devices available to support the learning and delivery of various subjects, such as digital technologies and many students have their own devices available from home. Programs and processes such as handwriting conversion applications or speech-to-text will enable students to access the curriculum with little interruption.

Managing student workload within the curriculum is critical to supporting autistic students throughout their schooling experience. Eight of the nine students identified difficulties with time and workload management (Saggers et al., 2001). Increased pressures are mounted onto students, as the final years of high school are clearly and often regarded as critical into gaining employment in the workforce or further study. It continues to be important to manage their expectations and to monitor their progress to ensure their success. All the schools I have experienced have had a “Home Room” or similar class, where students are collected somewhat randomly and limited formal curriculum delivery occurs.

The use of Home Room classes gives an enormous opportunity for teachers to engage with students without the shadow of curriculum requirements. However, I have experienced a case where the Home Room class and teacher were the same as other subjects. This regularly resulted in the classroom, designed for Social and Emotional Learning was disregarded for the other subjects. To stop this from occurring, Home Room classes did not all share the same subject and teacher, but also mixes year levels, at another school.

Sagger et al. (2001) also discusses the volume of work that creates anxiety among the students interviewed. In addition to the roles of Home Room teacher, they can use in-school programs such as Compass to understand the overall nature of what is being required of each student and manage those expectations with other teachers. The inclusion of applications such as Compass, allows teachers to understand a student’s subject, grades, timetable, additional learning needs or external factors, that may affect their education. Provided sufficient training and enthusiasm, teachers can easily understand their students’ stressors, enabling an informed conversation with the student to determine appropriate courses of action.

**Technology support tools for secondary students with autism (Hedges et al., 2017)**

Autistic students can engage more comprehensibly with the curriculum, using digital devices, such as tablets, phones, computers, et cetera. It is well established that autistic children are innately drawn to technology (Colby, 1973; Goldsmith & LeBlanc, 2004, as cited in Hiltz, 2017). This use of technology to motivate and enable autistic students to better engage in the curriculum through a preferred medium could be critical to their success in the classroom and through later endeavours.

Students mostly used for completing assignments and learning outcomes. However, some reported that it was used for “stress reduction-focus” whilst at school, which also occurred at home under the category “relaxation”. The use of these devices amongst all students must be closely monitored, as some students reported they would use YouTube (Hedges et al., 2017). Whilst it is common for autistic students to refer to videos or music to regulate emotions, this can quickly become a distractor if uncontrolled.

Whilst I have witnessed the lack of control in a classroom using mobile phones in the past, I have also experienced students deliberately using it to regulate their emotional stress and to mitigate their exposure other distractors. The variety in behaviour to the same type of device within a classroom will require monitoring and regular adjustment to appropriately manage their use. Importantly, I will also need to articulate the rules and goals for these allowances to students clearly.

Another obstacle to the use of personal devices which students are familiar with, is the recent NT Government decision to ban all mobile phones within NT Government schools. This may be enforced by the school; however, the ruling allows teachers to permit the use of mobile phones for the purpose of learning (NT Government, 30 November 2022).

Hedges et al. (2017) also identifies benefits of increasing independence, as students can regulate or initiate activities, by establishing routines with alarms or reminders. Technology enables social interactions, that may otherwise be too confronting for autistic students, within alternative media. Finally, to reduce anxiety and stress; by creating options for autistic students to self-regulate through enabling applications that can reduce stress, they are more likely to be able to focus on specified tasks and access the curriculum.

**Recommendation Summary**

* Early engagement with students and parents to map preferred and non-preferred activities, triggers, et cetera.
* Reconsider diagnosis first perspective.
* Allocate additional one-on-one direct instruction for students.
* Use available digital technologies, including school-based applications, to monitor and engage in student workload.
* Promote digital technologies that improve student outcomes.
* Reduction or removal of requirement for handwriting, if appropriate.
* Use of Home Room classes, to monitor overall student well-being and workload

**Personal and Professional Goals**

I want to:

1. Identify, test and reflexively analyse new methods to engage autistic students.
2. Identify established and new ICT tools to enable and engage autistic students and families.
3. Generatively develop a framework or process to engage with new autistic students and families before commencing in the secondary mainstream setting.