



CENTRE FOR AUTISM  
MIDDLETOWN

## Strength-based Approaches



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## INTRODUCTION

This is the forty-second Research Bulletin produced by Middletown Centre for Autism, providing summaries of nine articles from 2019 to 2023.

Historically, autism supports have not focused on strengths. The way that autism has been described and understood has largely focused on perceived deficits. It should not be considered cutting edge or innovative to acknowledge and work to a person's strengths; however, there is limited research focusing on the strengths that autistic people certainly possess. Even fewer research papers focus on how to support autistic people to make the most of their strengths. By focusing on strengths, we are giving autistic people an opportunity to show who they are, share their interests and develop confidence and a sense of empowerment.

In this Research Bulletin, we share research focusing on strengths from different perspectives – autistic people themselves and those around them. The papers show the immediate impact of focusing on strengths for autistic people, as well as the broader impact that may shape how we define strengths.

*Please note that the views represented in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of Middletown Centre for Autism. The language used in this Bulletin is autism-affirming and neurodiversity-informed. Some of the papers summarised use more medical and deficit-focused terminology and approaches. This Bulletin is created for autistic people, family members and professionals to learn more about research being conducted. The language chosen here is intended to be as inclusive as possible to the broad autism community*

## INTERVIEW WITH EDEL QUINN

Edel Quinn is a specialist trainer/adviser with Middletown Centre for Autism. She delivers parent and professional training in educational settings across Ireland. Edel is also an associate lecturer on post-graduate courses co-delivered by Middletown Centre for Autism for both Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and Stranmillis University College in Belfast.

Edel's main interests are in supporting anxiety and emotional regulation for autistic children and young people. Using a strengths-based approach is at the core of this work.

### **What does it mean to take a strengths-based approach? What is unique about this approach? What elements are required for something to be considered strengths-based?**

In recent years there has been a considerable shift in both research and practice from a deficit model of autism to a strengths-based approach. In essence, a strengths-based approach is when focus and recognition is given to the strengths, skills and interests of the autistic person. Furthermore, a strengths-based approach is about using those strengths; with families and educators identifying and leveraging those strengths within a person-centred approach to support motivation, engagement, attention and overall well-being.

When considering a strengths-based approach, the following elements should be explored:

- Acceptance of autistic students for their whole selves, including their personalities, strengths and autistic identities to create an environment where students feel safe and free to be themselves.

- Consideration of the physical environment to reduce discomfort, anxiety and frustration. Physical learning spaces should be adapted to avoid sensory overload and support regulation and comfort.
- Educating teaching staff in goal-setting techniques to ensure student activities are based on goals that are relevant to the student's wishes and graded at an appropriate pace for the person.
- Modification of activities to incorporate interests and incorporate the student's learning style.
- Development of opportunities for peer education, understanding and friendship, e.g. LEANS (Learning About Neurodiversity at School project, Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre, University of Edinburgh).
- Assessing the level of autonomy available within the learning environment and ensuring there are opportunities to exercise creativity within all activities.
- Person-centred approach: consulting with the autistic person and collaborating with them and their parents, family and allies to determine how to best accommodate individual needs and preferences.

### **Are there any challenges that people in supportive roles might face in taking a strengths-based approach?**

It is important to remember that everyone has both strengths and challenges. A strengths-based approach should still consider and be respectful of the support needs of an autistic child or young person. It does not negate the importance of assessment and provision of environmental

supports to address barriers that may exist either at home, in the community or within education.

Autistic stereotypes can still exist whereby people in supportive roles might assume that a child or young person is best suited or not suited to a particular interest or academic area based on these assumptions and stereotypes.

Supportive adults need to be non-judgemental and have an open mind to an autistic person's interests and strengths even if they don't relate to them personally. In my work with children and young people, there can be interests in things like escalators, hoovers, washing machines, samurai swords, to name a few. These should be embraced as they are meaningful for the person.

There is a balance to be achieved when incorporating interests and strengths of the autistic person into school, learning and the curriculum. Children and young people benefit from having something they love or they are good at, but we shouldn't overuse their interest in a way that they are uncomfortable with or where it can diminish the joy they get from it.

Equally, it is important that there is not an overfocus on very specific talents or a narrative that is based on 'super-powers'. Autistic experience should not be othered or treated as something outside the norm. Rather, autistic experience is simply one way of thinking and sensing that is no better or worse than non-autistic experience. Dr Jason Lang (autistic psychiatrist) highlights that a focus on high achievement can be unhelpful for children and young people as it adds pressure and expectations and may encourage masking.

### How can school staff practically embrace strengths-based approaches? How can parents practically embrace strengths-based approaches?

Educational professionals can embrace a strengths-based approach in many ways. First and foremost, consideration can be given to language used by professionals. Neuro-affirming and strengths-based language helps to develop a strong culture of autism acceptance in education. For example: using neurotype names such as ‘non-autistic’ or ‘autistic’ rather than referencing ‘normal’; ‘communication differences’ instead of ‘communication deficits’; and autistic ‘traits’ rather than ‘symptoms’. This approach to language shows that autistic experience is not being viewed as less than, nor is non-autistic experience assumed to be the standard that autistic people should be aspiring to.

It is also important that educators and professionals take time and effort to acknowledge what the child can do rather than there being a heightened focus on what they cannot do. Oftentimes assessments, reports and feedback to parents can focus on what the child cannot do, and although this is important in determining appropriate supports or environmental adaptations, it should not be the sole focus. It is important that parents and carers are given the opportunity to celebrate their child’s unique strengths.

Parents and carers can provide opportunities for activities that relate to the child’s own strengths whether that be in technology, science, space, art, music or nature, etc. Strengths can mean very different things for different children and young people. Involvement in strengths-based activities can be exciting, fun and engaging, and can provide a safe environment that is embracing, non-judgemental and where the child or young person can feel valued for being themselves.

### We know that autistic young people can face a lot of challenges – particularly if they have heard negative messages about being autistic. How can we remind them of their strengths and encourage them to focus on them?

Using a strengths-based approach can help to change autistic people’s perceptions of themselves by empowering children and young people to be their true autistic self, which fosters self-confidence. We can provide children and young people with opportunities to demonstrate their strengths to each other or their families. For example, an informal presentation or PowerPoint on a topic of interest can increase a sense of pride and inclusion. We can adapt or modify activities to incorporate areas of special interests or strengths. We can facilitate lunchtime or after-school clubs whereby children and young people can meet to share and showcase their skills within a shared interest.

A strengths-based approach respects and facilitates the voices and lived experiences of the autistic community. In education, children can be supported to be active participants, whether that be creating opportunities for autonomous learning, encouraging choice and facilitating collaboration when developing support plans. Collaboration with the young person about their unique individual learning needs/preferences, sensory preferences, goals and strengths can help them to feel heard, build a sense of autonomy and remind them of their strengths.

## ‘I DEFINITELY FEEL MORE IN CONTROL OF MY LIFE’: THE PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG AUTISTIC PEOPLE AND THEIR PARENTS ON EMERGING ADULTHOOD

### BACKGROUND

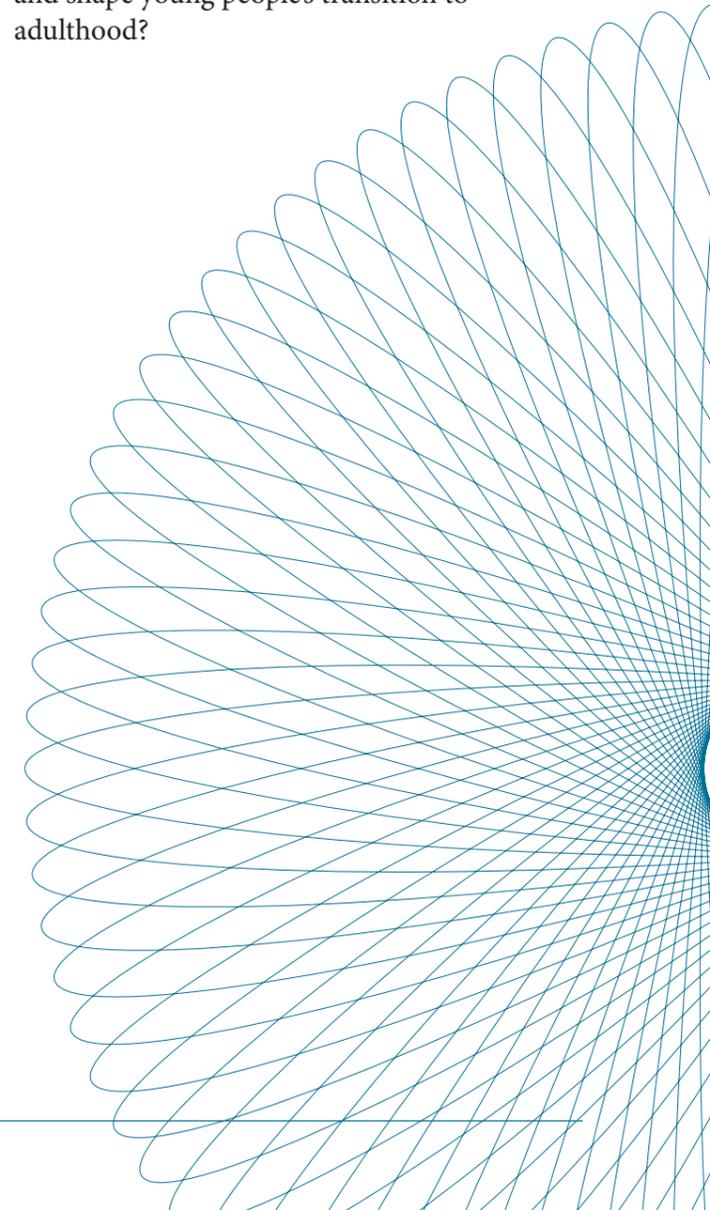
Many research studies that report long-term outcomes for autistic people present a picture that it not always positive. However, the way that outcomes are measured is usually based on those that are preferred by non-autistic adults, with employment, independence, friendships and romantic relationships seen as central expectations. By these metrics, transition from school to adult life can be challenging for autistic young people because they have been found to have less regular contact with friends, fewer plans for post-secondary education and lower levels of paid employment. These issues may be fuelled by a loss of structured support that had been present in secondary school and a lack of services designed to enable positive post-secondary experiences.

Autistic young people are not unique in their struggle to enter adulthood. This transition has been found to be a time of instability and change for all young people, with research highlighting the regular career transitions, struggles with identity and fluctuating friendships that are common for all young people in their late teens/early twenties. As such, these standard measures of ‘success’ that are typically used in autism research may not be reliable or appropriate measures for any young people. Given that transitions can be a particular challenge for many autistic people, it is no surprise that research has shown that parents and teachers have specific concerns about this time. Little focus has been given to the perspectives of young people themselves and the strengths and challenges they experience during this period of transition.

### RESEARCH AIMS

This study aimed to focus on outcome measures as defined by autistic young people themselves as well as their caregivers. They asked the following questions:

- What are young people’s subjective experiences of growing up autistic and their aspirations for the future?
- What are the processes that might underpin and shape young people’s transition to adulthood?



## RESEARCH METHODS

Forty-five children seen initially during childhood as part of a previous study were invited to take part in a 12-year follow-up. All children were diagnosed as autistic, but they had no other neurodevelopmental or medical diagnoses. Twenty-six were boys and two were girls. Fifteen were in high school, six were attending college, three were in part-time paid employment and four were not in education or employment.

Of the caregivers interviewed, 26 were mothers, one was a father and one was a grandmother. A number had received diagnoses such as dyspraxia, dyslexia, OCD, anxiety, depression, ADHD and epilepsy.

All participants completed face-to-face semi-structured interviews on a single occasion either in their home or at the researchers' university, depending on preference. One family (young person and parent) was interviewed over Skype because they had moved away following the initial study. Caregivers and young people were interviewed separately.

Young people were asked about their experiences of school, goals for the future and self-perceptions. Caregivers were asked about their perspective on their child's experience of school, their ambitions for their child's future and the extent to which they felt being autistic impacted their child's current and future lives.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and themes were extracted.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Young people's perspectives

**Progress:** Despite reporting a range of negative school experiences, the young people highlighted the positive progress they had made since childhood. This was achieved through opportunities to develop confidence via employment, college or pursuing special interests. They also highlighted how understanding and accepting their autistic identity had allowed them to make positive progress. However, some measured their progress based on their ability to fit into a neurotypical world.

**One step at a time:** The young people acknowledged that they needed more time to make the transitions into adulthood that they hoped for. They spoke of challenges with planning, organising and future-oriented thinking, and felt like they may need extra time to make decisions, explore passions and mind their mental health.

**Connections with others:** Many of the young people highlighted that they valued close connections with others – both family and friends. Some felt limited motivation to pursue new friendships, while others wished to have more friends. They commented on the potential difficulty of making friends away from a school setting. They valued being understood and emphasised the difficulty of sharing interests with non-autistic peers.

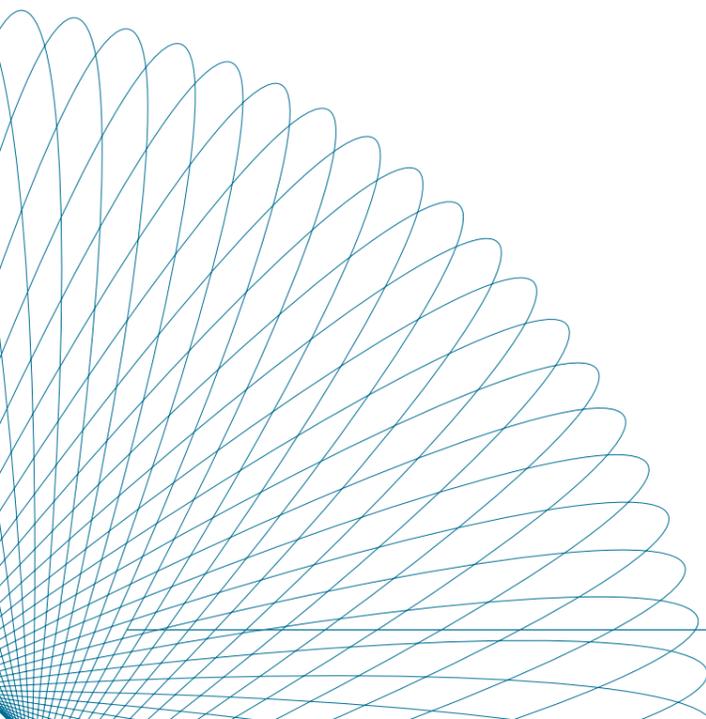
### Caregivers' perspectives

**Progress:** All caregivers reported that their child had made gains since taking part in the original study. For some, the rate was slow, while others exceeded expectations. They highlighted the importance of support – whether one-to-one or environmental. Many parents emphasised the important support of teachers and school principals, particularly focusing on staff who understood autistic experience. Some forms of support were found unsuitable based on the individual child's preferences. Caregivers felt that many school staff had low expectations for their child.

**Uncertain future:** Caregivers were concerned about future independence, highlighting the need to develop autonomy. Some caregivers were confident that this would be achieved, while others felt that specific skills needed to be developed, such as self-regulation, emotional regulation, planning and time management. Some parents were confident that due to their child's unique qualities, such as their capacity for learning and empathy, they would achieve independence.

**Pushing boundaries:** Caregivers highlighted that school was often a place where children felt secure but support could be too rigid. Schools could be over-protective or offer too much support. They wanted their child to have a sense of purpose and give them an opportunity to push boundaries. Some were concerned that their children didn't push themselves enough and needed to be exposed to more change. Caregivers wanted their children to develop confidence in taking the next step towards independence. Some felt that schools should foster this, while others felt that practical life skills were not within schools' remit. Like young people, caregivers emphasised that transitions should happen at a slow pace. One highlighted the pressure autistic people are under to transition to adulthood.

**Connections with others:** Caregivers focused on creating supportive and accepting family environments. They spoke of strong relationships within the family and the positive impact of viewing autism as a difference rather than a deficit. Most parents were concerned about their child's social network, yet many did acknowledge that they were more concerned about this than their child. Most parents felt that their children had difficulty making friends, leading to concerns about their friendships in the future. Again, parents noted that this was a concern for them rather than their children and they were wary of placing too much pressure on them.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Traditional outcome measures such as employment and independence may not be realistic goals for many young people starting their transition to adulthood – whether they are autistic or not. By focusing on the goals, strengths and achievements valued by autistic young adults and their families, we may create more practical supports and paint a much brighter picture of this time of transition.

Research has typically focused on the number of friends that autistic people have, with perspectives from parents taking the focus rather than young people themselves. In the present study, caregivers wished for their children to broaden their social networks, whereas the young people wanted to deepen a few friendships rather than expand their range of low-quality connections. By focusing on the young person's preferences, they may feel less pressure to be social, while simultaneously allowing themselves the opportunity to explore more meaningful connections.

Whether strongly identifying with their autistic selves or striving for an identity that made them feel more 'normal', all the young people spoke of the importance of developing a social identity. How we understand ourselves is strongly linked

to how others perceive us, and during school years children's self-appraisal is increasingly linked to how their peers view them. For autistic students, social interactions are often more limited and more negative, leading them to view themselves as 'different' in a negative way and causing a perceived need to mask their identity. The researchers suggest that by focusing on fewer high-quality accepting friendships, autistic children may experience a buffer from the negative impact of a poor sense of self-worth.

Both young people and caregivers focused on challenges related to future thinking and planning. Programmes for adults that combine seeking social support with executive functioning skills have had positive results. Introducing these skills in combination to autistic children at an early age may have a cascade of effects that impact the young person's sense of identity and long-term autonomy.

## FULL REFERENCE

Cribb, S., Kenny, L., & Pellicano, E. (2019). 'I definitely feel more in control of my life': The perspectives of young autistic people and their parents on emerging adulthood. *Autism*, 23(7), 1765-1781. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319830029>

# DIVERSITY IN AUTISTIC PLAY: AUTISTIC ADULTS' EXPERIENCES

## BACKGROUND

Play is important for mental health and well-being. It can be social or solitary, and while hard to define it is typically characterised as activity that is fun or rewarding, voluntary and intrinsically motivated (i.e. done for its own sake). Historically, autistic play has been understood through a 'deficit' lens and pathologised for diagnostic purposes as behaviours to be 'fixed' based on neurotypical 'norms'. The focus on 'deficits' can be seen as a form of ableism that is associated with negative outcomes for autistic people, exacerbating stigma and marginalisation. A neurodiversity-informed approach is therefore needed to counter the 'deficit' perspective, conceptualising play as a phenomenon characterised by difficulties, differences and strengths, and centred around autistic voices and experiences.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The study aimed to explore the experiences and meaning of play from an autistic perspective, including common themes, activities, motivations and any perceived differences between autistic play and non-autistic play.

The specific questions asked were:

1. How do autistic individuals construct play experiences?
2. What do autistic individuals consider important about the ways in which they engage in play?
3. Do autistic individuals identify any differences between autistic and non-autistic play?

## RESEARCH METHODS

Autistic adults as well as parents and professionals working with autistic people were consulted in the design of the study and interview questions. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was used in alignment with the aims of the project because it facilitates an understanding of individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon and reduces power imbalances by viewing the individual as an expert of their own experiences.

The researchers recruited a purposive sample of 22 adults aged 18–57 years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in either a written (email, Skype instant messenger) or verbal (phone, Zoom, Skype) format depending on each participant's preference, with audio interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews focused on three areas: experiences of play, comparisons between autistic and non-autistic play, and experiences of assessment and supports using play.

An iterative data analysis process was carried out resulting in a master list of superordinate and subordinate themes.

<i>Superordinate theme</i>	<i>Superordinate theme</i>	<i>Prevalence</i>
3.3 Socialisation in play	1.1 Solitary play versus social play	22
	1.2 Preferences in social play	
3.3 Imaginary play	2.1 Engaging in imaginary play	20
	2.2 Grounded in reality	
3.3 Flow	3.1 Experiences of flow	16
	3.2 Benefits and limitations	

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The superordinate and subordinate themes and the prevalence of the superordinate themes are outlined in the table below, with important commonalities and differences found in the ways that socialisation in play, imaginary play and flow (a state involving intense focus on the play) are experienced.

### Socialization in play

Participants discussed the importance of both solitary play and social play, with solitary play having an important recuperative function. Social play was seen as both rewarding and exhausting; therefore for some participants their preference for one type of play over the other depended on their available resources or their needs at a specific moment. They also reported preferences for parallel play and playing with similar autistic people.

### Imaginary play

Many participants described their engagement in imaginary play experiences, including social role-play and grounded-in-reality play. Social role-play included fantasy games such as Dungeons & Dragons, while grounded-in-reality play was based off familiar experiences, causing participants to reflect on how much of their play was 'genuinely imaginative'.

### Flow

Participants also discussed their experiences of flow in relation to time and focus. Most referred to the long periods of time they spent playing – 'for hours upon hours upon hours', losing track of time and becoming more intensely immersed in play than non-autistic peers. The experience of flow had both positive and negative aspects: promoting relaxation by allowing the participant to focus completely on something they enjoyed, but often at the expense of self-care activities such as eating or sleeping if the focus became too intense.

## Implications for Practice (By the Authors)

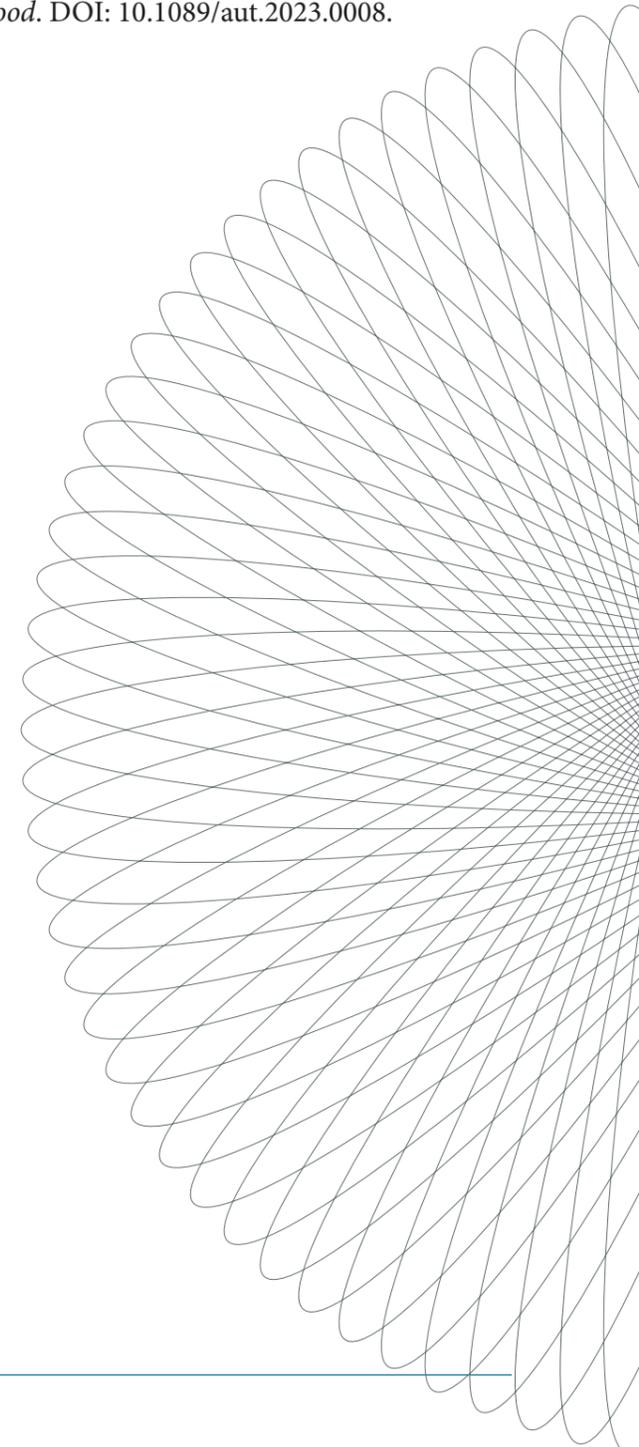
The authors highlighted important implications for practice in the following areas:

- Future research – it is important to explore whether other autistic people experience play in the ways the study highlighted. Furthermore, future research would benefit from exploring specific areas in more depth, e.g. the characteristics of autistic flow states and how these relate to monotropism, autistic conceptualisations of social play (e.g. 'parallel' play) and how autistic play supports autistic people's well-being.
- Autism diagnostic assessment – the findings of this study suggest play preferences that could be included in diagnostic assessment practices outside of a deficit-focused model; for example, by including observation of or discussions about grounded-in-reality play, self-regulation through solitary play and engagement in flow. Further research is required to explore and validate these possibilities.
- Settings involving potential social play (e.g. education, recreation) – it is important to provide environments where autistic people can play solitarily should they choose to do so.

More generally, the authors encourage professionals, researchers and members of wider society to become more understanding, accepting and supportive of the various play preferences and experiences this study has highlighted, and to avoid using deficit-focused language and mindsets in relation to autistic play.

## FULL REFERENCE

Pritchard-Rowe, E., de Lemos, C., Howard, K. & Gibson, J. (2023). Diversity in Autistic Play: Autistic Adults' Experiences. *Autism in Adulthood*. DOI: 10.1089/aut.2023.0008.



# POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN NEURODIVERSITY: AN INVESTIGATION OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN AUTISTIC ADULTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM IN A COMMUNITY SETTING

## BACKGROUND

Despite the study of character strengths (i.e. personality traits that are core to a person's identity and conduct) receiving significant consideration within the field of positive psychology, there is limited knowledge in the United Kingdom about how positive psychology can support well-being in autistic people. The present study aimed to reduce this knowledge gap among autistic adults.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The primary aims of this study were to investigate:

- Character strengths profiles as a potential tool to identify strengths-based interventions that could enhance well-being outcomes for autistic adults.
- The association between character strengths and life satisfaction in autistic adults in a community setting in the United Kingdom.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional design, using descriptive and correlational analyses, to answer research questions. Forty-seven autistic adults (83 per cent formally diagnosed and 17 per cent self-identifying, with no additional information on co-occurring conditions or disabilities collected) aged 18–75 years participated in an online self-rated standardised questionnaire pertaining to their character strengths and life satisfaction. No additional information on co-occurring conditions or disabilities was collected as these were not variables under investigation for this study.

Participation was restricted to those residing in the United Kingdom to reduce cultural variations in the validation of character strengths. Informed consent was gained. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of East London School of Psychology Research Ethics committee.

Two measures were employed: firstly, a 96-item self-report (the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths-P (VIA-IS[P])), assessing character strength items such as Emotional, Interpersonal, Intellectual, Theological strengths and strengths of Restraint using a 5-point Likert scale (1=very much unlike me, 5=very much like me) that only included questions in the positive direction; and secondly, a 5-item self-report, the Strengths with Life Scale (SWLS), measuring life satisfaction using a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

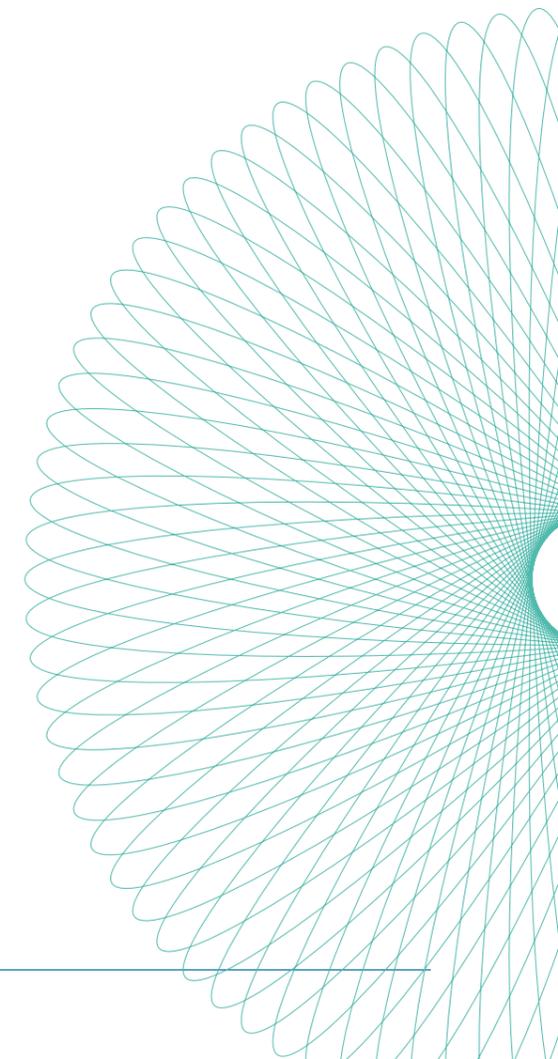
### Character strengths profile

To evaluate signature strengths (the five top-ranked strengths) for the total sample, character strengths were ranked according to the frequency the strength presented as a signature strength. Over 50 per cent of participants reported Honesty (n=34, 72.3 per cent), *Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence* (n=30, 63.8 per cent), *Love of Learning* (n=27, 57.4 per cent), *Fairness* (n=25, 53.2 per cent) and *Kindness* (n=24, 51.1 per cent). In contrast, the least reported character strengths included *Gratitude* (n=1, 2.1 per cent), *Teamwork* (n=2, 4.3 per cent), *Social Intelligence* (n=2, 4.3 per cent) and *Self-regulation* (n=3, 6.4 per cent).

Findings indicated a clear distinction in the relative endorsement of strengths. *Honesty*, for example, was the most frequently reported strength among 28 participants (59.6 per cent), scoring 4 or more compared to *Teamwork*, which was rated least by 35 participants (74.5 per cent), scoring 3 or less. Intellectual strengths were also reported more compared to emotional strengths, which were least reported within this study. Despite this, the endorsement of Emotional strengths did not appear to be different from Interpersonal, Theological and Restraint strength categories. This study further found that the most frequent strengths, i.e. intense interests and strong attention to detail (here described as *Love of Learning* and *Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence*) were consistent with autistic traits reported in literature.

### Character strengths and satisfaction with life

Findings revealed a neutral score for the mean satisfaction with life, i.e. participants neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements in the SWLS despite there being a sizeable variation in the responses provided. Correlations were computed between both the 24 character strengths and five strength categories of the VIA-IS with the SWLS. This resulted in multiple comparisons being produced. At the strength category level, Interpersonal strengths were significantly linked to satisfaction with life. A significant positive correlation with life satisfaction was also reported for Gratitude (Theological), Hope (Emotional) and Honesty (Restraint).



## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the authors)

This study has practical implications for the well-being of autistic people through the identification of a distinct signature strengths profile that is consistent with autistic strengths and traits reported across research. In this context, autism can be viewed through a more positive lens as supported by the paradigm shift of the neurodiversity movement. For example, focused interests could be better understood as an intense version of the character strengths of *Love of Learning* and *Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence*. Mental health professionals could further use the VIA character strengths to support clients to foster a positive autism identity, which will improve self-esteem and act as a protective factor against mental health difficulties. Within education, awareness of an individual's signature strengths could be used for planning purposes and to improve motivation.

This study identified that character strengths of *Gratitude*, *Hope* and *Honesty* were related to satisfaction with life. Out of these three character strengths, only Hope has been consistently reported in previous research to be associated with life satisfaction and a protective factor against depression. Hope therapy, a positive psychology hope-based intervention, could therefore be employed to target hope development among autistic adults.

The authors of this study advised that additional research is required to investigate further the efficacy of specific supports that target hope development in autistic adults, and also to confirm what character strengths in addition to hope are linked to life satisfaction.

## FULL REFERENCE

Nocon, A.S., Roestorf, A. and Menéndez, L.M.G. (2022). Positive psychology in neurodiversity: an investigation of character strengths in autistic adults in the United Kingdom in a community setting. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*. **99**(1), p. 102071..

# MUTUAL (MIS)UNDERSTANDING: REFRAMING AUTISTIC PRAGMATIC 'IMPAIRMENTS' USING RELEVANCE THEORY

## BACKGROUND

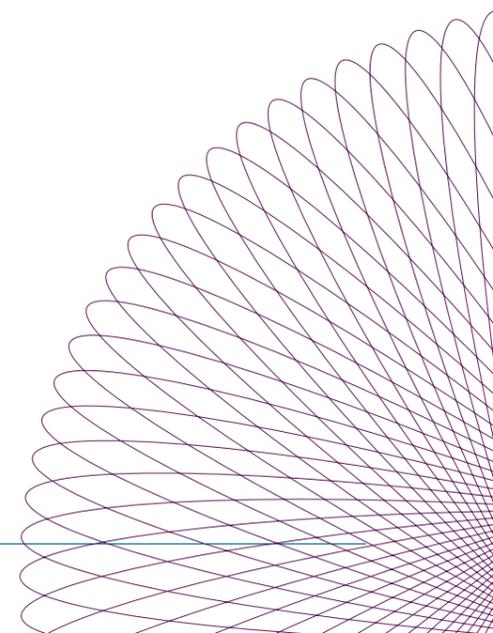
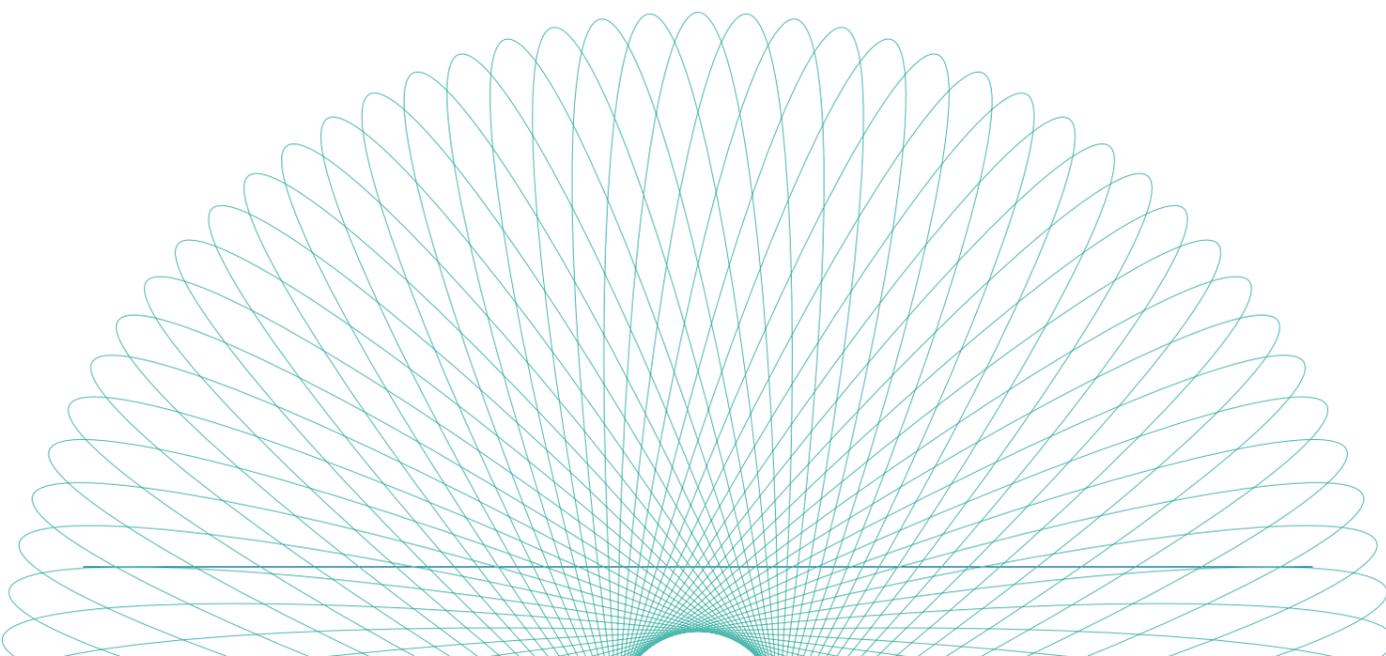
Issues related to communication have been voted as a research priority by autistic people and their allies. Despite this, research related to communication has been limited and has focused largely on perceived 'deficits'. More recent approaches to understanding communication focus on intersubjectivity. This is the idea that communication does not occur just in one person; rather, it is social and interactive and constructed by people communicating together. The traditional view of autistic communication has been based on the one-sided suggestion that autistic people struggle due to a lack of empathy and understanding for the people they communicate with. However, the Double Empathy Problem argues that misunderstandings or lack of understandings arise during autistic to non-autistic communication because of different norms and expectations that are associated with each neurotype. Rather than a failure of one (autistic) person within an interaction, there is a mismatch in communication styles that makes communication more difficult for both autistic and non-autistic people.

A second theory that has been linked to autistic communication differences is monotropism. This is the idea that the type of attention that people give can vary, with some people tending to focus on multiple things at once (polytropism), and others focusing very narrowly and intensely (monotropism). The theory suggests that monotropic processing is at the heart of autistic experience. It may explain focused interests and it may explain differences in communication style. Given the multiple forms of information (e.g. audio, visual, socio-cultural knowledge) happening at once during conversation, very focused attention may make it more difficult to juggle all these messages at once.

Taking both approaches into account, the current researchers focused on relevance and mutual understanding of the interaction. They suggest that for communication to work, the speaker and listener must infer what the other person has in mind, as well as understanding that the other person is also inferring their state of mind. The current researchers suggest that autistic and non-autistic people are likely to be having drastically different sensory and perceptual experiences, as well as focusing their attention in different ways. As such, assumptions about what is relevant for the other person and how they are thinking may not be accurate for either autistic or non-autistic people. This relevance theory suggests that there is a shared breakdown in communication.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of the study was to create a case study focused on the language and communication of a small number of autistic people. It examined whether this relevance theory may be linked to the Double Empathy Problem.



## RESEARCH METHODS

Eight autistic adults took part in the study. All used spoken language and none had an intellectual disability. They were asked to have conversations lasting roughly ten minutes with a chosen (familiar) partner, an autistic stranger and a non-autistic stranger. The conversations took place in a small private meeting room. To give participants the opportunity to have a meaningful set of conversations, they were asked to discuss the topic of loneliness in their area. Conversations were analysed by three team members over a period of months. Researchers originally planned to focus on occasions when communication broke down, but these instances were rare. Instead, they focused on set motifs: the flow of conversation, shared wavelength and moments of unique verbal play.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Results found that very few instances of non-understanding occurred, but there were clear differences between conversations held by mixed pairs compared to autistic pairs.

- All matched autistic pairs showed a dramatic increase in flow and rapport, with shared affect and enthusiasm regularly featuring. This was rarely seen within mixed pairs.
- Some autistic participants appeared to find communication easier when speaking to an autistic partner.
- While communication had less flow and symmetry when autistic people were paired with non-autistic people that they knew well, for some pairs a supportive communicative environment was created, with more time given, less interrupting and misspeaking accommodated for.
- Where there was connection and mutual understanding between autistic and non-autistic strangers, it was characterised by frequent questioning about the partner's experiences, volunteering of personal information and emotional openness.
- As all participants had agreed to discuss the topic of 'loneliness', it could be the case that this shared motivation may have facilitated mutual understanding to a greater extent than had participants been meeting with no assigned subject to speak on.

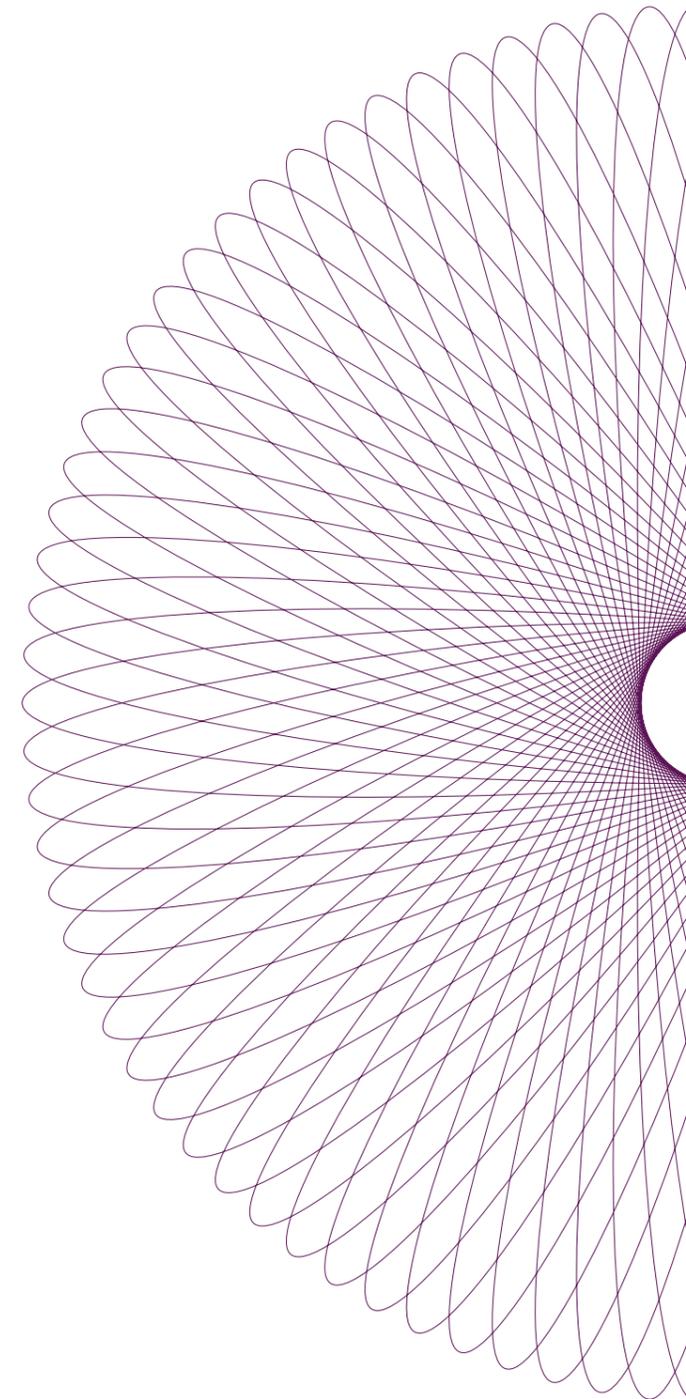
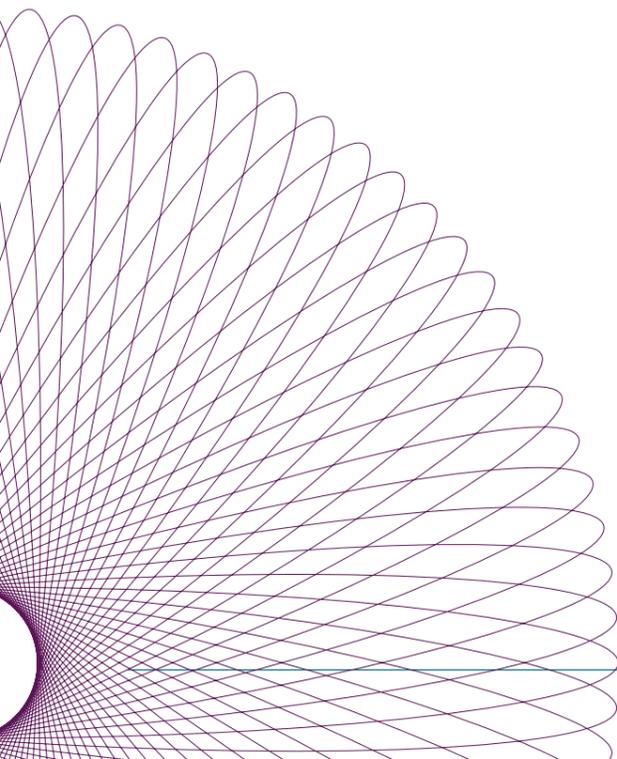
## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

A number of implications could be drawn from this preliminary piece of research:

- It is important for those in a supportive role to be aware of their own perspective and assumptions in relation to 'right' or 'wrong' ways of communicating.
- Giving autistic children space to engage with other autistic young people may give them the opportunity to freely communicate and experience flow and connection in their conversations.
- Taking time to really know a person, their communication style and communication needs can create a supportive environment where communication may move more freely.
- Those in a supportive role may be able to better facilitate communication flow with autistic young people by creating a shared focus of conversation and providing conscious space for mutual sharing.

### Full Reference

Williams, G.L., Wharton, T. and Jagoe, C. (2021). Mutual (mis)understanding: reframing autistic pragmatic 'impairments' using relevance theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 12:616664. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.616664



# ‘NEURODIVERGENT LITERACIES’: EXPLORING AUTISTIC ADULTS’ ‘RULING PASSIONS’ AND EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY THROUGH CLASSROOM LITERACIES

## BACKGROUND

Autistic experience has historically been framed through a deficit-focused lens, which has created disadvantage and discrimination for autistic people. A neurodiversity-informed approach acknowledges the natural occurrence of neurological differences, and challenges the neuronormative approach that favours neurotypical ways of thinking and being.

Models of literacy have also shifted from deficit-focused approaches to the ‘ideological’ model of literacy, which accepts that reading and writing are cultural practices and are shaped by specific cultural contexts. In this sense, both literacy and neurodivergent experiences are shaped by the culture, support and understanding in which they are experienced.

Historically, assessment tools have pathologised autistic experience and contributed to a deficit-focused understanding of autism. Common tools like the Autism Quotient (AQ) test have included loaded questions relating to literacy, with suggestions that autistic people may struggle to understand the intentions of characters in books, may find it difficult to picture characters and may struggle to create stories. The popularity of this tool may impact teachers’ perceptions of autistic literacy, leading them to assume that autistic students will lack strengths that may be present for non-autistic students.

## RESEARCH AIM

The aim of the research was to answer three research questions:

1. What was the nature of participants’ school experience?
2. How did participants’ intense interests relate to literacies?
3. How could related literacies help improve school experience for neurodivergent children?

## RESEARCH METHODS

Thirteen participants (18–66 years old) took part in the study. Five were male, four were female and four were non-binary. Several participants were multiply neurodivergent. All participants took part in semi-structured interviews. They were offered the opportunity to use the mode of communication they found most comfortable and their meeting style preferences were also respected (e.g. face to face, online, in text). Their responses were then analysed in NVivo. The study was led by a neurodivergent researcher.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### School experiences

Many participants reflected on negative school experiences, with a particular focus on negative social experiences. A number reflected on their experiences of being bullied (for example, Emma: *‘for years I was pretty badly bullied, and I learned to mask very well’*). They discussed feelings of isolation (Catherine: *‘I knew that I didn’t fit in ... but I didn’t know why’*). Some stated that teachers contributed to the difficulty of their schooling.

Some participants had positive school experiences, with many relating these positive times to being allowed to pursue their intense interests. Times when teachers acknowledged students’ intense interests were remembered positively. Intense interests were discussed as a central element to autistic well-being.

### Reading/books as an intense interest

For many participants, the act of reading was viewed with deep love. (P: *‘one of the people who would read the cereal packet: absolutely anything and everything!’*). Many talked about how their passion for reading had remained with them into adulthood. Many discussed reading fiction and non-fiction (despite the assumptions presented in the AQ assessment tool).

### Narrative and characters

Several participants engaged with story and character, again, in contradiction to assumptions made in the AQ tool. They focused on books but also broader forms of narrative presentation such as role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons, ‘interactional’ video games and TV programmes.

Narratives also served as a way to make relational sense of the world (P: *‘very early on, before I developed the tools of observation and analysis ... I was using people in literature ... so I was thinking, oh this person is like this book that I’ve read, so I was sort of parsing meaning in terms of these fictional worlds that I was experiencing’*). For some, fictional characters also provided an emotional bond.

### Literacies about intense interests

Intense interests were found to guide engagement in some literacies (for example, MEJ: *‘when I started learning the guitar, I read all the books, not just about how to play guitars, but who made guitars, where they were made, what the types of materials were ...’*). For some participants, engaging in intense interests allowed them to

cross multiple genres, incorporating fiction and non-fiction and a variety of texts to fully engage with their interest. Some participants highlighted that engaging with literacies could be influenced by their individual neurodivergent dispositions such as the sensory appeal of text or the experience of reading music.

### Intense interests, literacies and identities

Participants discussed how their intense interests and associated literacies were also entangled in their identities. Some stated that their intense interest in autism had led to work in autism-related fields. Others stated that their experience of gender and sexuality was intertwined with their autistic identity, leading to an interest in reading about LGBTQIA+ history or the language associated with minority spaces and their own language use in relation to their identities.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Most positive school experiences centred around participants’ intense interests. It therefore makes clear sense to actively engage students in topics they are passionate about.
- Allowing all students (neurodivergent and neurotypical) to demonstrate and share their interests in a safe and supported environment may build emotional connections between students and strengthen the student–teacher relationship.
- Many participants highlighted difficult relationships with fellow students, as well as their attempts to understand relationships through engaging with different literacies. By providing access to high-quality, emotionally rich fiction, neurodivergent children may be supported in developing an understanding of motive, relationships and different personalities.

- Many participants discussed experiencing bullying in school. By providing books written by neurodivergent authors and featuring neurodivergent characters to the whole classroom in all learning contexts, every student will be given the opportunity to understand and empathise with different ways of thinking and being.
- Equally, given the intertwined relationship between autism and gender discussed by many participants, students may benefit from texts that focus on the richness of neurodivergent identities.
- Participants highlighted the varied forms of texts used to engage with their interests, be that books, film, television programmes, videogames, etc. Broadening the types of texts used in the classroom may serve to enable neurodivergent students to better engage.
- Critical literacy skills are an essential part of school staff's working world as they are bombarded with varying information about 'best practice'. By staying informed of the latest thinking and critically evaluating information relating to the students in their care, staff will be better able to challenge approaches that support a deficit model of difference. By challenging the assumptions and stereotypes that they may hear about autistic experience, they will be best placed to understand their students and support their strengths.

#### Full Reference

Bailey, C. (2023). 'Neurodivergent literacies': exploring autistic adults' 'ruling passions' and embracing neurodiversity through classroom literacies. *Literacy*. 57(2), pp. 120–131. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12320>

## PARENT-IDENTIFIED STRENGTHS OF AUTISTIC YOUTH

### BACKGROUND

Historically, autism has been characterised by social and communication difficulties, with most research focusing on understanding and reducing perceived challenges, and less emphasis being placed on the strengths of autistic people. During the transition into adulthood, a particularly vulnerable and difficult time for all young people, development and use of strengths may be fundamental to attaining success in careers, relationships and community involvement.

Research suggests that autistic young adults often may not achieve the post-secondary outcomes that they hope for in relation to higher education and/or career development. Autistic adults are also less likely to enrol in post-secondary education than those with most other disabilities. Additionally, autistic adults have one of the lowest employment rates among disability groups in their early twenties.

Focusing on strengths is considered one of seven factors that forms a successful transition experience for autistic people. Understanding strengths and how to harness them in a workplace can create a more supportive environment for autistic adults and increase their job satisfaction. Furthermore, an autistic adult who is aware of their own strengths and has experience using them in practical settings may also be more successful in finding suitable work within a chosen career in the first instance. Despite these likely benefits, there are limited research studies that identify strengths in autistic individuals, including parent-identified strengths.

Given the need for better supports to enable autistic young adults to achieve their desired goals, and the close involvement of parents during the transition-to-adulthood period, the researchers identified a need to examine parent perspectives about youth strengths during adolescence.

### RESEARCH AIM

This study aimed to answer the question: how do parents consider youth strengths when preparing for adulthood with their adolescent autistic children?

### RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative methodology with data gained from semi-structured interviews conducted within three separate studies in two US states. Each study explored how autistic young people were being prepared for adulthood and included separate interviews with young people (n=41) and their caregivers (n=39). Within this paper, only the 39 parent interviews (95 per cent female (n=37)) about their autistic adolescent children (88 per cent male (n=36)) were reported on.

Across the three studies, inclusion criteria varied slightly. All parent participants were primary caregivers of an adolescent who had been diagnosed as autistic. The young people were aged 12–19 years. Most adolescents whose parents were interviewed did not have a co-occurring intellectual disability and were anticipating a high school diploma. Parents provided demographic information and completed the Social Responsiveness Scale.

- Study A was descriptive and examined youth and parental expectations for adulthood among seven families (eight youth) in North Carolina.
- Study B aimed to understand family experiences in preparing for adulthood during secondary school among 14 families (15 youth) in Utah. Interviews were conducted at the start of a longitudinal mixed-methods project on the topic.
- Study C involved individual interviews with 18 parents and 18 youth in Utah prior to engagement in intervention groups focusing on preparing parents and youth for adulthood.

The purpose of each study was slightly different, but many of the interview questions were consistent across the three studies. Each study was approved by the University of Utah and/or the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants were recruited through emails and paper and/or electronic flyers to local organisations (including clinics and schools) providing services to autistic youth and their families. Interviews lasted on average 31 minutes and were held at a university clinic or at the participant's home. Interview questions addressed parents' expectations for their child's life after high school, their concerns about the future, and preparations for the youth's entry into adulthood.

Some of the specific questions asked were:

- Tell me about what you currently imagine life after high school will look like for your child?
- Are there aspects of your child's future that you are especially unsure of or concerned about right now?

- Tell me about what sorts of things you, your child and the rest of your family have been doing to prepare for your child's adult life.

The participants were not asked specifically about their child's strengths.

Interviews were audio recorded, coded through the development of a codebook and then transcribed and data analysed using thematic analysis with the purpose of identifying themes and sub-themes. Within the primary sub-themes, data was further analysed by conducting a summative content analysis to specifically outline the categories of strengths that were described by parents.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Thematic analysis revealed three sub-themes under the broad theme of parental perceptions of strengths. These included diverse strengths and skills, strengths counterbalanced by challenges, and strengths with supports.

### Diverse strengths and skills

Although parents expressed some concerns and worries about their children transitioning into adulthood, they also identified a range of diverse strengths and skills without any prompting. These included (1) cognitive and learning skills (2) structure and routine (3) independence/self-determination (4) arts and creativity (5) technology (6) social and relational skills (7) positive character traits, and (8) physical/sensory motor ability.

### Strengths counterbalanced by challenges

Despite the many strengths highlighted by parents, they did mention that their children encountered challenges alongside their strengths. When spoken about together, parents provided

context about their concerns for their child's future. For example, even though their child may have strengths in providing ideas, being creative, analytical, a gifted person or independent, etc. these strengths may not be fully appreciated because of challenges such as their ability to cope with certain situations or states, perhaps job stress. Another parent highlighted their concerns about their child living within the community even though they were independent, preferred to be alone and could care for themselves but struggled socially. These types of challenges were deemed to be concerns that may impact the broader vision and success of their child's future.

### Strengths with supports

Parents highlighted the need for supports to be put in place to fully realise strengths, and it was deemed important to understand the unique individual strengths of those at transition age by creating supportive and autism friendly contexts to encourage adulthood successes. For example, a preference for structure and sameness is often viewed as a feature of autistic experience. While several participants saw the need for structure as limiting their child's ability to function in situations when flexibility was required, several also conveyed that their child succeeded in meeting expectations when instructions were clear and direct.

In summary, this study found that overall parents are an important source of information about youth strengths during the transition planning processes. Analysis from this research further found that parents of autistic youth had similar perceptions of autistic strengths as the autistic adults from previous research studies. Specifically, both groups identified memory, tenaciousness and creativity as strengths, while also expressing that traits can present as both strengths and challenges.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the authors)

- Understanding the various types of strengths that parents observe in their autistic children can help inform the development of strengths-based interventions to support the transition to adulthood.
- A supportive work environment is imperative. For example, when provided with a predictable and consistent routine with clear and direct instructions, autistic youth can thrive in a variety of environments, from schooling to employment and independent living skills. There is therefore a need to develop a person-environment fit in the context of the transition to adulthood for autistic youth. A person-environment fit involves matching between the developmental needs of individuals and the opportunities provided to them by their surrounding environments, including high school, college, workplace and community service systems. This approach may maximise strengths, increase job satisfaction, support both sustained employment and enhance well-being.
- Shifting from a traditional way of thinking about strengths and challenges associated with autism is encouraged. Traditionally, diagnosis of autism is based upon the identification of a range of challenges in the individual being assessed. However, some everyday characteristics that were commonly defined as 'weaknesses' for autistic people should potentially be redefined as strengths. For all people, individual characteristics can be either helpful or adverse depending on influences, such as social context, ability to regulate behaviour and the degree to which a characteristic is expressed.

- Overall, improved understanding of strengths in autistic people can help provide a better format for structuring transition supports. Many current supports focus primarily on reducing challenges faced by autistic people. However, without a complementary focus on strengths, positive characteristics and those perceived as negative but with potential for positive applications may be lost or reduced. A key component in the formatting of transition services may be the inclusion of strength recognition and development. This study provides evidence that parents can be an important source of information about youth strengths in the context of transition planning. There is a need for strengths-based support approaches for autistic youth particularly during the transition to adulthood.
- More research is needed to develop and test how individual strengths can be best harnessed in supports for autistic youth. Future research should be outlined within an understanding that parents observe varied strengths among autistic youth but that they have concerns about challenges countering those strengths and about ensuring access to the types of supports

needed to realise those strengths. Future studies should also proceed with a more nuanced, non-dichotomous view of the need for structure and routine, social skills, cognitive skills and other traits as both potential strengths and potential challenges. In addition, forthcoming research may openly ask about characteristics as both challenges and strengths, and enhance the literature on this more complex view of such traits.

- A discussion of strengths was unprompted in this study; parents were not asked whether they felt the characteristics they shared about their children were strengths relative to their challenges or to the abilities of other autistic or non-autistic youth. Future research investigating parental perceptions of strengths in further detail is needed for a more complete understanding.

#### Full Reference

Warren, N., Eatchel, B., Kirby, A.V., Diener, M., Wright, C. and D'Astous, V. (2021). Parent-identified strengths of autistic youth. *Autism*. 25(1), pp.79–89.

## A CAPABILITIES APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING AUTISTIC ADULTHOOD

### BACKGROUND

Both society and early ventures in autism research have depicted autism as a condition of childhood, despite the obvious presence and contribution of autistic adults. This has resulted in a large focus on understanding and supporting autistic children and young people, but far less understanding of the experiences of autistic adults. One barrier to understanding these experiences is a historic focus on 'deficits' and 'impairments' in autistic adulthood. Historically, the individual behaviours and ways of thinking of autistic adults have been compared to non-autistic ways of being, with 'treatments' and 'interventions' largely focusing on adapting the individual to appear less autistic. As such, the range of supports and services for autistic adults are often based on changing the individual rather than the world in which they live. Further, research has largely been conducted without the inclusion of autistic people, meaning that research questions and the interpretation of findings may not match the lived experience of autistic adults.

Many studies that do focus on autistic adults examine the developmental trajectory of autistic adults diagnosed in childhood. The outcomes used to measure whether an autistic adult is living well may not be meaningful to autistic adults. For example, an autistic adult who requires high levels of support from others (often considered a 'poor outcome') may be happy and enjoying a good quality of life. Equally, an autistic adult who no longer meets the diagnostic criteria for autism (typically considered a 'good outcome' by researchers) may struggle to fit in and may feel removed from others.

Rather than impose assumptions about what positive outcomes may look like, researcher Martha Nussbaum has developed an approach to understanding quality of life that focuses on the opportunity that a person has to do or be something. Access to these 'capabilities' can provide

an opportunity for a range of outcomes rather than a small number of pre-defined outcomes. Nussbaum highlighted ten central capabilities that most people (autistic and non-autistic) need so that they can choose and create lives that are fulfilled and meaningful in their own terms.

### RESEARCH AIM

The paper aimed to establish how analysing the life chances of autistic adults through a capabilities' lens can enable a richer understanding of autistic adults' lives.

### RESEARCH METHODS

The researchers reviewed recent autism research literature in the context of each of Nussbaum's ten capabilities.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

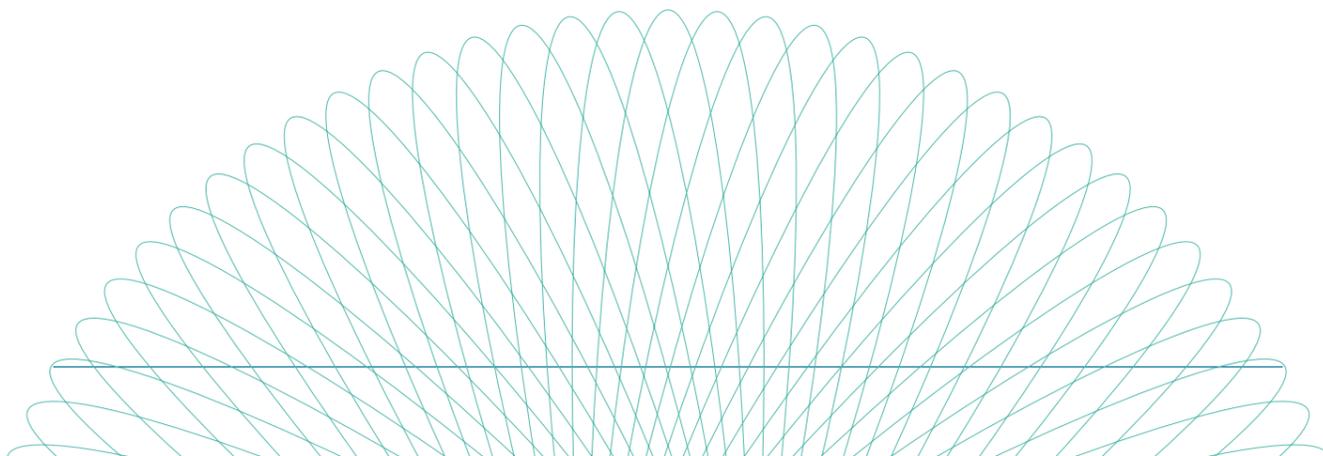
Each capability was described and its relevance to autistic adults was examined.

#### Life

This refers to being able to live a life of a normal length compared to the general population. There is evidence that socio-economic deprivation and other disadvantages lead autistic people to die at a younger age than non-autistic people. There is little understanding of what ageing well means for autistic people or what supports might be most appropriate during this stage.

#### Bodily health

This refers to being able to have good health, including reproductive health, adequate nourishment and shelter. A number of barriers have been found that limit autistic people's access to appropriate healthcare, which in turn influences their bodily health. Homelessness and housing challenges are higher for autistic people than for non-autistic people.



**Bodily integrity**

This refers to being able to move freely from place to place and to be free from violence. Bodily integrity is essential to reduce victimisation of autistic adults, including sexual violence. Safe, accessible public transport and other forms of mobility are a particular concern.

**Senses, imagination and thought**

This refers to being able to use the senses to think, reason and imagine. It focuses on freedom of expression – including access to pleasurable experiences and the ability to avoid painful ones. Historically, autistic people have been framed as lacking in imagination or incapable of having positive sensory experiences; however, more recent studies have shown autistic people to excel in producing novel responses to creative tasks and displaying clear creative talents. Greater focus on the unique autistic imaginative and sensory experiences is needed, as well as appropriate physical and social environments to allow for participation. Autistic people also express great joy in sensory experiences, for example through stimming, but often this enjoyment is pathologised by non-autistic people.

**Emotions**

This refers to being able to have attachments to things and people. It highlights the need to love, grieve and feel a full range of emotions without having emotions overwhelmed by anxiety or fear. While the stereotype exists that autistic people are not interested in relationships, more modern research challenges this. Romantically involved autistic adults report high relationship satisfaction, particularly if in a relationship with another autistic person. Autistic adults do report challenges in initiating and maintaining relationships. Social isolation and loneliness impact many autistic adults. A shift in social acceptance as well as access to relationship guidance and support could greatly impact this.

**Practical reason**

This refers to being able to reflect and plan one's own life. While historically it was thought that autistic people lacked the ability to self-reflect, research shows that they have the capacity to deeply reflect on many aspects of self, regardless of their intellect or communication preferences. The process of decision-making appears to differ to non-autistic people, with a preference for logically consistent, rational decisions that is more deeply founded in acquired information. Executive function and planning challenges can impact aspects of everyday life for many autistic people. Programmes offer strong potential to support autistic adults' goal-setting and decision-making skills.

**Affiliation**

This refers to being able to engage in various types of social interactions, to live with and show concern for others and to exist with dignity and without being discriminated against. Many autistic people emphasise the importance of friendship and peer networks. However, autistic children and adolescents tend to have fewer reciprocal friendships and spend less time with friends outside school. They also report a growing awareness of feeling different to their classmates. While social-skills training may be a well-intentioned attempt to target this, they often do not take into account autism-specific needs. Autistic people report being drawn to those who accept them as they are and who they do not have to mask around. These friendships often include autistic-to-autistic interactions. Such interactions have been found to promote self-understanding, positive self-identity and well-being. Activities to support community building are essential to maintaining well-being. Equally, widespread public campaigns to support acceptance and understanding could impact stigma held by non-autistic people, allowing for easier interactions.

**Other species**

This refers to being able to live in connection with the natural world. Time and again, research has shown that autistic adults intensely value their relationship with the natural world. Support services can play a key role in ensuring access is available to all.

**Play**

This refers to being able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities. Greater social acceptance is needed in relation to focused interests and passions. Supporting these interests can benefit other areas of life like education and employment. It is also essential that recreational activities are accessible to autistic people.

**Control over one's environment**

This refers to being able to participate in political choices that impact one's life. It also refers to equal access to employment and home ownership. While there is little research on autistic adults' engagement in mainstream politics, a number of high-profile autistic people have established themselves as campaigners and activists. Equally, a number of autistic-led advocacy groups have also been integral in shifting perceptions related to autism. There is capacity for autistic self-advocacy organisations and formal workplace reforms to extend autistic agency and control.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

By shifting focus from measures of well-being that are founded in non-autistic ways of being to the life chances experienced by autistic people, there is an opportunity to consider the unique foundations for individual well-being and to shape an environment where the individual is more likely to thrive.

This approach has highlighted that often, despite broad stereotypes, there are areas where autistic people have the potential to excel, such as emotions, affiliations, play, connections to other spaces, practical reason and control over one's environment. However, autistic adults are constrained by a range of social, economic and environmental barriers and disadvantages.

Future research needs to further examine the environment to better understand what currently prevents autistic people from enjoying a particular capability and working to their strengths.

Autistic people should be central in establishing other capabilities to which they aspire and in identifying the barriers that obstruct them.

**Full Reference**

Pellicano, E., Fatima, U., Hall, G., Heyworth, M., Lawson, W., Lilley, R., Mahony, J. & Stears, M. (2022). A capabilities approach to understanding and supporting autistic adulthood. *Nature Reviews Psychology*. 1, pp. 624–639. 10.1038/s44159-022-00099-z.

# A THREE-FACTOR MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING NEURODIVERSE LEARNERS FROM A STRENGTHS-BASED PERSPECTIVE

## BACKGROUND

Successful teaching and learning bring with them many challenges and ultimately require educators to draw on current knowledge, up-to-date practices and research to ensure that they are meeting the individual needs of the students in the classroom. This includes addressing the evolving insight from the neurodivergent community, where the focus is on each individual student's strengths, skills and preferences, while remaining cognisant of areas that may need specific support. This holistic view of the student allows for the creation of an individually tailored programme encompassing an array of supports and strategies.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The research asks, can we bridge the gap between research or theoretical frameworks with real-life teaching in the classroom?

What can we do with the knowledge we glean from observations and discussions with students?

Can we teach using the student's strengths and have a student motivated, engaged and taking ownership of their learning and feeling included in an environment that takes up so much of their daily experiences?

The researchers examined the factors that they feel are required to develop such a strengths-based approach. They proposed the following as essential components for teaching while incorporating the perspective of the neurodivergent student and broader neurodivergent community.

1. Knowledge of research focusing on neurodiversity
2. Strengths-based assessment of each student's individual and systemic strengths
3. Generating contextualised teaching strategies

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research used a two-case example approach, one based on an autistic student and the other on a student with ADHD where a Context of Strengths Finder (CSF) was employed. This CSF addressed a range of factors and strengths in both the students' home and school environments, allowing for a 360-degree view of relevant considerations impacting the students. It consists of 24 items on which the student self-reports, thus offering autonomy and engagement, covering strengths needed and used in the areas of:

- psychological, academic and vocational involvement;
- family and peer relationships and skills required for maintenance and development; and
- positive reflection and contribution to school and community.

The value is that the educator can then align the insight gleaned from the student, marry it with the relevant research and collate this information to modify, amend or enhance their professional practice, supports and strategies.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Student 1, an autistic student, identified with pride that their skills and strengths lay in the field of mathematics, an interest in numbers and solving equations, and that school afforded them many opportunities for meaningful inclusion and was appreciative of their deepening drive for independence within the various school and peer activities. The staff, after requisite acceptance of neurodiversity training, designed the following strategies and supports.

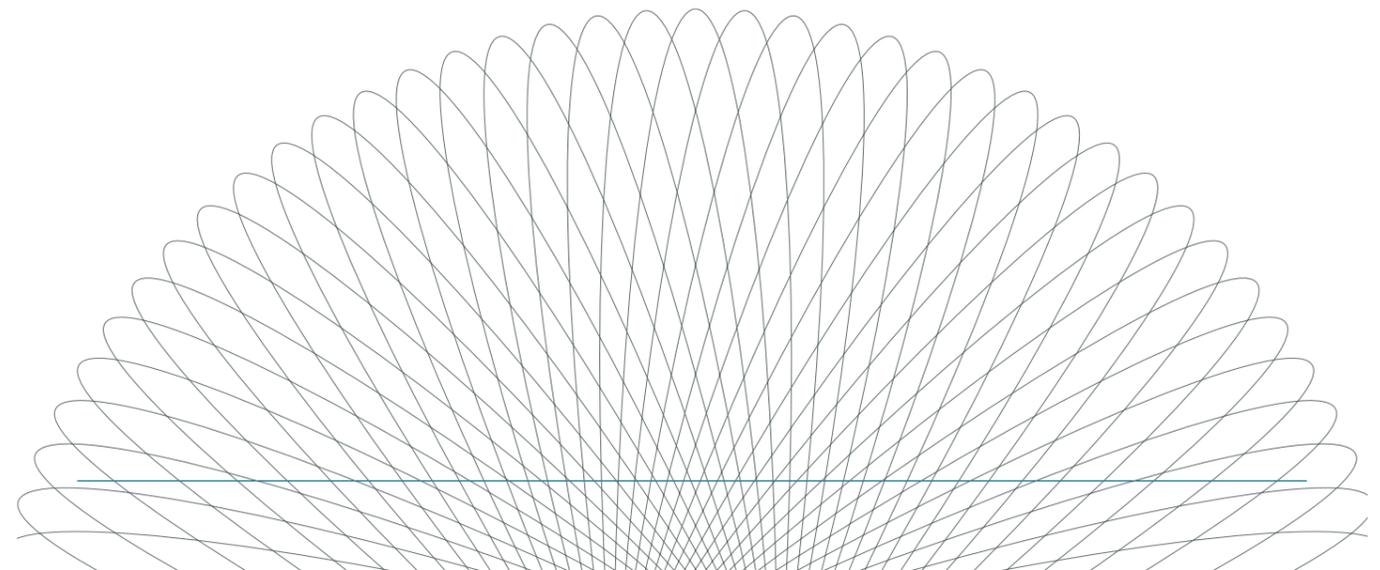
1. An equation club as part of the lunchtime club provision, where the autistic student was actively encouraged and involved in the development, promotion and maintenance of the club and its remit.
2. The student to act as a mentor for those who were experiencing difficulty in mathematics.
3. Whole school assembly on the benefits of mathematics and equation club in particular.

Student 2, a student with a diagnosis of ADHD, was perceived as experiencing difficulties

with attention and concentration. The student identified strong friendship-forming skills using their sense of humour. The student felt that they preferred and excelled when required to demonstrate knowledge and understanding verbally rather than when they were expected to write responses.

Through training, the teachers in the school found that simple adaptations to the environment and teaching approach allowed for greater involvement and skill acquisition for the student with ADHD. This culminated in the following supports and strategies being used.

1. A quiet area, free from distractions, was made available when independent work was required.
2. Use of assistive technology, where the student could record rather than write responses.
3. A Circle of Friends or Buddy Support system was developed with this student as an integral part, where they could create positive friendships and bonds with others using their sense of humour.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the authors)

- Education must be about more than meeting the constraints or opportunities of the curriculum. How we deliver the curriculum, tailoring it to each student's needs, strengths and skills, may allow for greater success, empowerment, independence, maturation and inclusivity.
- Well-designed and evaluated learning experiences should be an intrinsic aspect of any teaching opportunity to ensure each student feels included within the classroom and school environment.
- Students may develop a sense of ownership and involvement in their learning if they have been consulted on their strengths and these are recognised, rather than their differences or difficulties continually being highlighted.
- Acting as a mentor can be difficult for anyone, but do we generally consider the autistic student as the mentor? More frequently, we may limit the student by perceiving the student as only the mentee. Autistic students can benefit from being the mentor, seeing their skills and strengths positively reflected in the very close environment of their school, developing shared interest groups and being able to help someone else. They can gain in confidence as their skills, interests and talents are clearly put to use.
- Respect for individuality, interests, skills, strengths and needs is essential if students are to develop to their optimum and feel an integral member of their class and school communities.

- Continual professional development for teachers allows them to take the time to review new information, particularly as we are hearing more regularly and frequently from the neurodivergent community. It gives them opportunity to compare and contrast this with their observations in the classroom so that they can better collaborate with students around their motivations and preferences, allowing them to develop and promote supportive strengths-based individualised practice.
- Further research in the area is called for to ascertain whether such findings could be embedded into practice from the beginning of teacher education.

### Full Reference

Sewell, A. and Park, J. (2021). A three-factor model of educational practice considerations for teaching neurodiverse learners from a strengths-based perspective. *Support for Learning*. 36(4), pp. 678–694.

## AUTISM, INTENSE INTERESTS AND SUPPORT IN SCHOOL: FROM WASTED EFFORTS TO SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS

### RESEARCH AIMS

The study aimed to find out if and how autistic students were included in the core curriculum and assessment in their schools and to see their participation in regular school life.

### RESEARCH METHODS

Dr Rebecca Wood undertook the study using a case-study design involving 10 autistic students, aged 4–10 years old, enrolled in five different mainstream primary schools. Autistic students have experienced high levels of school exclusion. The researcher wished to elucidate how their educational inclusion and potentially their longer-term outcomes could be improved.

As well as the students, 10 parents and 36 school staff were also consulted. Additionally, 10 autistic adults, located across the UK, participated in a semi-structured interview about their experience of primary school and their understanding of autism.

The study involved mixed methods, including observations (both structured and unstructured) of the children, interviews, questionnaires and focus groups.

Data analysis of all the above involved extracting common themes such as key words, phrases and expressions. Interestingly, none of the participants were questioned directly about 'interests'. 'The benefits of teaching to interests' was a theme that arose organically through the data analysis.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

- A strong theme that emerged was the practice of using a high degree of repetition in the learning programmes of some of the autistic children, particularly where the children had

alternative targets to their peers. This practice was associated with much prompting by the school staff, perhaps indicative of a difficulty with change or adaptation by the staff. This approach did not prove motivating for some of the students observed.

- Conversely, great benefits were noted when the students' interests were used as part of their learning. Advantages included:
  - improved access to learning, curriculum and tests;
  - improved task completion;
  - improved communication;
  - increased socialisation, including extra-curricular activities;
  - greater independence;
  - intrinsic enjoyment of the activity;
  - improved inclusion/belonging in the school community;
  - source of comfort;
  - enjoyment of/coping with school;
  - better motor skills;
  - perfectionism/attention to detail;
  - expertise; and
  - link with future plans.
- Findings from staff indicated that the supports they use are intended to keep children on task, to facilitate curricular access, to promote good behaviour, support independence, socialisation and emotional support. However, it was observed that all these aims were met by including the students' interests in their learning.
- Some teachers noted that by differentiating the curriculum to include the children's individual

interests, the students were then able to access the full curriculum.

- When engaged in activities based on their interests, prompting by teaching staff was replaced by engagement and connection. This sometimes happened with the same staff and student dyad who struggled through other repetitive, less interest-laden tasks.
- Some disadvantages were noted in that half the staff considered that intense interests might form a barrier to learning, curriculum access and tests. A smaller number worried about focused interests acting as a barrier to socialisation and to inclusion in the school community. However, there were far more positives associated with including interests in teaching. It is possible that some students were losing themselves in their favoured interests due to the stress of repetitive, demotivating activities. Thus, they were caught in a negative cycle that could be resolved if the curriculum proved more motivating.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Further research is required into the benefits of a monotropic-thinking style and how to include individual interests at school.
- In line with neuroaffirmative practice, consideration of learning via interests as a strength rather than a deficit to be remedied could ensure a more positive educational experience for autistic learners.
- The author noted that autistic interests can diversify over time. Research on how skilled teaching can support autistic learners' development in this regard would be helpful.
- The deep focus of autistic people can lead

to experiencing a 'flow state', a deep sense of engagement and well-being. This allows freedom from prompt-driven learning and allows creativity to develop. Research into this positive effect of autistic thinking would be helpful.

- The lessening of prompt-dependent learning allows for better relationship development between students and teachers. The appropriateness of prompt-based repetitive learning for autistic learners needs re-evaluation.
- Consideration needs to be given to methods to create educational environments that allow the intense interests of autistic children to be valued and developed.
- The value of teaching to interests for all children, not only autistic learners, needs to be explored as we know that, in general, interest is linked to motivation.
- It has long been assumed that a 'broad and balanced' curriculum is universally important. Curriculum planning needs to incorporate a diversity of learning styles and needs for all children.
- There can be some confusion between 'flow states' (when an activity is intrinsically rewarding) and 'negatively experienced compulsions' (which may be engaged in by a stressed, anxious child). Research is needed to differentiate these opposed states and to support school staff to recognise the difference.

### Full Reference

Wood, R. (2019). Autism, intense interests and support in school: from wasted efforts to shared understandings. *Educational Review*. 73(1), pp. 34–54.

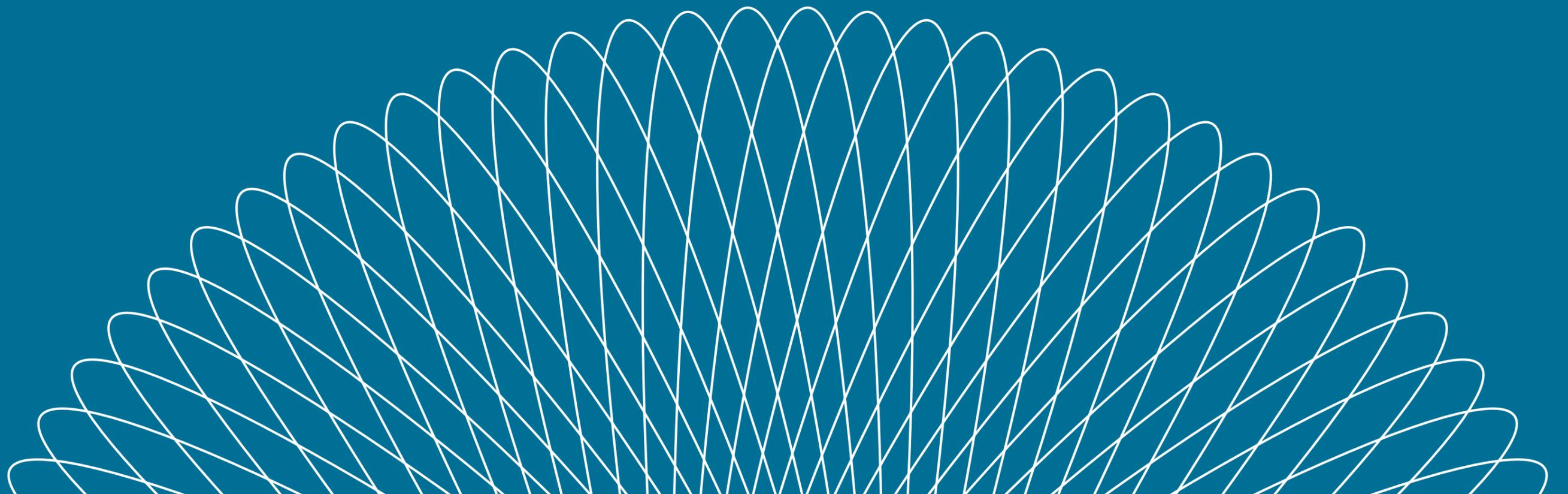
## CONCLUSION

Taking a strengths-based approach can create an empowering environment that provides room for autistic young people to follow their interests and build their skills in a safe and nurturing context. By taking time to think about how strengths are defined, we have an opportunity to reframe the value that we might place on certain behaviours, interests or ways of interacting. Non-autistic people are in a position of power to understand, accept and support autistic interests and preferences that may be different to theirs. By giving space to autistic people to define what *they* value as strengths, we have an opportunity to support each autistic person to take steps towards creating a future that is comfortable and fulfilling for them.

## YOUR OPINION

The Centre trusts that you have found this Research Bulletin informative. It would be appreciated if you would take a few minutes to provide the Centre with feedback in relation to this bulletin by clicking on the survey link below.

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