

There is a significant population of autistic students in schools across the globe; the outcomes for these young people is worse than their neurotypical peers (DfE, UK, 2016). Additionally a range of studies in different countries have also demonstrated that they are amongst the most likely to be bullied in the school population (Schroeder et al, 2014) and prevalence rates of anxiety, depression and anger problems are significantly higher among young people with ASC than their peers (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014).

Parents, carers and staff working with autistic students may experience behaviours that are often intense, frightening and result in physical injuries to the young person themselves or others. These can occur in a variety of settings; both at home, in school and in the community to list just three examples.

Having a diagnosis of autism is a 'risk marker' for exhibiting behaviours (McClintock et al., 2003) and this behaviour is a more serious risk in people with autism (Matson and Rivet 2008).

It is not uncommon that communication/social reciprocity and restrictive interests which can be core features of autism underlie many of the behaviours that others find distressing or challenging. Terms like 'meltdown', or 'outburst' have been used as descriptors that include a wide range of behaviour such as aggression to self, others or property or significant distress associated with high levels of anxiety.

Many educational settings struggle to support and educate this growing population within their schools; mostly due to the presentation of behaviours of concern and risks to the young people themselves as others as a result. This need not be the case, as this short paper argues; an understanding of emotional regulation within the context of the Saturation Model, developed by the first author can significantly improve the outcomes of these young people as part of a whole school approach.



Understanding Emotional Regulation in the Context of Whole School Inclusive Systems

Helping pupils understand the importance of emotions and how to regulate them can reduce stress, anxiety and dysregulation. Renowned SEND expert Gareth D Morewood explains how research can inform a nuanced approach.

Emotional regulation in context

Difficulties arise for teachers and practitioners if they cannot recognise and understand when children are displaying difficulties with emotional regulation (Jahromi et al., 2012). As these so-called 'challenging behaviours' work as attempts to communicate it is more beneficial to develop and provide strategies that help them understand their emotions and react to them in an appropriate manner. The training of education professionals (in addition to the direct work with young people and their families) supports an approach to develop a fuller understanding of the child's experience of stress and anxiety and how it impacts on the child. It is important for educational professionals to understand that stress, anxiety and trauma have been proposed as potentially significant factors in behaviours of concern of autistic people (Lipsky, 2011; Bradley and Caldwell, 2013, McCreadie and McDernott, 2014).

An individual's coping responses are important in our understanding of stress, particularly as it is almost impossible in the modern world to be 'stress free' and that schools often provide almost the complete opposite environment for autistic young people. It is our

coping responses that determine how we adapt to stress. Many people with autism have few or poor 'coping tools'.

The goal of an appropriate approach to understanding emotional regulation is to use a range of tools based on good practice, which will both alleviate the experience of stress/anxiety and enable self-management of anxiety in the future. The experiences of the author indicate that this is possible both within mainstream educational settings and specialised accommodation.

As an important change of mindset, the physical expression by an autistic child may not be a display of challenging behaviour, but could be viewed as a positive attempt by the child to self-regulate (Jahromi et al., 2012); often this inability to regulate emotions results in young people being permanently excluded from school, due to their lack of emotional regulation.

The concept of 'emotional regulation' forms a key element of the developing work the authorities are doing with schools; emotional regulation should be seen as a life-long developmental process underlying attention and social engagement, that is essential for optimal social, emotional and communication development and the development of relationships for all children

and adults; it is, in essence an essential element of preparing young people for life.

To this end, any developing work on emotional regulation also requires a focus on positive mental health; children with autism may not have the same awareness of the importance of emotions:

- Children with autism may not be aware of the relationship between physical symptoms and emotional arousal
- Children with autism may have a more fragmented understanding of their emotional state and their levels of emotional arousal
- Poor coping strategies can increase the likelihood of depression and anxiety

(Rieffe et al. 2011)

Taking these implications into consideration it is important to teach children about their emotions to increase their awareness of their emotional state. It is also critical to teach children useful and appropriate coping strategies to deal with emotions; not through a 'behavioural lens' but as part of a child-centred, metacognitive approach.

Developing a whole school approach

The development of awareness, understanding, training and direct support at Priestnall School, Stockport, UK (where the author works) started with trying to understand why 'education', in particular regular, mainstream schooling, presents such a challenge for many children and young people with autism. Morewood, Humphrey, and Symes (2011) highlighted a number of issues relating to the young people themselves, their teachers, the environment and, perhaps most importantly, their peer group.

Priestnall School is a large 11-16 comprehensive community school with just under 1300 pupils. Although numbers of students with special educational needs and disabilities are broadly in line with national UK averages; many of these learners have complex physical and medical needs in addition to a significant population of autistic students. Priestnall has a well-established school-led provision for Speech & Language Therapy and Educational Psychology (Morewood et al, 2016) which allows for systemic work with feeder primary schools, families and the wider community. In developing this model there is an increased understanding of individuals and families and how to support them. Each year almost all learners successfully transition into post-16 education, employment or training; a real hallmark of successfully preparing pupils for adulthood, whatever their age of starting point.



The Saturation Model

The saturation model was developed during the 4 year ESRC Research project and discussed in the peer-reviewed paper by Morewood et al. (2011). This model provides an overarching structure of provision for all autistic pupils at Priestnall and ensures that the needs of autistic pupils are considered at all levels within the school.



Morewood, Humphrey and Symes (2011)

Priestnall School, in partnership with colleagues at the University of Manchester, Manchester, UK developed this model as the foundation for bespoke training and direct work across other schools and communities both in the UK and abroad, whilst considering the key elements of:

- The agent of change
- Developing the school environment
- Providing a flexible provision for learning
- Ensuring direct specialist support and interventions
- Establishing policy that is embedded in practice
- Providing high-quality training and development for staff and parents/carers
- Supporting peer education and self-awareness
- Creating a positive ethos

The development of these key themes, developed from the original 2011 research, both at Priestnall School and across partner schools and communities has provided a holistic approach to supporting young people with autism and their families in line with an inclusive vision as originally articulated by the Salamanca Statement (1994). The work has continued to since the original research, the fulcrum on which the effectiveness of provision rests continues to be the 'agent of change'. This is a central figure that can shift beliefs and co-ordinate the whole school response necessary for effective inclusion.

At Priestnall School the author, who is Director of Curriculum Support (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) (SENCo), continues in that lead role, working with all stakeholders; the Local Authority (LA), parents/carers, young people,

school staff and Headteachers, along with specialists in ensuring that understanding and provision is embedded into whole school policy, practice and thinking. The 'agent of change' must also empower others within the school and community; this corporate responsibility model (Morewood, 2018) has been the natural evolution of the approach as more staff, peers and families gain increasing knowledge and wider skills through ongoing training, professional discussions and joint working.

The continually evolving model continues to draw upon whole-school and community approaches to emotional regulation (McDonnell, et al, 2002) and supports increased understanding and the development of environmental factors (Morewood et al., 2011):

- Physical environment
- Social environment
- Communication environment
- Emotional environment

Developing whole school approaches considering these environmental factors not only supports autistic students in schools, but all students. Non-autistic peers are not 'harmed' by inclusive approaches; being part of a community means supporting everyone within it, which is in essence the basis of the approach outlined in this paper.

Understanding arousal and emotional regulation as part of a personalised approach

It is important to understand that young people with challenging behaviour often have trouble regulating affect. They often react to others' affects by experiencing and expressing the same or similar affect. Affect is always contagious, but most people learn to differentiate between own and other's affects early in life. Some people don't. They don't know if an affect they feel is their own or somebody else's. That can result in anger if somebody else is angry and telling off the one who tells you off.

We also know that challenging behaviour often occurs when someone experiences a high intensity of affect. Nobody fights when they are relaxed and easy-going. Calm and self-control is connected, and we want the young people in our schools to be in control of him- or herself, so that they can cooperate and be in the best place to learn.

We need to use this knowledge in monitoring our own affect levels; in essence this means that we need to be calm ourselves, but also be aware of the risk of affect contagion from the young person. Therefore a key element of this approach is that we must use methods that protect the child and us from an increase in affect intensity, both in the way we talk to and relate to the child and in our methods concerning challenging and even violent behaviour. This is often at odds with 'traditional' school behaviour systems and must be part of a whole school approach, as outlined previously, in order to succeed.

This approach is about creating a caring environment characterised by calm and positive expectations aiming to decrease stress and challenging behaviour. The methods lean heavily on changing staff and parents' thoughts and conceptions and on body language, physical distance and conflict evaluation.

These approaches based on arousal reduction collectively known as 'low arousal approaches' appear to be increasing in popularity (McDonnell et al., 2015; McDonnell, 2010; Woodcock and Paige, 2009; Heilskov Elven, 2010) and as part of this developing methodology building upon the saturation model, defined earlier, have significant early indicators of success.



Concluding thoughts

As new approaches towards inclusion in Dubai are considered and developed it is hoped that this developing work will help frame discussions and allow for different thinking towards the inclusion of young people in educational settings and how they are supported across their communities.


Some of the key messages for consideration as we develop our approach are encapsulated by:

- an evidence base isn't always vital; something that works with only 5% of the school population can still be incredibly useful – personalisation (not normalisation) is essential
- organisational changes cannot be affected in a zero tolerance policy – flexibility and reasonable adjustments are required
- you need the appropriate tools to do the job – specific, bespoke training and development for partner schools and families is vital


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
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The author will be speaking about this work at the MENA Inclusion & Wellbeing Conference on Wednesday 13 Feb 2019 - Thursday 14 Feb 2019 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; and is keen to discuss further the approaches outlined in this paper with colleagues who feel this approach would be an important development in meeting the aspirational agenda for schools in Dubai; that all schools to become fully inclusive.

Link-

(<http://my.optimuseducation.com/conferences/inclusion-wellbeing-mena-2019>)



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