

'Flexible Curriculum' required to ensure pupils with autism achieve potential

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A report published today (14th September 2011) by the Autism Education Trust (AET) finds the current education system lacks flexibility in its approach to pupils on the autism spectrum. The research (*Educational provision and outcomes for people on the autism spectrum*, AET, 2011) led by Dr Kerstin Wittemeyer from the Autism Centre of Education and Research at the University of Birmingham, found that teachers are not being given enough guidance or scope to adapt the National Curriculum to include social and life skills for pupils with autism.

Moreover schools need to aim higher for their students with autism to ensure adult outcomes are positive – whether in terms of academic achievement or emotional well-being - and pupil assessment processes should go beyond those required by the National Curriculum.

Speaking about the findings of the report, Dr Wittemeyer says,

“A central tenet of education is to equip young people with the skills to reach their full potential. Given the challenges that individuals with autism face in adult life it is vital that their education sufficiently prepares them for those challenges and, crucially, is planned with them in order they are offered the best chance of achieving their desired outcomes, whatever those outcomes may be.”

The report comprises over 1,000 contributions from stakeholders including adults and children with autism, their parents / carers and education practitioners including teachers, head teachers and SENCos. Research was conducted using a literature review and via a series of surveys, interviews and focus groups with stakeholders. It is the most comprehensive study to date to consider what 'good adult outcomes' for people on the autism spectrum might look like, and the first to consider whether the current education system is able to support pupils with autism reach their goals.

The report concluded that although a 'typical' good outcome, such as employment and independence, was desired by some young people and adults as well as by parents, this was not the case for all. Only through robust and regular consultation with children and young people about their aspirations can potential outcomes be identified and prepared for.

Responding to its publication, Steve Huggett, Director of the AET, says,

“This report gives us a firm context for our current remit of developing National Autism Education Standards for all schools across England and delivering autism education training to education professionals over the next two years. Pupils with autism have ambitious goals in life and they must be supported to achieve them, alongside their peers. Schools and wider education services have a duty of care to all students and the AET hopes to be an instrumental part of improving the way pupils with autism are prepared for adult life.”

Key recommendations for Government, schools and the AET:

- Schools and other service providers should make every effort to consult all young people with autism, including those with limited communication means, about their desired outcomes for adult life. This consultation should include, where appropriate, the opinions of parents and carers.
- The Department for Education should provide written guidance on how teachers, particularly in mainstream settings, can find the right balance between teaching pupils with autism key academic skills and teaching them skills that fall outside of the National Curriculum (e.g. independent living skills, social and emotional understanding).
- Schools should include time within their “flexible” curriculum for pupils with autism to develop their self-awareness and to discuss their diagnosis, should they wish to.
- Local authorities should support the training of a member of staff to work as an “autism expert” across a network of mainstream schools, with the longer-term objective of employing an autism expert in every mainstream school.
- The Department for Education should advise schools and the schools' inspectorate to look beyond what is measured by National Curriculum level descriptors and be encouraged to include data that are collected as part of the school's standard or in-house assessments (e.g. on social-communication and independent living skills; sensory sensitivities).

The AET is funded by The Department for Education to develop National Autism Education Standards for all schools across England and deliver autism education training to education professionals over two years via networks based on hub schools and services. An estimated one in 100 children are on the autism spectrum meaning that all schools should be equipped to effectively teach children and young people with autism.

To download the report in full and to find out more about the Autism Education Trust visit www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk (<http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/>) or email info@autismeducationtrust.org.uk (<mailto:info@autismeducationtrust.org.uk>)

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