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World Autism Day: Illustrating how good autism practice constitutes good educational practice for all children

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From the Empire State Building to the pyramids, members of the global autism community shone a lens on autism this week by lighting many iconic landmarks in blue. This was in celebration of World Autism Day, which is a global initiative instigated by the United Nations to help raise awareness. It marks the start of autism awareness month.

Current figures indicate that one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum, and 70% of pupils with autism in the UK are educated in mainstream schools. As autism is a lifelong condition, it is worth reflecting on the importance of education in enabling people with autism to reach their potential.

Pupils with autism think and interact differently to their typically developing peers. It is therefore crucial to ensure that teaching staff and carers are equipped with the knowledge, understanding and tools to include these pupils in their classrooms and to provide them with the opportunity to thrive. With the right training, education practitioners can learn how to support individuals with autism to develop their unique strengths, talents and skills and to overcome their difficulties. Without that understanding, pupils with autism can be seen as difficult, naughty or challenging, and are then at risk of being bullied or excluded. In contrast, well-supported pupils with autism can go on to achieve success in adult life with many entering further and higher education as well as employment.

The team at the Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER), University of Birmingham, conduct research to enhance the understanding of autism and develop training materials and courses. The team was recently commissioned by the Autism Education Trust to develop a groundbreaking programme that gives a framework for practitioners and schools to reflect on and enhance their practice in teaching pupils with autism. This includes three levels of training in autism education for school staff, a set of National Autism Education Standards for self-evaluation by schools and a Competency Framework to enable professionals to plan their Continuous Professional Development.

The programme focuses on four themes based on what our research has identified as the key principles for good practice in autism education.

The first theme: ‘The Individual Pupil’, emphasises the importance of understanding autism and how it impacts on the individual child. People with autism have particular difficulties in key areas of development, such as social communication, rigidity of thinking and behavior, with many individuals experiencing sensory processing difficulties. Individuals with autism also have unique strengths and it is crucial for practitioners to find ways of identifying and developing these strengths.

The second theme: ‘Building Relationships’ highlights that pupils with autism can have particular difficulties with social understanding and interaction, and this is an area in which these pupils need support.

The third theme: ‘Curriculum and Learning’ illustrates the importance of understanding how pupils with autism learn differently, and what this means in terms of making adjustments to the curriculum.

The final theme: ‘Enabling Environments’ focuses on what it means to create the right environment for pupils with autism to flourish. This includes adapting our own communication style and mode of interaction as well as the physical environment to accommodate needs.

These themes are central to the development of good autism practice in education but they also illustrate what constitutes good educational practice for all children.

ACER works collaboratively with practitioners, policy makers, people with autism and their families. The programme was launched in September 2012 and has already trained 11,000 people here in the UK, but there is also an urgent need for international practitioners and carers to be able to access similar resources and training. Our work, therefore, is now being extended and developed to provide international training resources, strategies and programmes for different national contexts. We want to build on the positive work undertaken in the UK so we can make a difference to as many people with autism and their families as possible. World Autism Day is a timely reminder of the importance of this work.

Dr Karen Guldberg

Dr Glenys Jones

Andrea MacLeod

Dr Kerstin Wittemeyer

The Autism Centre for Education and Research, University of Birmingham (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/education/acer/index.aspx)

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