

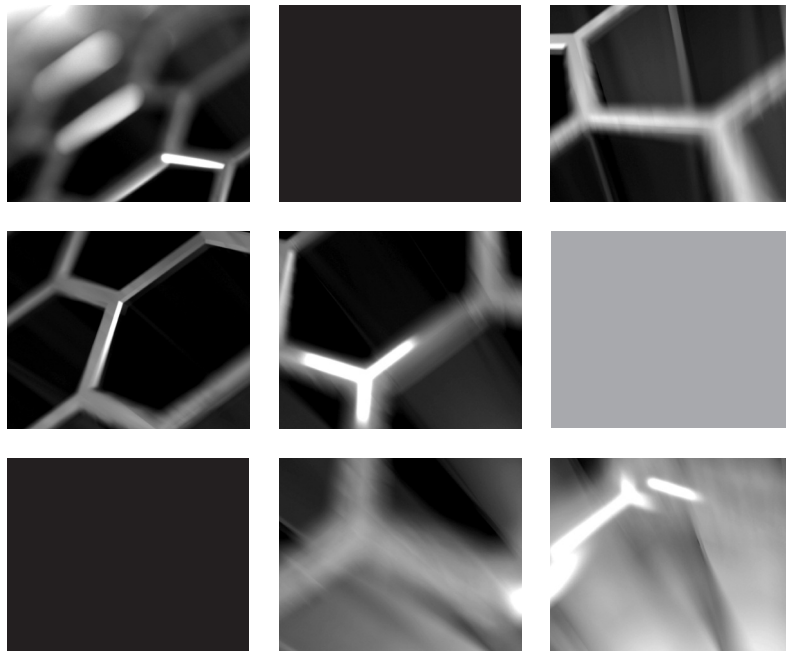


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Mainstreaming autism: making it work

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Editorial comment

The process of effectively including children and young people with on the autism spectrum in mainstream school environments is widely acknowledged as one of the most difficult and complex areas of education. Research suggests the pupils with autism attending mainstream schools are at an increased risk of a range of negative outcomes. However, there are schools where such children thrive, and an important part of developing practice within this field is to share the approaches taken in these settings. This paper presents a 'saturation' model encapsulating the work undertaken at Priestnall School, a mainstream secondary school in the north-west of England. Key elements of this model include having a central 'agent of change', creating a positive ethos, developing the school environment, training and development of staff, policy development and embedding practice, peer education and awareness, flexible provision, and direct support and intervention.

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Introduction

Children and young people on the autism spectrum can be characterised by a 'triad of impairments' comprising difficulties in social interaction, communication, and imagination (flexibility of thought and behaviour) (Wing & Gould, 1979). The publication of the Excellence for All Children (DfEE, 1997) Green Paper resulted in a sharp rise in the number of such pupils attending mainstream schools (eg, a 16 per cent increase from 1997–2001 reported by Keen & Ward, 2004). Although this has evened off more recently (eg, less than one per cent change from 2004–2010 (DfES, 2004; DFE, 2010)), the majority of pupils with autism or Asperger syndrome (70 per cent) in England attend mainstream, rather than specialist schools (DFE, 2010).

The challenge of inclusive education

Despite the increase in mainstream placements, inclusion of pupils with autism is still a complex and poorly understood area of education (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) and there is evidence that they are at an increased risk of experiencing negative outcomes in comparison to other learners. For example, they are

around eight times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than pupils with no special educational needs (SEN) (0.27 per cent compared to 0.04 per cent) (DCSF, 2009; DFE, 2010).

They are also significantly more likely to be excluded due to a physical assault against another pupil or adult than other pupils (DFE, 2010). Pupils with autism are at a greatly increased risk of peer group difficulties. For example, they are bullied more often, receive less social support (Humphrey & Symes, 2010), and experience greater rejection and reduced acceptance (Symes & Humphrey 2010) compared to other pupils in mainstream settings. Furthermore, teachers in mainstream schools report experiencing tensions relating to frustration over the enduring emotional and behavioural manifestations of autism (Emam & Farrell, 2009). A recent inquiry into the state of special educational provision in England remarked:

'Children with ASD ... provide an excellent example of ... where significant cracks exist in the system, to the detriment of those who fall between them.'

(House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006, p 18)

Why does mainstream education present such a challenge for many pupils on the autism spectrum? Firstly, understanding the discrepancy between their academic strengths and their difficulties in understanding the social world can be hard for staff and peers alike. There is often an assumption that because a pupil with autism is academically able (many included pupils are of at least average intellectual ability), he or she should be able to manage in mainstream education with few, if any, problems (Moore, 2007). Secondly, the difficulties in social interaction and communication experienced by such pupils can increase the risk of and exposure to bullying and social isolation (Reid and Batten, 2006). Thirdly, the preference for routine, predictability, and low sensory stimulation expressed by many pupils with autism is at odds with the noisy, bustling and often chaotic mainstream school environment (Carrington & Graham, 2001). Finally, the typical cognitive profile and preferred learning style of such pupils can challenge professional assumptions about teaching and learning (Jordan, 2005).

Effective inclusion for pupils with autism can therefore be challenging for the pupils themselves, their parents/carers, school staff, and the peer group. This challenge is arguably greatly amplified in *secondary* school. The young person may have difficulty:

- learning in a social setting, reading social situations, and understanding 'unwritten' rules
- learning in a complex language environment with limited visual support
- understanding and communicating with other pupils and adults (both verbally and non-verbally)
- coping with changes, transitions, and unexpected breaks in established routines
- 'day to day' organisation (eg, bringing the correct books and equipment for different lessons on different days)
- generalising learning beyond the setting in which it took place.

Parents/carers and school staff may have difficulty:

- gaining, maintaining and refocusing the young person's attention
- motivating him/her
- differentiating language and/or the curriculum to an appropriate level
- managing the young person's behaviour
- accommodating their special interests.

Finally, the peer group of the young person with autism may:

- not understand why they behave in the way that they do
- resent the extra attention given to the young person
- be hurt if their social advances are ignored or rejected
- be distracted/disrupted
- feel that the young person with autism 'gets away' with things
- be nervous of or frightened by them
- in some cases ignore, tease, 'wind up' or bully the young person.

There are also broader challenges in relation to different perspectives on inclusion that need to be acknowledged, particularly given that they influence how inclusive education is *enacted*. Ravet (2011) usefully summarises two dominant and (seemingly) contradictory perspectives in the inclusion literature. The 'rights' perspective calls for an end to all educational segregation, highlights the right of children to academic and social inclusion in their local school, and challenges mainstream schools to change in order to accommodate them. The 'needs' perspective argues for a range of mainstream, specialist and mixed (e.g. resourced) provision to meet the distinctive needs of certain groups of learners, and draws attention to the equivocal research evidence in favour of full inclusion, alongside the potential negative outcomes that can arise from it (Ravet, 2011). These perspectives clash on key issues such as the value of diagnostic labelling and the utility of special pedagogies. In line with Ravet (2011), we argue for an 'integrative' approach, wherein elements of both perspectives inform the enactment of inclusive practice. So, for example, whilst the model

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presented in this paper has a primarily systemic focus, the need for individual intervention is also highlighted. Likewise, although policy and practice in the school are predicated on an assumption that young people with autism and Asperger syndrome can and should be educated alongside their peers, part of the flexible provision on offer reflects a recognition that there may be times when they benefit from withdrawal work or even a dual placement involving a specialist school.

Making it work

Life in the mainstream secondary school environment can be difficult for pupils with autism, and the evidence presented above suggests that they are likely to experience negative outcomes as a result. However, there are schools where such children thrive, and an important part of developing practice within this field is to share the approaches taken in these settings. In this vein, this paper highlights a whole-school model of support that has been developed by the first author at Priestnall School, Stockport. Priestnall School recently became the first secondary school in Stockport to be judged as 'outstanding' by OFSTED (June, 2011). The inspection report made specific reference to the school's inclusive ethos, and the 'outstanding care, guidance and support carefully tailored to students' needs'. Additionally, from 2008–2011, the school was involved in an ESRC-funded project led by the second and third authors exploring inclusive education for pupils with

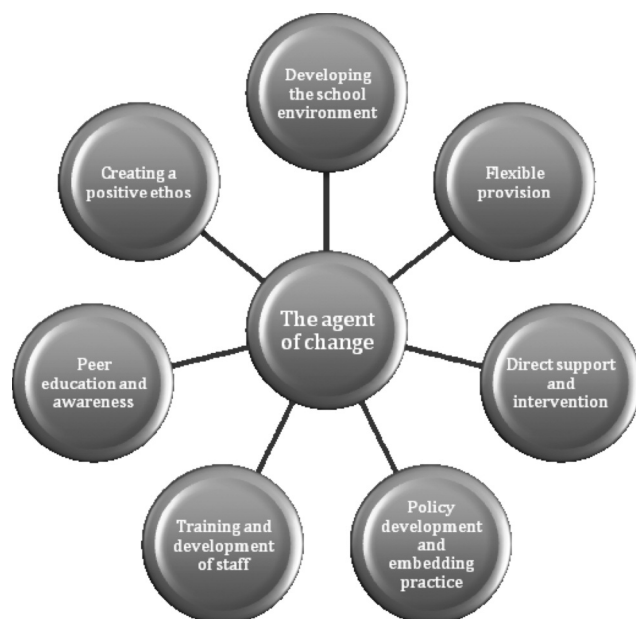


Figure 1: The whole school saturation model for effective inclusion of pupils with autism

autism (ESRC Project Ref: 061–25–0054; see www.asdinclusion.info), during which it was selected as a 'good practice' case study site on the basis of evidence collected on pupil outcomes. Thus, insofar as it is possible to provide hard evidence, provision at Priestnall School appears to be very effective in supporting pupils with autism.

The saturation model used at Priestnall School is presented below (see *Figure 1*). The word 'saturation' is used to reflect the fundamental tenet that, to be effective, inclusive principles and practice need to permeate every aspect of life in school; thus, in order to be 'autism friendly', the school needs to be saturated in autism understanding and awareness. The model is therefore a whole-school rolling response, involving supporting, educating and developing the understanding of every member of the school community.

The starting point of the model – and indeed, the fulcrum on which the effectiveness of provision rests – is 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 first author, who is Director of Curriculum Support (Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo)), took that lead role, working with the Local Authority (LA) and ensuring that understanding and provision was embedded into whole school policy, practice and thinking.

Creating a positive ethos is a cornerstone of effective inclusion for pupils with autism. Maintaining a consistent positive focus through all aspects of work within the school is central to this, and helps to challenge stereotypes and raise expectations (Humphrey, 2008). Examples of this philosophy in practice include:

- Postcards home, text messages, letters and telephone calls to parents/carers that support and reward positive aspects of each student's day.
- Positive reward charts and target sheets linked directly into areas of challenge, with immediate short-term rewards.
- Positive focus in training and development activities – increasing awareness among staff that young people with autism can be loyal and dependable, may have exceptional memory, display persistence

in pursuing topics, adhere meticulously to routines and appreciate order, and have particular areas of knowledge and skill that exceed the level of their peers.

Alongside the creation of a positive ethos, consideration of an 'autism-friendly' environment is essential. In **developing the school environment**, we should consider both physical and social/communication aspects. In terms of the physical environment, there is a need to consider the physical characteristics of classrooms, corridors, and playgrounds, and think about how aspects of these physical spaces in themselves may present a barrier for young people. For example, several classrooms at Priestnall School have sloping ceilings, a characteristic which caused a significant amount of anxiety for one pupil with autism. Once this issue had been identified, a change of timetabled room provision solved the problem. However, not all issues relating to the physical environment are so straightforward, and in such cases we need to be able to provide compensation. For example, several young people with autism at the school find the open plan layout of most classrooms difficult to deal with; for these pupils, screens and booths inspired by TEACCH workstations (Mesibov and Howley, 2003) and built by the school's Technology technician provide a portable solution.

In terms of the social/communication aspects of the school environment, there needs to be a basic recognition that whilst most children enjoy the social aspects of the school day, these can be amongst the most challenging for young people with autism. Developing a response to this challenge is therefore about identifying the parts of the day that are the most socially demanding and thinking creatively about how these demands can be eased. Priestnall School has developed a series of supported clubs and activities during these social times of the school day; one of the most popular is the Manga Club. This has seen pupils with autism taking lead roles in supporting typical peers in developing work on projects and one-off pieces of artwork. Having inclusive clubs and activities adds weight to the 'value' placed on diversity at the school. Another example is a structured homework club run by the Curriculum Support Faculty, but again open to all. Thus, an important part of including young people with autism involves provision of appropriate supported activities and clubs that the pupils can select from, again

adding weight to their perceptions and desires at potentially volatile times of the school day.

It is also important to consider the pupil's whole day at school *and* home – and the transitions between them. In terms of communication, it is crucial to raise awareness of the fact that whilst pupils with autism may have good conversational skills, their comprehension may be poor (and, indeed, they may not be able to indicate what they have not understood). They may also misinterpret or ignore humour, irony and sarcasm. In taking steps to change the communication environment on this basis, staff might, for example, actively modify their conversational language to reduce the use of metaphors and/or figures of speech that appear in so many everyday interactions (Humphrey, 2008).

The **training and development of staff** is also paramount. Priestnall School has always been creative in supporting staff with development needs (Morewood, 2010) and if schools are to successfully include young people with autism, this needs to be regular, ongoing and part of a commitment of all staff to be teachers of students with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) – a one-off twilight session is never going to suffice. In addition to ongoing staff training, the school has also invested heavily in supporting the development of teachers in training on placements and other courses. Some of their project work, undertaken as part of their post-graduate courses, provides real depth to the analysis of provision and a good insight into how young people with autism interact and respond to the demands of the curriculum. Morewood and Glew (2011) provide such an example, showing how tracking a student with autism through his timetable, whilst teaching him Art, allows for a unique perspective into the communication and interactions he had in the world which is Priestnall School.

In terms of **policy development and embedding practice**, work on inclusion is part of a clear policy agenda agreed by all, and supported by the Headteacher and the Governing Body. Such immersion and *saturation*, as outlined in this paper, simply cannot work as a 'bolt-on'; it has to be woven into the fabric of the school-life. At Priestnall School the development of this policy and practice evolved over a period of years; it is reported by the first author that with a considerable focus on education and training for peers and staff (teaching and non-teaching staff), in conjunction with

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direct support, after just one year a significant shift in perceptions and inclusion can be noted. However, to provide a sustainable model, this *saturation* needs to be ongoing and constantly high on the agenda. For this to be truly effective the aforementioned *agent of change* must be able to influence provision school-wide and work effectively in partnership with the leadership of the school. This is clearly the case at Priestnall School, as OFSTED (June 2011) recently observed.

Although they share some common characteristics, no two young people with autism are the same, and as such there needs to be **flexible provision** to accommodate their individual needs. So, for example, some students with autism at Priestnall School are placed in teaching groups that suit their personal needs regarding positive role models and the need for good quality, structured teaching and not necessarily by their ability in that subject. There is also flexibility built in to pupil's individual timetables, such that they may be withdrawn for specialist support from lessons in which the cognitive and/or social demands are considered to be too high (the pupils themselves provide useful information to inform such decisions). In some cases, the flexibility of provision may even extend to students to having dual-roll placements, whereby they attend both Priestnall School and a local specialist school for young people with autism. The proportion of time spent in each school is also flexible and can be adapted to meet a pupil's needs at a given point in time. Finally, being flexible with school rules and routines is important. For example, some young people with autism experience disturbed sleep patterns and will occasionally arrive to school late. In such cases, staff must be prepared and understand the child's needs – allowing them time to get settled in a designated area (possibly a TEACCH-style booth)) rather than forcing them to move straight on when they are not ready (as this may trigger challenging behaviour). Alongside this, students are able to express their inner states with simple visual indicators (e.g. thermometers/rainbows/traffic lights), enabling them to indicate their readiness to proceed.

Peer education and awareness has a central part to play in the Priestnall School model, and is predicated on the notion that much of the bullying, teasing and social exclusion that is often targeted at pupils with autism is fuelled by ignorance – other children see young people behaving differently and often being treated differently by staff, but do not have any explanation for this;

because autism is a 'hidden' disability, developing peer awareness becomes all the more important. Work in this area links to the creation of a positive ethos mentioned earlier – including, for example, whole school assemblies highlighting positive messages and achievements of individuals with autism. Examples of Stephen Wiltshire's outstanding cityscapes have been explored, extracts from Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* have been read, and music by Rory Hoy has been played. Interest has always been intense; many students ask for more information and further 'training'. These simple awareness-raising techniques can be supplemented by more formalised peer support techniques – such as Circles of Friends (Gus, 2000).

The final element of the whole school saturation model relates to the provision of **direct support and intervention** for pupils. This stems from the recognition that, whilst a systemic focus (as outlined above) is very effective, there is also a need to provide direct, individual or small group intervention that helps young people with autism thrive in the mainstream school environment. This can include, for example, access to speech and language therapy as required, social skills/understanding interventions (such as the use of Social Stories (Gray, 1994)), and occupational therapy. One very successful approach used in this area has been provision of psychotherapy for some pupils. In keeping with the developed model of support away from traditional 'fix' and 'medical' models (see Morewood, 2008, 2009a & 2009b), the aim of such interventions is not to 'cure' but to support the young people in understanding their own needs and skills; specifically in relation to the world and community, so that they can support themselves within that world. The therapeutic intervention, which is a key part of the successful inclusion of students on the autism spectrum at Priestnall School, involves working on various aspects around the young person's personal growth and development of who they are and where they fit in to the world around them.

Depression and low self-esteem resulting from feelings of isolation in a world they find hard to understand and 'fit' into, are high on the list of issues that arise during sessions. Anxiety is a huge barrier to inclusion for young people with autism. Work is done to help lower the high levels of anxiety thus allowing students to cope better and manage difficult or unsettling situations in a way they were unable to previously. By working on these areas, students have grown in confidence and this has enabled

them to increase their time in the mainstream setting and take part in projects that would not have been possible previously.

Tackling depression, low self-esteem and particularly anxiety, opens up a path for further therapeutic intervention, offering the young person an opportunity to explore how their autism affects the way they interact with the world and how the way the world interacts with them. This develops the young person's understanding of how conflicts and misunderstandings arise both at school, with staff and peers and equally at home with parents, siblings and extended family, for example. Helping the young person to know themselves better and understand what autism means to them, gives them the tools to manage themselves in a much more productive way, making them feel valued as a person rather than a social outcast or someone who doesn't 'fit in' anywhere. Students at Priestnall who access therapy sessions enjoy an increased awareness of who they are and that it is OK to be different as they have much to offer society. Coupled with the peer education and staff development work discussed earlier in this paper, it allows young people to develop friendships which they previously thought would never be an option for them; and has also crossed over into home life, much to the delight of their parents.

Anxiety levels are significantly reduced as are obsessive or intrusive thoughts, therefore allowing their 'head to be less cluttered with stuff that gets in the way'. This in turn has increased their ability to access areas of school work/life that previously they were not able to do. Students at Priestnall School typically receive a one hour therapy session each week. This can be flexible so that if a student is experiencing particular difficulties at any given time they can receive further sessions, as appropriate. As a student progresses and develops through their therapeutic intervention these sessions can be reduced to one per fortnight and reviewed as appropriate over time. This has been, and continues to be an essential part of provision for the students at Priestnall School.

Concluding comments

The purpose of this paper was to share a model of inclusive practice for supporting young people with autism in mainstream schools. We do not pretend to have all the answers; nor is it our intention to suggest that effective inclusion can be reduced to a series of

'tips'. Much of what we have presented is about developing awareness and understanding of students' needs; it is from the changes in mindset that this process brings about that the more 'concrete' examples of practical strategies and approaches (some of which we have included above) emerge. It is important to state that the 'job' is never complete; hence, as mentioned earlier, the model represents a *rolling* response.

The authors also feel that evidence from schools involved in the ESRC-funded study, and specifically, as outlined in this paper, from Priestnall School, indicate that pupils with autism can be successfully included in their local mainstream schools, if there is a commitment to do so. This commitment, if it is to be sustainable and truly 'inclusive', must *saturate* all areas of school life and practice, and work in conjunction with more traditional models of support. Priestnall School continues to evolve provision for all young people and some pupils with autism now take a lead role in aspects of school life; showing round interview candidates, helping with transition events and also talking to other parents/carers about their experiences 'first-hand'. In order for inclusive ideals and passions to truly become part of a community it is important such positive messages are told; one of the key areas of Priestnall School's success to date.

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