**Autism in special and inclusive schools:
`there has to be a point to their being there'**

Priscilla Alderson PhD and Christopher Goodey MA

Social Science Research Unit
Institute of Education
University of London
18 Woburn Square
London WC1H ONS

0171 612 6396
fax 0171 612 6400
p.alderson@ioe.ac.uk

Priscilla Alderson's research work includes reports on consent to children's treatment and research, children's competence, ethics, civil rights in schools, and the views of adults with congenital conditions on prenatal and genetic screening and on the value and quality of their lives.

Chris Goodey's research includes the history of learning difficulties, parents' views about their child's Down's syndrome, and the practical implementation of inclusive education policies.

Autism in special and inclusive schools: `there has to be a point to their being there'

Abstract
What kind of schools are most suitable for pupils affected by autism? This article reviews meanings of autism and autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). We report evidence from observations in schools and interviews with pupils and adults, drawing on a qualitative study of special education in two contrasting education authorities one with special autistic schools, the other with inclusive schools. Current theory, policy and practice in the education of pupils with autistic tendencies are discussed in relation to the data.

Introduction

What kind of schools are most suitable for pupils affected by autism? During 1994-1996 we interviewed 45 pupils aged 7-17, assessed as having physical, sensory, learning or emotional difficulties, their parents and teachers, school governors, local education authority (LEA) staff and members. We observed 22 schools in two very different LEAs. East City has an inclusive policy and mixed-ability-range classes in mainstream coeducational, multi-racial, comprehensive schools; only two of the original eight special schools remain open and they are in a transitional stage. West County has 13 LEA special schools and units, further special schools run by voluntary organisations, and grammar or high (secondary modern) schools, almost entirely white, single sex schools, and 23 private schools (Alderson and Goodey, 1998). The research compared segregated and inclusive schooling for all kinds of disabled and disturbed students.

  This paper considers only the pupils who were assessed as having autism or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). They were in severe (SLD) and moderate (MLD) learning difficulties schools, an autism unit, and in inclusive schools. We conducted small scale in-depth research, in order to achieve detailed qualitative observations of, and conversations with, disabled and disturbed pupils. Our findings are likely to be fairly typical of special schooling, judging from the literature and conference reports, and from lack of evidence that it is not typical. The qualitative research findings raise urgent questions about current theories, policies and practices in the education of these pupils. This article reviews meanings of autism, then one of us (PA) presents evidence from `West County' LEA, and the other (CG) gives evidence from the inclusive LEA, `East City'. We conclude by discussing theory and policy implications of the data.

Are definitions of autism coherent?

Scientists' theories are influenced by their time and place (Kuhn). Theories of autism concern an extreme narrowing that excludes everything except the person's own self. They were developed during the early 1940s, by Kanner in the United States, which felt isolated as a democracy between imperialist Japan and fascism in Europe, and also by Asperger in Vienna during the Nazi regime of racial hygiene and exclusion of all foreign elements (Proctor 1988). Decades later the theories were revived without reference to their political origins. Wing (1981) identifies three main characteristics of all autistic children: impaired social relationships, impaired communication, and impaired social imagination or imaginative play. Frith (1989:10-11) notes that autism is often confused with other conditions. Following Kanner (1943) she proposes only two `cardinal' features:

> **Autistic aloneness**. <u>Exactly</u> what this is <u>cannot be identified</u> with a specific behaviour. It

can only be <u>inferred</u> from behaviour... This <u>intangible</u> difference of autistic children, pervading <u>all sorts of</u> behaviour, is highly conspicuous to the <u>experienced</u> clinician. [And] **obsessive insistence on sameness**... a <u>densely formulated</u> concept which <u>suggests</u> several factors at once: repetitiveness, rigidity, single-mindedness, pedantry, and inability to judge the significance of subtle differences. (Our emphases) (Frith 1989)

Our emphases note the tensions between precision and uncertainty which characterise the literature on this complex condition. In a section entitled `Is autism difficult to diagnose?', a question which remains unanswered, Frith continues somewhat ambiguously, as she juggles common confusions and misdiagnoses by `well-meaning amateurs' who account for wrongly labelled `border-line cases' against the clarity of a few infallible experienced diagnosticians.

 Experts differ on the range and severity of behaviours identified with autism. A National Autistic Society leaflet estimates that four or five people in every 10,000 have `classic autism', but 15 to 20 people in every 10,000 have `autistic-like conditions', and `one in every 200 people is affected by [knowing someone with] autism'.

 ASD includes Asperger's syndrome (1943) said to be characterised by: borderline or normal IQ; social isolation or naive, inappropriate social interaction; intensive interest in only one or two subjects; a narrow repetitive life style; limited or inappropriate intonation and body language; and poor motor coordination' (Wing 1996). So many characteristics are linked to ASD, that a single person is unlikely to have all of them, and few people are likely to have none of them at some time, leading to confusion and incoherence in definitions of autism and ASD. This leads to difficulty in selecting the most affected cases for special units and deciding precisely what special teaching techniques they require.

Advice to teachers
Our observations included a seminar for 200 teachers in West County about ASD, at which health professionals gave typical advice. A community paediatrician qualified most signs of ASD with `may': `Those at the milder end and those with SLD may not go through all the stages. Babies may not avoid eye contact. We don't now think that they all do not show affection.' Her cautious account perhaps encourages optimistic approaches and reasonably high expectations of affected children, yet it can also include many more children as having ASD. The doctor mentioned sets of contradictions: `He [*sic*] may fail to notice other children or make friends, or he may be indiscriminately friendly and too loud and obtrusive. Language may be very much delayed or he may use very good grammatical structure. Dialogue is repeated rather than invented, though there can be original word creations.' The doctor concluded, `Education and social environment can have marked effects on a child's happiness and overt behaviour, but the basic impairments remain.' This point questions how much teaching can affect mood and behaviour, how much it is mainly care and control, and how or whether special autism teaching differs from any other school teaching. Also, how far are learning difficulties attributable to autism or to other physiological or social factors?

 A speech therapist then gave practical advice on encouraging social development, language, play skills, learning and self-esteem. She used a less equivocal style.

ASD is a communication disorder, in the way the child processes information....It is hard for them to extract any kind of meaning, oral or visual, so that they are confused. They need continuity, limited diet, to wear the same clothes, etc. The more stimulating the environment, the harder it is to cope with....Friends are the biggest issues in the clinic.

3

They are desperately unhappy about lack of friends. We all have a duty to offer situations where they can be socially successful. Free times at school can be the hardest times when they can be very very vulnerable....Make sure you say the child's name **before** you give a general instruction to the whole class. Talk slowly in simple sentences and do not bombard the child with questions. When he/she asks a question make sure you are responding to his/her intentions rather than just the words he/she says otherwise you may be on the road to developing repetitive questioning. Always work from shared practical experience in all subjects.

These useful techniques apply to most young children. The advice raises questions about when adults should allow for a child's limitations, or try to compensate for, or resist or overcome them. Does a limited diet or wardrobe reinforce, or even establish, narrow rigidity?

An autism unit in West County (PA)

The unit observed is, in theory, part of the adjacent mainstream primary school, and shares the site also with a mainstream secondary and a large special school. There is almost no contact between the schools, they might as well be miles apart. The unit's 18 pupils are aged from 5 to 11. There are three teachers, four classroom assistants, and two lunchtime supervisors. A notice on the front door says `No child is allowed in before 9.15'. Children wait in their taxis, after a journey of up to an hour or more, then all enter the narrow hallway at once, while teachers and escorts exchange wry commiserations about their difficult charges. The school day of 9.30 to 3.00 includes breaks of up to 2.5 hours. The children mainly sit at a `play table' with one box of equipment only per session, and shopping catalogues, waiting to work with teachers individually or in small groups at a `work table'. Teachers spend long periods writing records, one spent half the day doing this. Each child has only very brief periods of tuition. The unit is very sparsely equipped, especially for the six year span some pupils spend there. Providing so few activities could reinforce autistic obsession. Alternatively boredom with repeated activity could be taken as attention deficit disorder.

   The head of the unit said that some affected children are not diagnosed until they are aged 7 or 9. They `drift along in school unnoticed....we can diagnose more of them, and there are more to cope with, some of them who were in main stream are with us now, they were a bit of a pain, a bit odd, they muddled through school, they were the cleverer and the milder cases.' She was unclear about parents' preferences, saying `parents want them to go to local school and have local friends and community, so you can't steer the child to where the expertise is,' but also that more boarding places are needed `because of the stress on the family'. Partly to reduce pupils' travelling hours, `three new units are being set up, and we're going to open a third class'. They are called `integrated' because they share sites with mainstream schools, and will be for either MLD or SLD. West County staff emphasise the risks of attempting inclusive education: `with integration there has to be some point to their being there', said the unit head, but the staff tend to assume that segregation is beneficial. The apparent increase in demand for ASD places is linked to many more cases being diagnosed and referred. The next sections describe how signs of ASD were demonstrated and treated in the unit.

Social relationships and communication

> The characteristic peculiarity of gaze never fails to be present... They do not
> make eye contact... they seem to take in things with short peripheral glances...
> The use of language always appears abnormal, unnatural (Asperger in Frith

1989:9-10).

> Profound aloneness dominates all behaviour... an innate inability to form the usual biologically provided affective contact with people. (Kanner 1943)

Megan, one of the highest achievers, and Paul, the only black child present, clearly show an averted gaze, and make grimaces and abrupt gestures and sounds; the others are usually quiet and polite, work hard when given a task, talk coherently and look "ordinary". How do the staff give them special help with social skills? Unlike most teachers in our study who are friendly and helpful, the unit staff tend to avoid contact with me, and with the children. They teach different pupils each day `so that they don't get attached to anyone'. This is a strange, marked contrast to mainstream primary schools which endorse children's attachment to their class teacher and expect younger ones to `be upset' about a change of teacher.

Annie plays in the sand for over an hour at various times. She is deft, careful, imaginative and funny. She calls me (PA) `baby' so I call her `mummy' and she feeds me spoons of sand which in turn I feed to her, and we share cups of sand tea. The staff never remark on how well she plays, invents, and shares the small sand tray and small amount of sand with other children. Martin plays at digging for gold and mixing banana milk shakes. Then Nick arrives and Martin tries to ward him off by threatening to throw sand at him. The staff quickly chase Martin away, `No we are <u>not</u> having you playing in the sand'. They ignore Nick disrupting Annie's play. At last Annie says, `No we are <u>not</u> having you playing in the sand'. She is told off by the teachers, `You must <u>learn to share the sand</u>'. Later Annie takes a dust pan and sweeps sand off the floor very competently, but no one comments on this.

Sandra, aged 11, frequently comes to sit next to me. She is said to shout at home, but never speaks at school and will board next term. She shows me her school books and reads me a story with a mixture of tiny grunts and signs. During break time, she takes me to the small shaded area out of the blazing sunshine. Other children sustain eye contact and initiate friendly contact. From many examples, these details show levels of competence, good sense, imagination and sensitive interactions between the children which deny their autistic label. They play for long periods while the staff sit talking together, frequently discussing the children's limitations, as if they cannot hear, for example:

> <u>Teacher 1:</u> She's psychotic.
> <u>Teacher 2:</u> Yes. Not to say obsessive. Oh watch out for Paul Look he's flicking his food, take his knife and fork away.
> <u>Lunchtime assistant</u>. [Laughing and with irony] I wonder why? [She gives him a plate of shredded cabbage which he can only eat with his fingers.]
> <u>Classroom assistant:</u> Oh look at him, I thought he was getting more civilised. I know you're going to be a naughty little monkey today, I can feel it in my water.

The children are hurried to finish their small portions and then all taken to the toilets at once. When they quickly reappear, several boys have wet trousers. The staff seem to assume that the children are too irrational to talk to. Neil weeps twice, for a long time with many tears and a teacher tells him to stop but does not ask what the matter is. Staff often admonish children, but seldom remark on their friendly cooperation, except occasionally to say it is `amazing', `too good to be true'.

Empathy and imaginative play

> The most general description of social impairments in Autism is lack of empathy...indifference to other people's distress [and hypothetically] lack of the ability to recognize the existence of other people's minds... There is abnormal lack of imaginative activity, this refers to absence of pretend play (Frith 1989:12,154-5).

For about 30 minutes, Noel plays with plastic blocks and a plastic chicken. He builds a house for the chicken and calls some blocks eggs. He makes a fox, later called a wolf. The wolf tries to catch the chicken and break down the house and take the eggs. Interested to see Noel's capacity for empathy, I beg in a squeaky `chicken' voice for help and mercy. Noel is sometimes the fierce wolf and as often the kind rescuer and house maker. He makes the chicken die and go to heaven, and is fluent and imaginative, funny, sometimes fierce, often kind. He builds a car for the chicken to ride in, and two bath rooms, and gives the chicken gentle baths. Later the wolf becomes a hamster who also dies and goes to heaven. Other children play imaginatively, as described earlier.

Links with other schools
> This disturbance results in considerable and very typical difficulties of social integration. In many cases, the failure to be integrated in a social group is the most conspicuous feature... (Asperger 1944)

The head of unit said: `Yes, the LEA has an integration policy and there are a lot of units on mainstream sites, but how much they are integrated is quite individual. They don't make friendships anyway. If they can cope socially that is the hardest part, the lessons are the easy bit.' The pupils spend break times in a small yard and look through wire fencing at the other schools' playgrounds. This is discouraged. `Don't put your hand through that fence! Either you'll be dragged through one way or you'll drag someone through to this side or there'll be biting.' If children have difficulty with communication, it is questionable logic to group them all together and away from articulate children at school, so also undermining their chances of making friends near their home, besides constantly seeing and treating as subnormal.. If lessons are `the easy part' there seems even less purpose in segregation, for academic or social reasons. The special school system and attitudes impose isolation which is attributed to ASD.

Learning
> The children largely follow their own impulses, regardless of the demands of the environment... The children are simply not geared towards learning from adults or teachers... (Asperger in Frith 1989:9-10)

> They do want to do what they like doing, it's part of autism. (Teacher in unit)

Duncan waits patiently to play with the computer. Sitting opposite it, every time he looks up he cannot help noticing the brightly coloured games, with exploding coconuts and grunting monsters. He is told to learn to concentrate on his work. Other children have a turn each time he asks. At 11.50, he is allowed nearer the screen to watch. A teacher then slowly sorts out another game, working out how to click the mouse which one boy has done expertly, and typically doing easy tasks instead of showing children how to do them or checking if they already can. At last Duncan has a short go which he enjoys greatly, and then gracefully allows himself to be rushed off to lunch.

Many hours are spent playing computer games which involves touching the screen with a paintbrush to trigger a reaction. Everyone aged from 7 to 11 seems to do this easily, often much faster than the programmed timing. The computer is used to occupy rather than to educate. Annie completes a work sheet, colouring animals and correctly writing how many legs each one has. Then a teacher gives her another identical sheet without checking the first one. Annie fills in the second sheet incorrectly. A teacher walking by says, `Oh that's silly, a snake can't have 27 legs'. Megan happily hums while busy writing and drawing. Then a teacher sits by her, and slowly looks through shopping catalogues, chooses a picture, cuts it out, glues it, and sticks it on a page while Megan has to watch. Another teacher very slowly draws pictures and rules lines and eventually lets the watching child to do some simple colouring. No work appears to be prepared before lessons.

Later, while two teachers write records for an hour, two assistants sort squared sheets with coloured patterns. One says, `No, that's too hard for Noel, too complicated for him give him this, no this.' Noel, aged 9-years, says, `No, no, too young, that's too young. I'm too old for that.' He does the task quickly and easily, and is given another simple task and protests about having to use dull colours. After colouring a graph, Noel wants to cut it out but is not allowed to. A teacher very slowly cuts and pastes it into Noel's book, and writes what the exercise involved. The teachers exclaim in surprise that Noel has worked so well. Like the displays on the walls, most of the work is clearly done by the teachers and much is at nursery level. Special needs teachers are advised to teach in very small steps and review regularly, so that every small advance can be recorded to encourage the staff. The disadvantages of this approach have been widely discussed (Gardner 1993). The small tasks can easily seem pointless, boring, demeaning and frustrating to the children, and it is uncertain whether their skills improve through teaching, maturation or experience.

Therapy

> Life is puzzling and unpredictable, so they need security, and protection from loud noises, pain, bright lights such as from wet surfaces. Don't shout because every loud noise will mean to them that you are angry. Provide a certain amount of predictability to reduce anxiety (Leaflet by West County LEA and health staff, 1995).

The special unit is not a quiet, therapeutic haven for children who find ordinary school too stressful and distracting. The staff often shout angrily, and there are noisy sessions, especially during the final half hour while everyone waits for taxis. These is no psychologist or counsellor, and psychologists seem to be unaware of the type of education they are recommending for the children they refer. Some sessions are called `therapy', like `music therapy' which appears to mean unstimulating repetition . Everyone sits on benches, listening to taped songs they know by heart. For example:

> Now I need to get dressed (4 times)
> Please pass me my clothes (4 times)
> What shall I put on? (2 times)
> Please pass me my pants (4 times)
> Thank you for passing me my pants (lots of times)
> Now I'll put on my pants (etc.)

The term `therapy' can excuse frustratingly tedious lessons which are likely to increase disturbed

behaviour (McNamara and Moreton 1995). By 2.20 pm, some children who have looked "ordinary" so far begin to wriggle and wave. Yet any group of children aged 5 to 11 who spend years in this small unit, with the repeated activities, meagre resources, long journeys and negative staff might react similarly.

Discipline

> *The head of unit on discipline:* How long is piece of string? There are a million strategies. It has to be tailored to the child. If there's aggression you look at whether it is frequent or not, find out why, the cause, sit the child by you, separate him for a while, or present orders in a different way, or give them better ways of coping, get them to feel that they can have an influence if they express themselves in a better way. Communication is the major area they don't understand. The world is very confusing for them. You have to make the messages clearer, and see that they learn that they have to get on in the world. There are some rules that they have to keep.

What is the appropriate treatment for obsessive behaviour - to allow it, to try distraction, or firmly and explicitly to discourage it? Some teachers use threats, an unusually large teacher often says: `I'll pick you up'; he pokes and tickles children, and traps them into a large plastic barrel stood upright. Some teachers seem to want to ensure that children who want to do something (play with the computer or with lego or in soft play area) cannot, and children who do not want to do it, have to, and they frequently emphasise confrontation. During break time, David, who reads and speaks very well, becomes increasingly agitated about being outside and keeps asking, `How long, how long?' At last the door is opened, but a teacher pulls back the almost frantic David while another teacher calls out names from a list of the order in which pupils are allowed in with David last. A note on the wall says: `David is obsessive about time. He needs to be spoken to and disciplined very firmly. Reward: a book of teacher's choice or toy of his choice but not clock'. Collective decisions about discipline can mean that teachers enforcing harsh rules need feel less personally responsible for increasing David's great distress.

The examples have been selected from many similar ones to illustrate general trends in this unit and the special schools we observed for learning and communication difficulties. Staff in some other schools were more kind and gentle, but we saw similarly low teaching standards and expectations, and no informed, consistent ways of responding to behavioural difficulties.

Inclusive primary schooling in East City (CG)
In 1988, the MLD schools for pupils with communication disorders closed. All the parents chose to send their children to one resourced mainstream primary school Moreton, which opened a special, all-age autistic class 8. Seymour School is now also resourced for children with severe or complex problems who are all fully included in wide-ability peer groups, and some pupils attend their local school with support..All the children we saw who were profoundly `uncommunicative' (a problematic term as we shall show) have no speech, or a few single words.

Seymour's head teacher said, `We don't use the word "autism", we just see them as children.' She questions how much avoidance of eye contact and obsession with ritual affect people generally, including herself, and mentioned a psychologist who, when visiting the school, insisted on isolating a boy to test him and refused to respond to other children who talked to him. She is concerned that use of the label `autistic' powerfully shapes perceptions and relationships, and considers that the school should adapt to the pupils and their differences, not the other way round. Questioning the idea of autism includes willingness to see any failures in communication as

mutual and not simply as an effect of autism, with willingness to try other ways of communicating and breaking down boundaries in interactions between all the adults and pupils involved.

One former special school teacher said she finds that severely affected children improve notably when they join inclusive classes, and she asks experts to visit Seymour, to challenge the theory that autistic behaviour is unalterable. She finds that the experts tend to assert that these children could never have been autistic, and she remarks they `constantly alter the diagnosis, expanding it here and restricting it here...that's a vested interest.' It turns the diagnosis of ASD into a political rather than a clinical response, concerned with the power to allocate resources rather than with need.

By 1995, 15 children were in class 8 at Moreton, with a teacher and five classroom assistants. It is a quiet area with some extra play and learning equipment, in the middle of the school to emphasise that it is not a separate unit. Each pupil has a different degree of integration into the peer classes, between 100 and 20 per cent of their time. During my visit, I am told that Aaron is brilliant at meccano, so try to show him some interesting things, He is not interested; perhaps he realises that I am not mechanically minded, and my behaviour is at odds with my real self. Eventually he decides to sit on my lap, although he doesn't look at me. The activity of the other boys in class 8 appears to be vague and aimless (in contrast to how they appear later in their peer classes). Their teacher comments on how angry the other children get during school outings, on behalf of the autistic children when they are stared or pointed at, and how much she feels class 8 can copy the "normal" children, which they could not do at the special school where she once taught.

At playtime, I feel rather isolated in the playground until Alice, a big 11-year-old with no speech runs across the playground through a crowd and takes hold of my hands smiling. She plays with two other girls. A boy from class 8 walks and runs on his own, his arms slightly dangling, rather like other boys doing aeroplane impressions. Two infant-age boys play with another girl, and help her when she wets herself. Later some children argue about who will have the privilege of fetching class 8 children to join their class.

In class 6, Alice and Satnam work with a classroom assistant, and a girl who had played with Alice pats her on the back occasionally. Alice has a story book with a word missing from each sentence, and she has to point to the correct word on a card. The playtime has illustrated the value to Alice of being able to communicate and the incentives for her to learn. She uses flash cards at school and home, as I did when I visited, and school friends talk to her on the telephone in the evenings. Satnam traces rows of capital letters neatly, making almost no eye contact, and swiping me lightly a couple of times, then he spits, Alice dribbles slightly. After they leave the table, a girl passing by sees that it is wet, she grabs a tissue and mops it up, unasked and apparently unplanned. It is not her table and she passes on.

In class 2, Anthony selects names words from flash cards helped by the teacher and a friend, while the others do a word search. 6-year-olds to from the adjacent class to come in to work with Anthony. Later three 6-year-olds help him to do a coloured shape puzzle. Anthony says an occasional word or two, almost like echoes. Then we build a castle with large lego, then a boat and a bridge. I get Anthony to give me pieces and hand them to the friend. to set up. Anthony loses interest quickly, but he is very interested in lego people, he keeps looking at the face and the hole in the back, and later peers under the bridge. He holds very little eye contact but often looks towards me and chuckles to himself.

Gradual inclusion

During their interview, Alice's parents' describe how class 8 have gradually been more included in the school. They began to sit in assembly and at registration with their peer class, they gain permission to have a packed lunch, and to play in the main playground and not a small `quiet area'.

> *Alice's mother:* All the things we wanted for Alice, for her to take part in just like anyone else, used to have the same effect. First of all, they [teachers] thought of the problems it's gonna cause - not like, `What can Alice get out of it?' It was, `What sort of disruption it's gonna cause to the school?'...
>
> *Alice's father:* Alice makes it clear she does not want to be in class 8. She'll bring the board that says `class 2' to one of the teachers, or she'll go for the door and try to get out of the room. She doesn't spend much time there ...but surely she shouldn't be there at all if she doesn't want to be.

They kept Alice at home on Fridays, until the class 8 outings stopped. `Every Friday morning used to be the outing day....to the supermarket. I said, "No, that's a special school thing, ten kids and seven teachers traipsing round Asda's to buy two bananas".' Alice's parents valued her `willingness to <u>want</u> to be able to communicate'.

> *Father:* If Alice doesn't want to do something. she'll let you know in no uncertain terms - pulling away, making noises, but if she's doing something she really likes, then she'll show you all the joy. But with her friends, I think they've got their own communication system, which is all to do with facial expressions, they way they touch each other, that sort of thing... She'll spot someone, one of her best friends, she'll belt up towards them. grab their hands, smile at them, might make a noise. They'll say `hello' back, and they'll start chatting to her.
>
> <u>Interviewer:</u> is it an equal relationship?
>
> <u>Father:</u> I think it is, yeah. The group of kids that choose Alice to be their friend, they're fairly vulnerable theirselves. Kids that are very shy, kids that have problems in making relationships, kids that are very nervous, a lot of kids that don't want to be at school, that sort of child, yeah? Alice doesn't make the demands that a lot of kids in the school make on them you know, `You haven't got your Rebok trainers on' or `Ooer, you look weird today, what you wearing?'
>
> <u>Interviewer:</u> Is this just non-threatening, or does Alice offer something positive?
>
> <u>Father:</u> Alice does give a lot back. She's really warm, she shows other kids that she's really happy to be in their company. At the end of the summer term there are all these kids in tears... A big strapping lad was crying because Alice is leaving. In particular for the boys, they've become such nice, caring kids, without mothering Alice. They're actually able to show a kid from the opposite sex that they care... The kids accept that, and there is this boy Peter who's cuddling Alice in the playground, and nobody's laughing at him.

Alice's head teacher described her efforts to change the school, though acknowledging the part played by families. She thinks autistic children give `power' to the rest, which appears to mean confidence and maturity.

Friendships continued into the local secondary comprehensive, where former members of class 8 spend all their time with their peer class. A classroom assistant said he sometimes takes them, `to our little room....we've got a mini library. Some of the other students say, "Please sir, can we come up with you?" And they come up and join in with them.... although basically the idea of it is a haven or sanctuary for people who need it at a time of stress.' The assistant described his worst moment, `when Satnam threw his first major wobbly. And it was bad. I took him out of the classroom initially and they actually had teachers coming out of their classroom from the second story to find out what the screaming was about.' He added that this recurring event is no longer remarked upon. The pupils will `come across and say, "Can we borrow your rubber?" and this is what they use as excuses just to make them feel at home. They really go out of their way to make them feel part of it.'

Education policy and ASD

The autism unit illustrates the difficulties of attempting to diagnose such a condition. It is not clear which features are necessary and sufficient for a diagnosis, what precisely the unique educational difficulties associated with ASD are, the specific educational expertise pupils said to have ASD require, what unique needs they have in common to justify separate provision, `the point to their being' in separate units, and how any benefits offered could justify the very high costs - financial, educational, emotional and social. Ironically, these costs are blamed on to ASD and not on to systematic discrimination. Autistic tendencies of isolation and self-absorption are more noticeable in the segregating education system itself, which appears to project and enforce these characteristics on to the pupils we observed. As we also illustrate in greater detail elsewhere (Alderson and Goodey, 1998), comparative evidence of inclusive and special ASD schooling seriously challenges assumptions about the advantages of special schooling. The evidence also raises urgent questions for all LEAs and schools to reconsider their policies for pupils who are thought to have ASD.

Acknowledgements

References

ALDERSON, P., GOODEY, C. (1998) *Enabling education: experiences in special and ordinary schools*. (London, Tufnell Press).

ASPERGER, H. (1944) *Die autistischen Psychopathen im Kindesalter* translation in Frith (ed) 1991.

DES. (1989) *Discipline in schools*: Report of the Enquiry chaired by Lord Elton. (London, HMSO).

FRITH, U. (1989) *Autism: explaining the enigma* (Oxford, Blackwell).

FRITH, U. (ed) (1991) *Autism and Asperger's syndrome* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

GARDNER, H. (1993) *The unschooled mind: how children think and how schools should teach*. (London, Fontana).

KANNER, L. (1943) Autistic disturbance of affective contact, *Nervous Child*, 2, pp 217-50.

KUHN, T. (1977) *The essential tension: selected studies in scientific tradition and change*. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).

MCNAMARA, S., MORETON, G. (1995) *Changing behaviour: teaching children with emotional and behavioural difficulties in primary and secondary classrooms*. (London, David Fulton).

NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY. (no date) *In your working life you can expect to meet several people with autism.. will you recognise them?* (London, NAS).

PROCTOR, R. (1988) *Racial hygiene: medicine under the Nazis*. (New York, Harvard University Press).

WING, L. (1980) *Autistic children: a guide for parents*. (London, Constable).

WING, L. (1981) Language, social and cognitive impairments in autism and severe mental retardation, *Journal of Autism and Development Disorders*, 11, pp 31-44.

WING, L. (1996) Autistic spectrum disorders: no evidence for or against increase in prevalence, *British Medical Journal*, 312, pp. 327-8.