



Vulnerable and Forgotten: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Autism Special Schools in England

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused, and continues to cause, unprecedented disruption in England. The impact of the pandemic on the English education system has been significant, especially for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). While it was encouraging that the educational rights of children and young people with SEND were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, Government decision-making appeared to be centered around the needs of pupils in mainstream schools. In this article, co-authored by an academic researcher and senior leaders from the Pan London Autism Schools Network (PLASN; a collective of special schools in London and the South East of England, catering for pupils on the autistic spectrum), we reflect on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on special schools in England. We document and discuss a range of challenges experienced by PLASN schools, including the educational inequalities that were exposed and perpetuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the manner in which the needs and realities of special schools were overlooked by the Government. We also detail the creative and innovative solutions implemented by PLASN schools to overcome barriers that they encountered. These solutions centered on facilitating holistic approaches to support, ensuring clear and regular communication with families, providing effective support for home learning, and promoting collaborative ways of working; all of which align with good practice principles in autism education more generally, and are essential elements of practice to maintain post-pandemic. We additionally reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic could be a catalyst for much-needed change to the SEND system: leading to better educational provision, and therefore better outcomes, for pupils with SEND.

Keywords: COVID-19, special education, autism, teacher-education, school

COVID-19 AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused, and continues to cause, unprecedented disruption to the education system in England. As part of strict physical distancing measures introduced by the Government in March 2020, schools were not physically open for the majority of children and young people. Partial physical reopening of schools started in June 2020, followed by full physical reopening in September 2020. The process of physically reopening schools and/or adjusting the school environment to meet Government guidance was enormously challenging for school staff. The logistical challenges faced by schools were substantial, with a range of measures needing to be implemented to reduce the risk of COVID-19 on staff and pupils (e.g., social distancing, classroom modifications, staggered scheduling). These challenges were compounded by a lack of clear guidance for school staff, with key decisions being communicated to schools at extremely short notice (Kim and Asbury, 2020).

Specific concerns have been raised around the educational impact of COVID-19 on children and young people with SEND.¹ The need for effective, quality support for children and young people with SEND is essential given that disabled children and their families experience a unique range of inequalities (Dowling and Dolan, 2001). These inequalities stem from the “structures, systems, policies and attitudes of society toward the family” as opposed to the children’s disabilities per se (Dowling and Dolan, 2001, p. 22). For example, families of disabled children often face economic challenges, linked to lower levels of employment and the costs of meeting the basic needs of caring for disabled children, which can negatively impact wellbeing (Baldwin, 2015). While these factors may present challenges for families of children and young people with SEND generally, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these existing inequalities, leaving disabled people and their families even more vulnerable (Pellicano and Stears, 2020).

The physical closure of many schools meant that access to crucial resources for learners with SEND (e.g., specialist educators, structured learning environments) was compromised; with recognition that parents of children and young people with SEND were unlikely to have the resourcing to replicate their children’s education during home learning (Masonbrink and Hurley, 2020). Such concerns likely influenced the Government’s decision for continued physical school attendance during the COVID-19 outbreak for vulnerable children and young people in England. The Government’s definition of vulnerability in this context explicitly referred to children and young people with

Education Health and Care (EHC) plans.² Specifically, continued school attendance was advised for children and young people with an EHC plan where, following a risk assessment, it was determined that their needs would be as, or more, safely met in their regular educational environment. This advice was manageable for mainstream schools, where only a minority of pupils have EHC plans (163,054, equating to 2% of pupils; Department for Education, 2020). In contrast, facilitating continued school attendance was a considerable undertaking for special schools, where almost all pupils have EHC plans (128,000, equating to 97.9% of pupils; Department for Education, 2020). The unique context of special schools, and the associated challenges and complexities that they would encounter, simply was not considered in Government decision making.

OUR CONTEXT AND PROCESS

In this article, we focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on special schools for pupils on the autistic spectrum. Autism is diagnosed on the basis of difficulties in social interaction and communication, as well as the presence of restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Eleven per cent of the 1.3 million pupils with SEND in England are on the autistic spectrum, with autism being the most common primary need listed on EHC plans (of the 294,800 pupils with EHC plans, 30% are autistic; Department for Education, 2020). Over 70% of the 82,847 autistic pupils in England are educated in mainstream provisions, with the remainder in some form of specialist education (Department for Education, 2020). Autistic pupils educated in special schools tend to have a range of additional communicative, sensory, cognitive, emotional and/or physical needs (sometimes referred to as “complex needs,” e.g., Richards and Crane, 2020). Yet even within a special school setting, the profiles and associated support needs of pupils can be extremely wide-ranging.

This article collates and presents the views, perspectives and experiences of members of the Pan London Autism Schools Network (PLASN) in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on their school communities. PLASN is a collective of Head Teachers from special schools in London and the South East of England, all catering for pupils on the autistic spectrum. PLASN was set up to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experiences across schools, via termly meetings of Head Teachers. PLASN also has an associated research group (PLASN-R), which was set up due to

¹In England, children and young people (0–25 years) are considered to have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) if they have a learning difficulty and/or disability that calls for special educational provision to be developed for them. Guidance on supporting children and young people with SEND is outlined in the Children and Families Act (2014) and associated SEND Code of Practice (2014).

²In England, children and young people with SEND will have one of two levels of support. SEN support is provided by all schools, at all levels of education (i.e., from mainstream schools to specialist provisions; from nursery schools to further education). If, however, children and young people have needs that cannot be met by SEN support, then they may be assessed for an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. EHC plans are legal documents that detail both a young person’s needs and the extra support that they should receive. Across all school types, 3.3% of pupils in England have an EHC plan—equivalent to 294,758 children and young people (Department for Education, 2020).

PLASN Head Teachers acknowledging the need for research to inform their decision-making with regards to issues faced in their schools (see Parsons et al., 2013, for more information). PLASN-R is chaired by an academic researcher (LC) and a PLASN Head Teacher (LS), both of whom attend meetings of PLASN and PLASN-R (providing a link between the two).

During the pandemic, all of the PLASN schools provided varying degrees of provision for their pupils, to meet each pupil's unique needs. Regular meetings of PLASN members during the COVID-19 pandemic (as a means of sharing experiences, resources and advice with colleagues facing similar issues) highlighted a range of shared challenges, as well as the development of creative and innovative solutions to overcome these. In the spirit of shared learning, these discussions were documented with the support of an academic researcher (LC) and are presented in this article, along with recommendations and examples of good practice. More specifically, PLASN met (virtually, each time for 2 h) in June, September and November of 2020, and had regular email correspondence in between these meetings. LC also asked Head Teachers to share (via email) details of key lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., the challenges faced, what has worked well, and what could/should happen going forward). With permission from all involved, LC collated these shared learnings (from meeting minutes and email correspondence) into an article that PLASN members reviewed, and engaged in detailed discussion about, at the November 2020 PLASN meeting. As part of this process, we specifically reflected on how the COVID-19 pandemic could be a catalyst for much-needed change to the special education system; leading to better educational provision (and therefore better outcomes) for autistic pupils with complex needs, as well as special school pupils more broadly.

OUR REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite providing crucially important provision to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in society, there was a consensus from PLASN members that *special schools were overlooked* by the Government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although recent research with mainstream school staff highlighted the challenges they faced in operating their settings due to lack of guidance (and/or lack of notice of guidance) from the Government (Kim and Asbury, 2020), PLASN members felt that these issues were particularly problematic for special schools. As one example, guidance on minimizing contact between individuals was introduced in schools across England to limit the spread of COVID-19. Mainstream schools were able to address this with the implementation of initiatives such as “bubbles” (to ensure that staff and pupils in different year/class groups did not mix), yet special school pupils do not just encounter one another in school but also via school transport services. This reflects how special school pupils often need to travel significant distances to access appropriate educational that meets their needs (APPGA, 2017). Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the coordination and provision of accessible pupil transport services for those with

SEND has been reported to be a complex endeavor (Ross et al., 2020). The use of class/year group bubbles recommended to limit the spread of COVID-19 simply did not take into account the unique context of special schools, where pupils from different classes will be mixing on school transport. As a result, a single positive COVID-19 case in a special school can lead to sizable numbers of children across different class bubbles needing to self-isolate (as some of the PLASN schools experienced first-hand). COVID-19 guidance and regulations simply did not apply to special schools in the same way they did for mainstream educational settings.

There was a consensus from PLASN members that clearer, setting-specific guidance was needed for schools, and much earlier. Put bluntly, special schools needed to be prioritized by the Government rather than treated as an after-thought. Research with staff in mainstream schools has highlighted the need for more joined-up thinking from the Government in their COVID-19 educational response (Kim and Asbury, 2020). Mainstream school staff emphasised the need for greater clarity in communications to school (to facilitate planning by school staff), and additional opportunities for consultations that include a broader range of stakeholders (Kim and Asbury, 2020). We echo these calls, and further highlight the need for senior leaders of special schools to be centered in such conversations: while special schools may cater for a minority of pupils, these pupils have some of the most significant levels of need.

To meet special school pupils' high levels of need, one of the first actions undertaken by PLASN schools (in March 2020, following the announcement of strict physical distancing measures) was the creation and completion of detailed and robust risk assessments, to continue the delivery of services to *every* pupil. The goal was to identify the most vulnerable pupils and families, in order to coordinate the educational provisions on offer to each pupil. In this regard, PLASN schools emphasized the need to take a *holistic approach to support*; defining vulnerability not just in relation to SEND, but acknowledging the multiple, intersecting ways that pupils and families could be vulnerable (for example, ensuring that the needs of single parents and/or parents with additional needs themselves were met). Given the inequalities faced by families of disabled children (Dowling and Dolan, 2001), this was deemed especially pertinent. Holistic support was also felt to be crucial given the high levels of caregiver burden and parenting stress experienced by parents of autistic children with complex needs (Baykal et al., 2019; Postorino et al., 2019). The adaptations implemented as part of PLASN schools' COVID-19 responses were found to be particularly helpful in this regard. For example, removing the need for face-to-face consultations with parents proved advantageous to families (e.g., reducing the burden of organising childcare). As a result, some PLASN members reported that, post-pandemic, they planned to have more regular, online parent consultations (as opposed to less frequent, in-person meetings).

Underpinning schools' ability to provide holistic support was the focus on *clear and regular communication* with families, to build robust partnerships. Despite the importance of collaborative working between schools and families (e.g.,

Guldberg, 2020), school staff are rarely trained to work with parents, and parent education programmes rarely focus on interactions between parents and schools (Azad and Mandell, 2016). During the pandemic, PLASN members ensured that their schools facilitated exceptionally high-quality communication with parents via a variety of routes. For example, some schools implemented a policy of weekly calls to families; discussing the highs and lows of the week, any issues, and any important school updates. Parents were encouraged to contact the school if there were any problems and PLASN members emphasized the need to be responsive to parents and accommodate all requests (especially in crisis situations). Conscious that language barriers can negatively impact the ability of parents of autistic children to access services (Amant et al., 2019), PLASN schools were sensitive to the language barriers experienced by many families living in multicultural London and arranged for staff who spoke the families' home language to call home; ensuring that their needs were truly understood, and subsequently met. PLASN members explained how learning more about their school communities and their home circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic was hugely beneficial in developing positive home-school relationships, which should be maintained in future. Crucially, the emphasis was not only on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils, but also striving to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their families. Taking a proactive approach also meant that schools could act swiftly in addressing any issues and/or safeguarding concerns as and when they arose.

Despite these newfound opportunities, the COVID-19 pandemic was felt to *expose and perpetuate inequality* among an already vulnerable group of pupils and families (see also Pellicano and Stears, 2020). Even before the pandemic, many of the pupils attending PLASN schools (and their families) were felt to be disproportionately disadvantaged and on the margins of society due to a range of factors, such as the stigma experienced by parents of children and young people on the autistic spectrum and/or with intellectual disabilities (Mitter et al., 2019). Further, this disadvantage is often compounded by a range of other intersecting factors (e.g., being from a minority ethnic background; see Perepa, 2019) and/or factors directly related to having a child with SEND (e.g., financial hardship associated with being unable to maintain employment due to caring responsibilities; see Baldwin, 2015). PLASN school staff emphasized the need to go beyond the young people's SEND and take a broader approach to identifying need. As one example, technology has become a valuable tool for facilitating education during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet this limited opportunities for those who did not have access to computers or the internet (Van Dijk, 2017). Ensuring all pupils and their families have the necessary resources to access their education – at school and at home—was felt to be crucially important, particularly for vulnerable groups attending specialist educational provisions. PLASN schools ensured that if they were not able to offer the support themselves, they signposted families where needed (e.g., to charities, food banks). Again, these were felt to be important aspects of the schools' COVID-19 response that needed to be maintained post-pandemic.

The need for *greater support for home learning* was also crucial given that not all pupils were able to attend school during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was especially true for pupils in PLASN schools, as even those who were offered the opportunity to continue receiving their education on school premises could not always do so (e.g., due to health concerns). Further, as previously noted, positive cases of COVID-19 could quickly close several bubbles across the schools, resulting in pupils having to self-isolate at home. It quickly became apparent to PLASN members that families did not have the resources necessary to support their children's learning when not on school premises. Many schools therefore provided equipment (e.g., sensory items, books, stationary) to families to support them with home learning. This was reported to be hugely beneficial, in order to transfer learning from school to home. While caution needed to be exerted in terms of not placing too high expectations on parents in terms of providing educational input for their children (especially given the high degree of burden and stress generally experienced by parents of children with SEND; Baykal et al., 2019; Postorino et al., 2019), the provision of some limited equipment was felt to be an initiative that would be useful to maintain post-pandemic; fostering stronger collaborations between school and home. Collecting feedback on the accessibility and quality of home learning was an ongoing process, with school staff responding creatively (e.g., by training parents in widely used classroom approaches; by providing engaging learning activities for the whole family to participate in).

Collaborative working forms a central part of important legislation for pupils with SEND (as detailed in the Children and Families Act; Department for Education, 2014), is a major component of the EHC plan process (see Department for Education, 2014), and is emphasized in good practice guidance for autism education (see Guldberg et al., 2019). Despite this, some pre-pandemic partnerships have been reported to be fraught with challenges. For example, education providers often lament the lack of input from health and social care providers during the EHC plan process (Boesley and Crane, 2018). Encouragingly, PLASN members noted that some of these partnerships were more effective during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, technology allowed a range of stakeholders to contribute to annual reviews remotely and this was a development that PLASN schools unanimously welcomed continuing post-pandemic.

It is important for us to note that many of these best practices emphasised by PLASN schools during the COVID-19 pandemic have been emphasised in good practice guidance in autism education more broadly. For example, the Autism Education Trust (a Government funded organization that coordinates, supports and promotes effective educational practices for autistic pupils) has published eight principles of good autism practice (Guldberg et al., 2019) that overlap considerably with the good practice principles highlighted by PLASN schools as part of their pandemic responses. As examples: Principle One focuses on understanding each autistic child and young person, including the influence of each individual's cultural and linguistic background, as well as the need for regular reviews to ensure

needs are being met; Principle Three focuses on collaborating and proactively engaging with parents and carers of autistic children and young people, including developing effective ways to share information, signposting families to effective services and supports, and understanding the needs of families (including diversity of family backgrounds); and Principle Five focuses on leadership and management that promotes good practice, ensuring the needs of children and young people (as well as their families) are met. What was disappointing, however, was that it required a national and international crisis to facilitate some aspects of practice that were in the best interests of vulnerable pupils. As such, PLASN members felt that developments as a result of COVID-19 (e.g., frequent and more authentic collaborative working) should be a major strategic priority following the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged all educational settings in England and beyond. Educators have been required to respond rapidly, during uncertain and unprecedented times, to meet the varied and changing needs of their pupils while also adhering to Government guidance. Our article adds important insights in this area, from the perspectives of senior leaders in special schools who cater for an extremely vulnerable group of children and young people. Integrating these reflections with pre-existing research, it appears that—across both mainstream and special educational settings—the pandemic has exposed broad challenges that pre-dated COVID-19, deepening pre-existing inequalities in the educational system.

The skills of school leaders in times of crisis differ from the skills needed to effectively manage a school on a day-to-day basis: while general school leadership requires a focus on excellence in teaching and learning, as well as the long-term development of the school, leadership in times of crisis involves dealing with immediate events in a way that minimises negative personal and organisational consequences to the school (Smith and Riley, 2012). While some senior leaders in mainstream educational settings relished the challenge that COVID-19 presented (Kim and Asbury, 2020), little has been documented about the response of senior leaders in special education settings. The PLASN network ended up being a crucial source of support for its members during the unprecedented crisis situation of the COVID-19 pandemic; enabling school leaders to share good practice and, in turn, giving confidence to members in terms of their decision-making. Indeed, the PLASN network was initially set up in response to a lack of formal support available locally for autism special schools, who faced unique challenges to other educational settings (Parsons et al., 2013). This provision of informal support was felt to be particularly crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, given the lack of Government guidance for special school settings. In future, it is imperative that the needs and realities of special schools, as well

as the support needs of staff leading the schools, are not overlooked.

Encouragingly, PLASN schools implemented creative and innovative solutions to overcome barriers that they encountered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These solutions centered on facilitating holistic approaches to support, ensuring clear and regular communication with families, providing effective support for home learning, and promoting collaborative ways of working. Notably, many of these initiatives align with best practice principles in autism education more generally (e.g., Guldberg et al., 2019). It will be important for special schools (and, indeed, all types of educational provision) to reflect on the innovations that they implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, to identify how to maintain these exemplars of good practice going forward.

Finally, it should be noted that a high number of PLASN schools are rated “Outstanding” by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted), reflecting how they provide exceptionally well for their pupils now, and in preparing them for the next stages of their lives. Given the creativity, planning and organisation required to respond effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools operating effectively pre-pandemic were likely to navigate this challenge more successfully. As such, it is possible that our reflections underestimate the challenges faced by some special schools. Nonetheless, we hope that this article draws attention to the plight faced by special schools catering for young people with complex needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the pandemic represent a catalyst for positive change in the SEND system going forward.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This article is authored by LC and members of the Pan London Autism Schools Network (PLASN). LC and all members of the Pan London Autism Schools Network (PLASN) conceived the idea for the article and made intellectual contributions towards the content. LC wrote the article, with all members of PLASN critically reviewing the paper. All authors approved of the final version of the article.

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