

Autistic Student Experiences of Post-Primary School

Creating a space for autistic students to be heard

Introduction

The last three decades have seen unprecedented change in how students with special educational needs (SEN) are supported in educational settings. Ireland has progressed a multi-track system for supporting such students, including autistic children and young people. Special classes in mainstream settings have been a feature of the system since the 1970s but began to expand rapidly in the 2000s. Special classes specifically for autistic children and young people have grown from 214 in 2010 to 1,463 in 2022, a 584% increase (NCSE, 2024). As of 2020, 85% of all special classes in Ireland are designated for autistic students.

A key factor in the expansion of these classes is parents and advocacy groups who have been fighting for their autistic children to have a place in their local school. However, each year we read about extreme stress endured by parents attempting to find a suitable school place for their child with SEN. At the time of writing, September 2024, some 160 autistic students are without a suitable school placement.

In January 2024, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) affirmed its commitment to progressively becoming a fully inclusive education system, whereby all students will attend their local school alongside their peers in accordance with the vision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Ireland ratified in 2018. Such ambition will undoubtedly see further developments in our education system.

Autistic students' experiences

Against the backdrop of rapid changes to educational provision, a growing body of research suggests that autistic students, particularly those enrolled in



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Drawing from the first author's doctoral research, this article summarises the current and unique obstacles facing autistic young people enrolled in mainstream post-primary educational settings in Ireland. It highlights the urgent need to create a space for these students to be heard on matters affecting their lives.

mainstream settings, often report negative experiences and pervasive barriers to their inclusion (Horgan et al., 2022). International empirical research has consistently shown that autistic students are more likely than their non-autistic peers to experience bullying, social isolation, rejection, school distress, and attendance difficulties. Given the degree and rapid pace of policy change in relation to how autistic children and young people are supported in schools, coupled with reported negative experiences and outcomes, we must ask ourselves, where are the voices of the students in all of this?

The missing voices

Influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of children's rights. Article 12 of the Convention enshrines the right of children to express their views freely on matters affecting them and to have their opinions given due weight, commensurate with age and maturity – encompassing the inclusion of student voices in education discourse. The benefits of student voice work are well established in the research literature. Student participation in decision-making, for example, has wide-ranging benefits at societal, school, and individual level, including increased motivation and engagement in school, improved student-teacher relationships, and a greater sense of school-connectedness (Fielding & Bragg, 2003; Flynn, 2016).

Yet despite the increasing emphasis on student voice, the voices of marginalised students are seldom heard on important matters impacting their lives (Tangen, 2009; Flynn, 2017). Instead, the voices of adult stakeholders are often prioritised and dominate in debate and discourse relating to inclusive and special education.

Voices of inclusion

In 2019, the lead author was fortunate to be awarded a full academic scholarship from Dublin City University to pursue doctoral research on autism and inclusive education. My primary aspiration was to authentically listen to the voices of a group of autistic students about their experiences of mainstream secondary schools, to identify the supportive and unsupportive aspects of their educational placement. Authentic listening requires a shift from the act of simply listening to a shared experience and understanding (Flynn & Hayes, 2021).

Four mainstream secondary schools expressed interest in participating. After a rigorous recruitment process, 19 autistic students assented to participate in the project (see table), which involved semi-structured interviews and optional drawing and ranking activities. In total, 48 student interviews were conducted.

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Age	Gender	Enrolment
Average age: 15.8 years	Male: 12 Female: 5 Transgender: 2	Mainstream only: 4 Dual enrolment (accessing an autism class): 15

Table: Profile of participants

What did the students say?

The research described shows that by authentically listening to the voices of autistic students, we can better understand the unique and often overlooked obstacles they may encounter on their educational journeys.

Analysis of transcribed interviews indicated that while each student had a unique and personal experience of school, some potential obstacles and supports to their inclusion and participation were identified.

The most challenging aspects included: lack of understanding of autism and associated needs; not being 'heard' when encountering problems; loud and chaotic environment, including hallways and general purpose areas; visibility of adult support (special needs assistants) in mainstream classes; fast-paced nature of mainstream curriculum; and experiencing stigma, judgement, and bullying. These challenges, often encountered by students, impacted directly on their experiences, sometimes leading to social isolation, anxiety, low self-esteem, and frustration.

Students also described supportive aspects that made school more enjoyable, protected them from isolation and bullying, and contributed to a sense of school connectedness. These included: having friends at school; positive relationships with wider peer group; positive student-teacher relationships; being treated with high expectations; subtle and skilful delivery of adult support; and provision of accessible, safe, and quiet spaces.

Conclusion

The research described shows that by authentically listening to the voices of autistic students, we can better understand the unique and often overlooked obstacles they may encounter on their educational journeys. Given the degree of policy change in Ireland towards a more inclusive system, it is imperative that these students be empowered to have their say on these important matters, which impact directly on their lives. Such a vision resonates with Flynn's (2016) contention that 'a student voice approach is fundamental to the development of an inclusive learning environment for the benefit of *all* students'.

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Pharmacogenomic strategies for personalised medicine approaches

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