



## **“Was it a cat I saw?”: working with autistic English teachers to support understanding of our pupils’ autism perspectives.**

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Clare Lawrence

**[This is a short preview of a manuscript accepted for publication in the National Association for Teachers of English magazine, Teaching English]**

As an Initial Teacher Education lecturer, I am privileged to be able to support autistic trainee teachers on their PGCE journeys. These teachers are not constrained within the traditional, stereotyped subjects. Yes, we do have autistic maths and physics trainees, but we also have autistic students learning to be art teachers, music teachers, geography teachers and – most certainly – English teachers.

It has been a huge pleasure for me to work with a number of these autistic English trainees as they have made their successful journey to QTS over the past few years. The insights that they have brought have hugely enriched all of our journeys. Of course, all autistic people are different and autistic teachers can only give one perspective on the world of education. However, I believe this perspective remains hugely important and am delighted to be able share these seven short insights with you.

‘I enjoy literature of course, but I can find some imagery overwhelming. For example (and I hate describing this!), the reference to men without boots limping ‘bloodshod’ in Dulce et Decorum Est is almost too painful to process. The sensory power of the blood mixing with the mud – the colours, the germs, the pain, the cold, the awful sensitivity of feet - is overwhelming.’

‘The word ‘spring’ was used in a poem that I was sharing with the class, meaning the season that precedes summer. I read it the first time as being a spring as in a coil, and I couldn’t get that out of my head. It was like I was looking at two poems simultaneously, one about a season and one about hardware.’

‘I really struggle with embarrassment, and cringe-worthy moments. I hate the whole Malvolio thing in Twelfth Night. Bullying isn’t funny.’

‘The trouble is that I see my autistic son in each of my autistic pupils, and I know how upset he gets if I say I’ll read him a chapter for his bedtime story and then I can’t. I hate it when something happens in class and I can’t read the bit of the book that I’ve said we’ll be covering. Most of the kids don’t care but I know I’m letting down my autistic pupils, and I should be better than that.’

‘Books are not real life and we should be careful not to set them out to be. For example, I’m quite like Mr Darcy; I am tall and quiet and socially awkward. Does that make me ‘sexy’? I don’t think so. (Granted, I don’t own a large estate in Derbyshire.)’

‘I’ve always enjoyed re-reading texts and will read the same books again and again to relax. One of the great things now that I am qualified is that I’m teaching the same texts this year as I did last. I’m finding new things to highlight because of the responses pupils made last time. I can feel my enjoyment growing and my teaching getting richer with each cycle.’

‘My sense of humour at school gets me into trouble. I love palindromes (‘Was it a cat I saw?’) and puns. I get hung up on kennings and I can hear myself banging on about them even when I know my pupils haven’t the faintest idea what I’m talking about. Is being ‘funny’ a good thing in a teacher?’

What these snippets from autistic English teachers show us is that our autistic pupils may be focussing on elements that are just a little different to those of the rest of the class – different, not necessarily less important. The uneven profile of autism has both peaks and troughs, and I believe that it is essential that we are alert as teachers for both, for the variation in our teaching that may be required and for the potential for originality and insight that our autistic pupils may bring.

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## **Developing useful and supportive pedagogies for teacher education**

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Eleanor Tierney

**Eleanor reports on her small-scale action research study on how a planned schedule of collective reflection opportunities could strengthen trainee teachers’ linking of theory and practice.**

The BERA-RSA (2014) report concluded:

*‘that teachers across the UK should be supported to become research literate. This should include being given frequent opportunities to read up on the latest findings, with every pupil entitled to lessons which are informed by the best evidence.’*

The report also recognised that there is a valued connection between research and practice for teachers and their pupils but that the specifics are, as yet, unknown and unmeasured. Tang et al (2019, p.124) found, not unsurprisingly perhaps, that from trainees’ perspectives, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge is

seen as a secondary priority over learning how to function in the classroom, novice teachers favouring learning techniques.

This would suggest that explicit scaffolding during the training year, for making links between theory and practice, could be beneficial. I observed, as trainees arrived in subject specific sessions, that exchanges of greetings also sparked vivid and lively supportive exchanges of their recent and varied experiences. The need to share and consider the 'social situation of that learning' (Mills & Morton, 2013, p.167) was evident. Often, I was curtailing these conversations for the more formally planned lecture and activities phase of the session, and I became conscious that this could be limiting these social constructive opportunities for learning.

Therefore, this study explored whether a schedule of planned (as opposed to informal) collaborative reflection opportunities during subject specific sessions, could contribute to improving linking theory and practice, and increase feelings of confidence, for trainee teachers.

Radović et al (2021) published their development of Kolb's learning cycle, producing the 'more Authentic Reflection and Collaboration' (mARC) model. Its main aim was to help learners de- and re-construct their practical lived experiences in order to strengthen links with theoretical knowledge. This model was chosen as a basis for this research because of its 'three pillar' approach closely mirroring our own Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course. The first two pillars, those of 'Authentic' experience (trainees in placement) alongside regular formal 'Reflection' (weekly, quarterly etc) are very well established in the teacher training year. This allowed focused research, specifically on the third 'Collaborative' pillar (in small groups during subject sessions).

In line with elements of our ADEPT curriculum, trainees were asked what they found most enlightening and most challenging about observing others, planning, teaching, reflecting etc. Their responses, combined with lesson observation reports helped decide which particular area the collaborative reflection sessions would address and produced a systematic programme following the mARC model to provide a more structured, sense making, socially constructivist and contextualising experience for trainees.

Findings seemed to suggest this method could yield benefits for trainees in improving evidence-based practice and that trainee confidence increased overall during the study. Trainees were able to discuss, in theoretical terms, more robustly their justifications for changing their practice. They also requested more opportunities to discuss their experiences, thoughts and feelings as these were felt to be highly beneficial in improving their confidence.

## Talking point: ChatGPT

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Jean Wood

As a language teacher I was always able to spot a piece of homework produced using Google Translate and I am sure teachers of other subjects will also be familiar with pupil homework produced with the assistance of Wikipedia. However, as teachers we need to be aware of the next development - Artificial Intelligence - in the form of OpenAI's new chatbot called ChatGPT, which was launched in November 2022 and already had one million users in its first 5 days.

We are all familiar with chatbots on online shopping sites, but ChatGPT does far more than merely reproduce human conversation. It can produce a range of essays and texts using its vast memory and it learns more as its use grows. The potential is immense, and the links below give some examples of the way in which teachers are beginning to use ChatGPT to produce lesson material, such as a text with questions (and answers) or mathematical questions aimed at a particular year group.

The obvious disadvantage of ChatGPT is that our pupils are likely to learn about it through TikTok or Instagram and will inevitably take advantage of its ability to create instantaneous essays on any subject. As in all things, forewarned is forearmed, and working with the pupils to explain the pros and cons of the site could be useful.

There is an excellent tutorial here ([nick-s-site-9a5e.thinkific.com/courses/aiteachers](https://nick-s-site-9a5e.thinkific.com/courses/aiteachers)) on how to set up and use ChatGPT, together with some examples of how teachers have been using it.

### References:

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