

# Supporting mental health of autistic students in primary schools: Teachers' views and needs

*“Regulate then educate”*

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# AGENDA

I will be presenting  
preliminary findings of my  
latest PhD work

- \* Background
- \* Method
- \* Findings

# Background

- ~70% of autistic pupils attend mainstream schools, but many report negative school experiences (NAS, 2021).
  - However, high absence (43%) and exclusion rates (Totsika et al., 2020) highlights that there are more things to do.
  - In England, teachers' self-efficacy in supporting autistic students is moderate to high with SENCOs reporting higher self-efficacy than classroom teachers (Besdere et al., in progress).
  - Autistic students thrive when supported by teachers who understand them. They seek more resources and trainings, especially in supporting mental health needs (Besdere et al., in progress; Giles-Kaye et al., 2023).

# Background and Aims

In our survey of 512 teachers in England, the most frequently selected topic for autism-specific further learning was mental health (n=282).

Thus, we sought to gain insights into teachers':

- **Confidence and preparedness** in supporting the mental health of both autistic and non-autistic students
  - **Role** in promoting the mental well-being of their students
  - **Current practices and resources** for identifying, managing, and preventing mental health challenges in autistic students, including the rationale behind these practices
- **Challenges** they encounter and the **facilitators** that assist them in supporting the mental health of autistic students
- **Training and support needs** required to effectively aid autistic students' mental health.

# Method

- \* Six online focus groups and one individual interview with primary school teachers in England ( W=21, M=1)
- \* Demographic information and consent forms were collected through Qualtrics. Teachers were also asked about their training backgrounds regarding mental health and autism.
- \* Data is being analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) on NVivo.

# Demographics

21 female and 1 male teacher took part in this study.

Years of experience in teaching autistic students varied.

## Years of Experience

- 1-3 years: n = 2
- 4-6 years: n = 7
- 7-9 years: n = 5
- 10+ years: n = 8

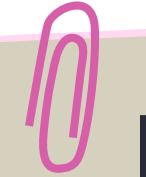
Ethnicity	n
White British	14
White Other	2
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Backgrounds	2
Asian or Asian British	2
Black, Black British, Caribbean/African	1
Other Ethnic Group	1

## Location

n



# Main Themes



Expanding the Teacher Role



Strategies and resources



Challenges



Confidence



Training and support needs

# Expanding the Teacher Role

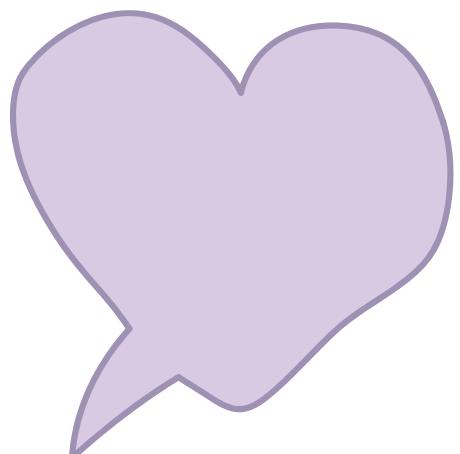
“The mental health kind of has to be the first thing I address. [Otherwise] I just don't get anything else done in the day.” Alex, Focus group 1

“[Autistic students] they often come to the classroom with a lot of other things that are going on, and we have to spot and put things in place before that becomes an overwhelming crisis point.” Devi, focus group 2

“It's looking out for behaviours in the children and being aware of what possible symptoms are...then often advising parents on how to go about getting diagnosis.”

Millie, Focus Group 4

# Expanding the Teacher Role



“You know, we are not just teaching the curriculum, we're part of the whole child” Kirsty, Focus group 1

“I have a room next to my classroom that she's allowed to go and have a lunch in and she often will just come and sit with me and chat with me and just talk to me about literally anything.” Taylor, Focus group 3

“I think for a lot of her life she's just been told to kind of just suck it up, go and go to your room, and she will sit. She used to go under my desk and we'd make a den for her. So, when it was too much, she could go and calm down.” Taylor, Focus group 3

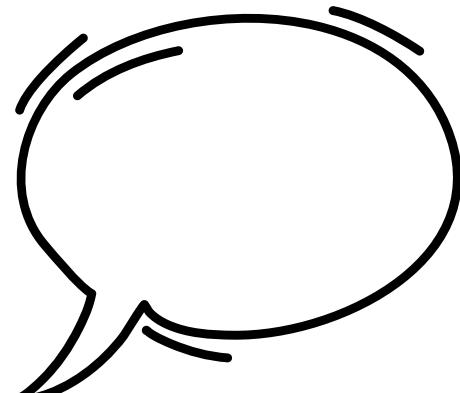
## 2. Confidence

“...most of it comes from your daily experience and in my case of being a mother as well. I'm not going to say that I feel 100% confidence in doing this role, I don't feel very ready and very prepared. I'll just try to navigate my boats and take it.”

Anna, Focus group 2

“I do feel quite confident I've been doing it [courses] for a really long time, and my eldest son is also autistic, so I've got a bit of background as well.”

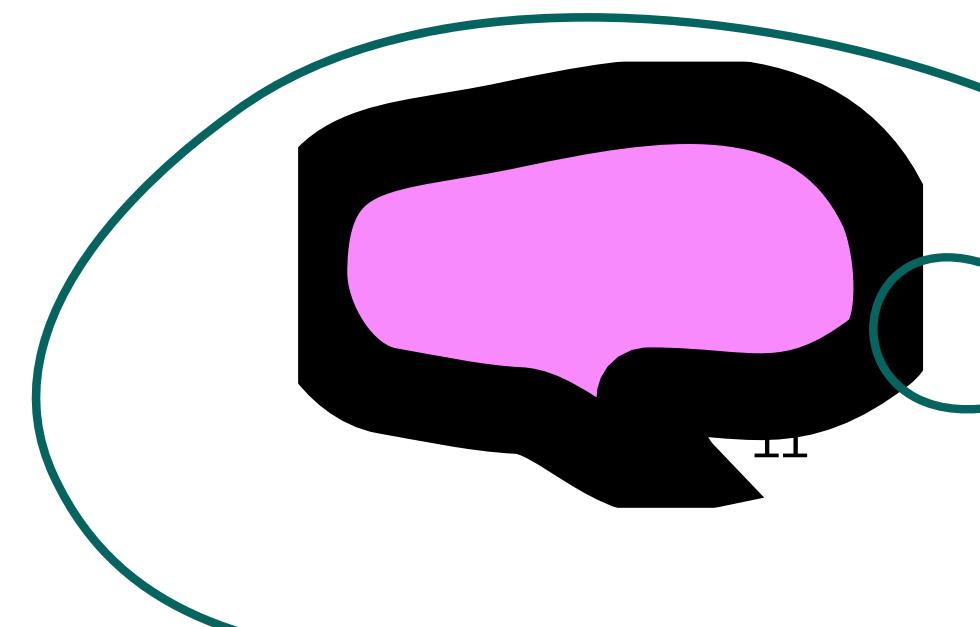
Lesley, Focus group 1



## 2. Confidence

“Whereas there's a child in the other Y6 class who I have a lot of dealings with him, but.. I'm not confident.. nobody is confident in dealing with him. He's diagnosed with autism.” Taylor, Focus group 3

“I would say like definitely more confident with the children that I've built relationships with.” Lily, Focus group 3



## 2. Confidence



“ I feel quite prepared. Definitely since lockdown. It's become a bit more on, like, definitely my school's radar. We've had quite a lot of training on it. I also has done a lot of training with ours staffing group.”

Taylor, Focus group 3

“I think it's SLT's preparedness to go find someone to make the connections and help every single teacher to be confident, it is down to them. Because we can do whatever we can, try our best in class, but we don't know who to go”

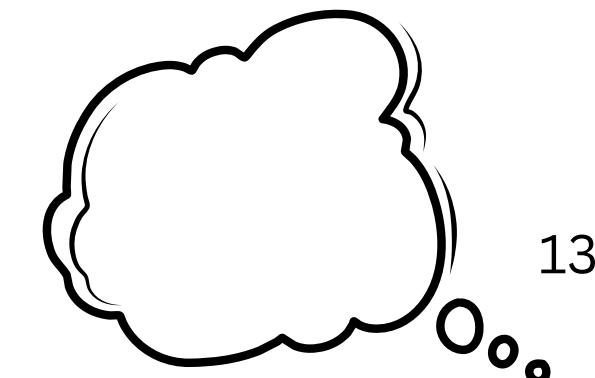
Karim, Focus group 6

### 3. Strategies

“For big changes, like a transition which is coming up. Maybe having social stories... This is a photo of your teacher... just dealing with the anxiety. This will be your classroom, let's go look at it quickly.” Devi, Focus group 2

“My autistic children tend to be quite regulated when they come in and they have brain breaks throughout the day.” Lily, Focus group 3

“Being really prepared and making him prepared. If I tailor his learning to the Titanic, he's more likely to want to come into school. He's more engaged if he knows what's coming up. If he's unsure what's going on he really struggles coming in, and he'll be tearful.” Jayne, Focus group 5

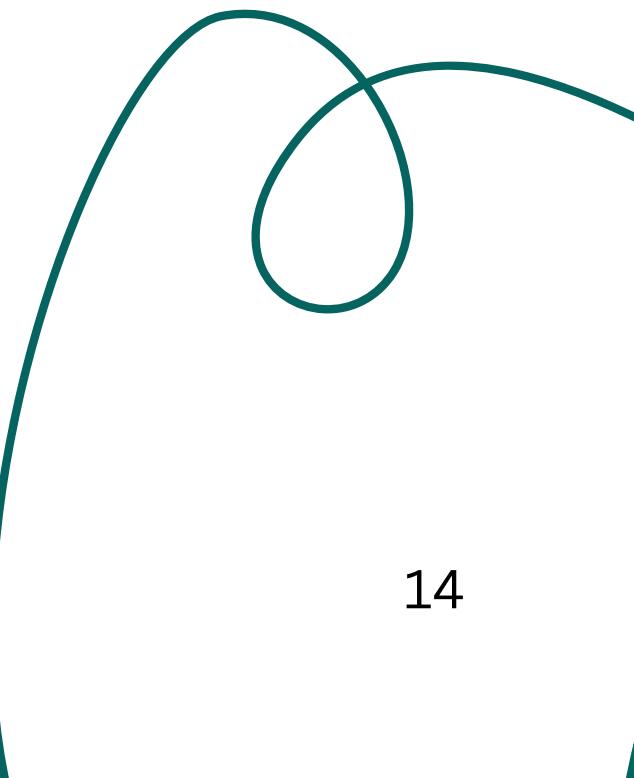


### 3. Strategies

“Children come in the morning, and they check in on the tablet and they pick the feeling that they're feeling. But it is difficult for autistic students. It focuses on identifying feelings or understanding what those feelings mean. Or recognising facial expressions”

Kirsty, Focus group 1

“...her own little visual timetable that she keeps, she adds to, and she feels nice. And if something changes. We talk about it together, she shows me emotion cards, if she's feeling a little bit wobbly or a little bit sad or a little bit worried about something. She's got little things that she holds when she's feeling worried. “ Stella, Focus group 5



## 4. Challenges

“Colleagues may have outdated views, a lack of understanding around current research, and particularly with young girls who are masking...[they say] oh, they are spoiled girls and they just want their way .”

Alex, Focus group 1

“Biggest challenge is actually understanding of an autistic child's mind. We know it is not because they want to provoke you or they misbehave... In my case I find it even more difficult to cope and actually help.”

Anna, Focus group 2

“Early identification happening with your most, kind of obvious autistic children. They got funding. So many children are masking and as they're getting older, they're unable to cope with the demands”

Taylor, Focus group 3



## 4. Challenges

“Like Lily said, everyone is spread so thinly, you can't give those children what they need, and as well as the learning challenges, not just the the mental health side.”

Taylor, Focus group 3

“I don't have a lot of time because there's so many different needs. I've got a class of 27. I don't have an LSA all of the time.”

Margaret, Focus group 5

“Things have changed so much in terms of like how fast-paced the curriculum is and expectations from schools, and I find it really difficult to find that time to implement some strategies.”

Valeria, Focus group 6

## 5.Training and support needs

“Understand what autism is and how it can present in different ways.”

Alex, Focus group 1

“Mental health, autism... it's rare to get the two things together, although in autism courses they might mention that there's comorbidity with anxiety and other issues. In mental health they might mention autism briefly, but not really, and it'd be good to have the two together.”

Devi, focus group 2

“Some autistic pupils, like those girls that might not be diagnosed. They may have different signs and I don't know how to spot them. You know, maybe they shut down and you just think they're quiet. They're not quiet.”

Taylor, Focus group 3





## Training and support needs

“Case study information really useful. So they make up a scenario. And then you do an assessment based on what you've learnt.” Alex, focus group 1

“At what point do you..who decides at what point you grow out of that way of learning to just sit in a room and listen?” Taylor, Focus group 3

“What's useful is having like gap tasks with maths. You get a task to do. Maybe like observe the child. Then you go back and then you find so many similarities.” Kirsty, Focus group 1

“Best format of training is to train staff as a whole school so that people can talk about shared children, shared experiences.” Alex, focus group 1

## 5. Training and support needs

“I have got like a online community where I can talk to like other teachers from other schools and share and upload resources and it would be really nice if there was some kind of mental health hub or autism”

“All of these things are going to be possible, but they have to be possible with the staff well-being in mind.”

“When I approach my SENCO, it's like she puts her circle cap on and starts firing lots of questions like, have you tried these? Have you tried these for a long? But I don't want you asking me if I tried these and for how long. I actually want you to come and sit in the classroom, look at that child. See what I have prepared and why it's not working because I'm running out of ideas of what to try and I don't want to be here.”

# Discussion

- \* Teachers thinks that supporting mental health of their students is part of their role.
- \* Their strategies are mostly preventative and come from learning by experience, trial and error startegies or training that they had.
- \* Major barriers were late support, lack of time and staff, and not knowing how to spot triggers and signs, and how to respond when things escalete.

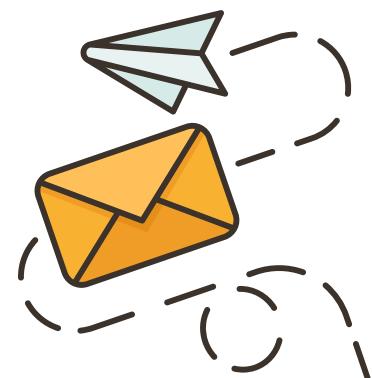
# Implications for practice

- \* Practical trainings with case studies and whole-school strategies to better identify and address the complex needs of autistic students, particularly girls who often remain unnoticed, is needed.
- \* Schools and students have diverse needs. Regular support from school leadership, tailored support and continuous trainings, and access to a mental health specialist can increase teachers' confidence in meeting diverse needs.
- \* Teachers value sharing practice and learning from each other. Online hubs that they can post and get feedback may be helpful.



THANK YOU!

*We also thank all the teachers who generously contributed their time and perspectives to this research.*



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