

The transition to adulthood for autistic young people with additional learning needs: the views and experiences of education professionals in special schools

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Education professionals (n = 41) in special schools were interviewed about supporting their autistic pupils transitioning to adulthood following the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014. Our participants explained how they lacked the time to fully implement knowledge gained from training, leading to growing reliance on experiential expertise. While our participants reported employing a variety of methods to elicit the voices of pupils, they were uncertain how effective and ethical these were. Further, a lack of available opportunities meant that participants felt they could not always support young people in achieving their goals. Based on these findings, we recommend greater investment in the implementation of staff training, more flexibility for schools to be able to meaningfully elicit and act on pupils' voices, and better vocational opportunities for autistic young people with additional learning needs. This would enable the principles of the Act, which have been widely lauded, to become a closer reality.

Key words: autism, special education, educators, transition, outcomes, pupil voice

There are almost 1.3 million young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England (DfE, 2020). In 2014, the support provided for young people with SEND in England changed with the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the associated SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015). Aiming for ‘a radically different system’ for young people with SEND (DfE, 2011), the key principles of these reforms were: (1) involving children, young people and parents/carers in decision making; (2) early identification of need and provision; (3) more choice and control for young people and parents/carers about support; (4) collaboration between education, health and social care providers; and (5) high-quality provision that meets pupils’ needs (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). In addition, two major changes were introduced: (1) SEND services could be used by children and young people potentially up until the age of 25 (as opposed to the age of 19); and (2) education, health and care plans (EHCPs), which detailed the education, health and care support to which an individual was legally entitled, replaced Statements of SEND.

These reforms were positive in many ways. For example, EHCPs have been reported to provide a better process for assessment, planning and outcomes, and to achieve better parental and child involvement (Craston et al., 2015; Sales & Vincent, 2018). Further, professionals appreciate the holistic, person-centred approach that is advocated (Hellowell, 2017). Despite this, there has been a lack of guidance about how to implement the reforms in the ‘real world’ (Castro & Palikara, 2016; Hellowell, 2017). Professionals report bureaucratic issues, including unmanageable timelines, budget cuts, and problems in collaboration between education, health and care professionals (Boesley & Crane, 2018; Palikara et al., 2018). Further, despite the child-centred philosophy of EHCPs, children’s and young people’s voices tend not to be adequately captured (Palikara et al., 2018); outcomes written in EHCPs are often not ‘SMART’ (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound) and are therefore difficult to use, apply and measure; and the overall standard of EHCPs is variable (Castro et al., 2019).

Autism is the most common primary need listed on EHCPs (DfE, 2020). Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition diagnosed on the basis of difficulties in social communication and interaction, alongside the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours, interests and activities (APA, 2013). Diagnosed in over 1 in 100 people in England (Baird et al., 2006; Brugha et al., 2011), autism is referred to as a ‘spectrum’ or ‘constellation’, reflecting the wide range of ways that the core features of autism manifest, and the

wide variety of needs that autistic people have (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). While the majority of autistic children and young people in England are educated in mainstream educational provisions (including resource bases within mainstream schools), around 30% are educated in special schools (DfE, 2020). Autistic children and young people who are educated in special schools often have additional learning needs and therefore receive additional support compared to their mainstream peers. These differences in support have been recently documented during a particularly critical stage of the lives of autistic young people: as they transition to adulthood (see Bruck et al., 2021).

Research on post-16 outcomes for autistic individuals with additional learning needs paints a bleak picture (Henninger & Lounds Taylor, 2013). Poor outcomes have been reported for autistic young people with respect to independence, social relationships, post-secondary education and employment (Wehman et al., 2014), often more so than other disability groups (Anderson et al., 2014). Many autistic young people experience low levels of personal autonomy and continue to be dependent on their families for day-to-day needs such as finances, housing and companionship (Wehman et al., 2014). Disruptions in post-secondary pathways (either educational or vocational) are also common for autistic young people (Wei et al., 2018). The impact of unsatisfactory post-16 opportunities has far-reaching consequences. Many autistic young people strive for traditional markers of adulthood (independence, employment, marriage, children), but are not always able to achieve them (Anderson et al., 2016). Not meeting these expectations can have a negative impact on an individual's identity, mental health and quality of life (Anderson et al., 2016; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Moss et al., 2017).

There is an urgent need to understand how to promote good outcomes for autistic young people with additional learning needs as they transition into adulthood. Education professionals in post-16 provisions play a crucial role in this process: fostering independence, building skills and titrating support levels (Elias et al., 2019), as well as choosing and implementing appropriate curriculums. Indeed, a key characteristic of high-quality education and good outcomes for autistic pupils is the development of trusting relationships with staff who know their pupils well (Charman et al., 2011; Guldborg et al., 2020). Eliciting the views of education professionals is particularly pertinent following the Children and Families Act 2014 and associated SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015). While both emphasised the importance of pupils with SEND and their families having a say regarding the decisions that

shape young people's lives, education professionals play an essential role in supporting this process (for example, guiding decision-making); more so than other professional groups (for example, health and social care professionals) (Boesley & Crane, 2018).

Limited research has examined the transition to adulthood in autistic young people with additional learning needs from the perspective of education professionals in special schools. In one of the few studies on this topic, Fayette and Bond (2018) interviewed nine members of teaching staff from two specialist schools in England, also observing one transition planning meeting. The specific focus was on the manner in which pupils' views were elicited in relation to the transition to adulthood. The results demonstrated that the transition to adulthood was very much underpinned by the ethos of the school, with the importance of a person-centred ethos emphasised. This ethos involved: (1) taking the time to know each individual pupil, so transition support could be tailored to their needs; (2) supporting students to make informed choices and evaluating them jointly; and (3) eliciting pupils' voices in a variety of ways, based on their communication styles/preferences. Importantly, this study focused on the transition *to*, rather than experiences *of*, post-16 education. Further, as an exploratory study, it was limited to just two schools and the authors noted that additional work in specialist schools in other localities is needed.

The current research

We sought to gather the views of education professionals in special schools on supporting autistic young people with additional learning needs in post-16 special education provisions. We were particularly interested in evaluating the impact of the Children and Families Act 2014 and associated SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015), which were designed to radically change the support provided to young people with SEND potentially up to the age of 25 years. As such, our research questions were structured around three key aspects addressed by these reforms. First, we were interested in education professionals' views on the *help and support* provided to autistic young people with additional learning needs in special education (for example, whether they felt equipped to provide the best support for pupils, and whether they could provide the support set out in EHCs). Second, we wanted to find out how education professionals supported autistic young people with additional learning needs (and their parents) to *have a say* in their education. Third, we were interested in how education professionals supported their pupils in *achieving better outcomes*, focusing on what education professionals believe

to be good outcomes for their students, and how they supported them to achieve their goals.

Method

Design

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to elicit the views and experiences of education professionals working with autistic young people with additional learning needs (aged 16 to 25 years) educated in special schools. Data were analysed qualitatively, using both content analysis and thematic analysis. This research was part of a broader project, commissioned by the DfE, examining the impact of the Children and Families Act and associated SEND Code of Practice from the perspectives of autistic young people (Crane et al., 2021a), parents (Crane et al., 2021b) and education professionals (reported here).

Participants

Criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants needed to (1) work in a specialist educational setting in England and (2) be involved in the delivery of post-16 education for autistic young people. Participants were recruited using opportunity sampling. Specifically, we emailed contacts of the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE) at UCL Institute of Education, including members of the Pan London Autism Schools Network (see Parsons et al., 2013, for details). We also searched online (for example, on the website Natspec, a membership association for organisations offering specialist further education/training for students with learning difficulties/disabilities) for organisations that met our inclusion criteria and contacted them directly (via email and/or phone). Via these routes, we recruited a total of 41 education professionals, from eight specialist schools in England. As can be seen in Table 1, participants were largely from London and the surrounding areas ($n = 36$, 88%), with education professionals from one setting in the north of England ($n = 5$, 12%) also taking part. Participants included those responsible for providing educational support (for example, teachers, teaching leads; $n = 13$, 32%), vocational support (for example, job coaches, vocational instructors; $n = 11$, 27%), learning support (for example, teaching assistants, learning support assistants; $n = 4$, 10%), transitional support (for example, annual review co-ordinators, transition co-ordinators; $n = 3$, 7%), or administrative support (for example, EHCP co-ordinators, student support workers; $n = 3$, 7%) or those who were in a management position (for example, assistant/deputy headteachers, heads of education; $n = 7$, 17%). On average, participants had worked at their schools for 6.5 years ($SD = 5.89$).

Table 1: Setting characteristics

No. of participants (and participant identifiers)	Type of school ¹	Age range	Ofsted rating ²	No. of pupils (to nearest 10)	No. of pupils eligible for free school meals at any time during the past six years ³	Region of England
1 5 (P1–5)	Community special school	3–19	Outstanding	250	Above average	North-west
2 8 (P6–13)	Community special school	4–19	Good	100	Above average	London
3 5 (P14–18)	Community special school	4–19	Good	180	Above average	London
4 12 (P19–30)	Independent special school	5–20	Not applicable	60	Not available	South-east
5 6 (P31–36)	Non-maintained special school	10–19	Outstanding	50	Below average	South-east
6 1 (P37)	Community special school	3–25	Outstanding	230	Above average	London
7 1 (P38)	Community special school	3–19	Outstanding	320	Above average	London
8 3 (P39–41)	Academy special converter	11–19	Outstanding	190	Above average	London

¹Notes: In the UK, a special school is a school for children and young people whose needs cannot be met in a mainstream school, and the majority of pupils have an EHCP. A community school is funded by the local authority whereas a non-maintained school is funded by a charitable trust. Similarly, independent schools are independently funded but can also run for a profit. Academy converters are funded by the central Government as opposed to the local authority.

²Ofsted is a department in the UK Government, responsible for inspecting the quality of a range of educational institutions. Ratings are on a 4-point scale from 1 (outstanding) to 4 (inadequate).

³In the UK, free school meal eligibility is taken as a measure of deprivation.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by members of the research team, either face-to-face ($n = 30$, 73%) or over the phone ($n = 3$, 7%), depending on participants' preferences and availability. Three focus groups ($n = 8$, 20%) were also conducted, face-to-face. Interviews and focus groups began by attempting to build rapport with the interviewee(s), explaining the aims of the research and the structure of the interview, gaining informed consent, and collecting background information about the participant and their setting. Then, the interview was divided into three consecutive sections. Section 1 focused on how the interviewee(s) and their setting(s) felt able to provide *help and support* for their pupils (probing for information on any autism-specific training they have had, if such training has been useful, if/how the training could be improved and how able they feel to signpost students to relevant professionals/resources). Section 1 also covered experiences of EHCPs (for example, whether professionals felt able to provide the help and support set out in the plans, and if/how partnership working has enabled them to provide help and support for pupils). Section 2 focused on how interviewees supported their pupils and their families to *have a say* in their education (probing for what has worked well and potential areas for improvement). Section 3 asked participants to think about *achieving better outcomes* for their pupils (for example, whether they felt educated on the options available, what they believed a good outcome was, and how they support their pupils to achieve such outcomes). The interview concluded by inviting participants to give any additional information they wanted to share. All participants were able to offer their views and experiences on all aspects of the interview schedule with the exception of one participant, an EHCP co-ordinator, who only responded to questions specifically related to EHCPs. Interviews and focus groups lasted an average of 32.29 minutes ($SD = 9.22$, range = 11–56 minutes).

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained via the Research Ethics Committee at UCL Institute of Education. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using two qualitative analytic approaches. First, content analysis (Mayring, 2015) was used to tally responses to questions posed to education professionals in three areas: (1) the training they received so as to *help and support* their pupils; (2) the ways in which they support their pupils in *having a say* in their education; and (3) their perceptions of what constitutes *achieving better outcomes* for their pupils. All other data were analysed via reflective thematic analysis, as per Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2019). Adopting a critical realist framework, analyses involved

identifying both semantic and latent meanings in the dataset, following an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Analyses involved recursively proceeding through the stages of data familiarisation, coding, theme development and review. This was led by two authors who conducted interviews (the second and third authors, both junior researchers with expertise in autism research). The authors independently familiarised themselves with these data, identifying (and repeatedly returning to and revising) preliminary codes and themes that were organised under each of our key areas of focus: (1) help and support; (2) having a say; and (3) achieving better outcomes. With input from the first and last authors (both senior researchers with expertise in autism research), the second and third authors discussed the findings on multiple occasions; working together to resolve any discrepancies, merge overlapping themes, and agree on a final set of discrete themes and sub-themes. Given the diversity of education professionals within our sample, the authors leading data analyses also considered the coherence of responses across participants (during data familiarisation and coding, and again following theme development). There was agreement that preliminary codes and themes applied irrespective of participants' specific roles within the education settings, so data from all participants were analysed together.

Our results are structured around three key areas of focus in relation to the SEND reforms: (1) help and support, (2) having a say, and (3) achieving better outcomes.

Results: help and support

When reflecting on their ability to help and support their autistic students during their post-16 education, participants provided an overview of the training they had received. This training was wide-ranging and encompassed both training organised internally by their setting and training sought externally (see Table 2). From discussions with participants, two themes were identified in relation to providing help and support to pupils: (1) *moving towards experiential knowledge* to guide their approaches; and (2) *navigating a challenging system alone* (with limited support from other stakeholders and the burden of constrained finances).

Theme 1: Moving towards experiential knowledge

Despite participants undertaking a wide range of training, it was felt that external training opportunities were starting to become more limited due to funding constraints: *'before, staff would look up different training [or] qualifications that they would like to get, and the school would happily pay for it. In*

Table 2: Types of training that education professionals reported in order to help and support their autistic pupils with additional needs

	Category (n, %)	N (%)
Formal training – organised by setting n = 29 (70.7%)	General autism induction training (internal and external)	29 (70.7)
	Curriculum (for example, TEACCH approaches; see Mesibov et al., 2005)	24 (58.5)
	Speech and language (for example, Picture Exchange Communication System, PECS; see Bondy & Frost, 2011)	27 (65.9)
	Emotions and behaviour (for example, relaxation techniques)	22 (53.7)
	Health and safety (for example, safeguarding)	8 (19.5)
Informal training – not organised by setting n = 21 (51.2%)	Additional experiences gained on the job (for example, observations of colleagues)	20 (48.8)
	Academic qualifications	7 (17.1)
	Experience in other settings (for example, working as a supply teacher in mainstream/special schools)	5 (12.2)
	Personal experience of autism (for example, having an autistic family member)	3 (7.3)

Note: As categories were not mutually exclusive, some percentages equal more than 100%.

the current economic climate, this is not possible' (Participant 14, henceforth P14). Consequently, schools had to be creative with how they could cut training costs, yet still maintain a skilled workforce:

'with financial cuts, [some schools] try to get one person trained in a particular area and then have staff who then disseminate those skills to the rest of the staff team' (P17)

It was also noted that it could be overwhelming to fit training into the demands of the school environment and properly embed it within their practice:

'It was great to have that two days of training, then we needed some extra time to try and implement it. So, I think maybe time afterwards, so

we can spend some time creating some things that would help us implement it in their everyday use’. (P20)

Given the move towards fewer training opportunities, as well as limited opportunities to embed learning into their practice, participants began to rely on their own experiences, and that of other staff members, to guide their approach to providing help and support:

‘The experiences you pick up ... through working with the students and the families every day, the experiences you pick up through working with the different members of staff, some who have been here for a considerable amount of time, I think is valuable in itself’. (P32)

Shared knowledge was perceived as essential in feeling well-equipped to support and signpost their pupils:

‘I feel that I’ve got the relevant skills and also a lot of support from others to be able to do my job. I’m never in a situation where I feel that I don’t know what to do or where to go’. (P1)

Theme 2: Navigating a challenging system alone

Participants reported that there was a need to start working together: *‘to work collaboratively with experts that broaden our knowledge and enable us to offer the best support’* (P4). Yet, especially with regard to EHCPs, they expressed a need for more support from other stakeholders as *‘education are definitely the drivers’* (P18). It was noted that external professionals and organisations rarely attended annual review meetings: *‘Very rarely do we get the local authority turn up. I think I’ve had one out of eight [that] did’* (P1) and explained that when:

‘there’s an absence of input from the other two agencies [health and social care], that creates a real issue [because] you’ve got to make decisions on a tripartite level for somebody’s ongoing care’. (P39)

This had led to situations reaching crisis points:

‘There is just not that input coming from health and social care – until there’s a real crisis, and a crash, and then education step out of the picture, and then of course, that young person becomes the responsibility of health; whereas, if there was a collaboration from the beginning, things might not have broken down. So, that’s sad’. (P39)

Participants discussed how they were further constrained by limited resources, noting that:

'we try and make the best with what we have got ... At the end of the day, budgetary constraints, financial pressure ... we're still in austerity measures. It has had a big impact on our provision [and] what we provide to our students'. (P16)

This was particularly relevant with regard to staff, with resourcing in this respect having a two-fold effect on schools. First, it affected students' education:

'We had an occupational therapist who was full time ... she left but she wasn't replaced because we didn't have the funds [so we were] unable to meet the needs of some of our young people'. (P17)

Second, it affected the education professionals themselves, as it removed expertise that they would otherwise access for additional support and advice:

'that support for us to go to for advice is no longer there ... for example, the occupational therapist who is an expert in things like sensory perception she's not here anymore so I can't ask her am I doing the right thing? What should I be doing? What could I do to support this young person?' (P15)

Participants added that such issues were not confined to schools:

'It's not just us that have been affected by [funding]... the local community, the local authority and what the council can offer our young people has significantly reduced too' (P16)

In particular, they felt mental health services have been affected:

'We can point in the direction of adult mental health services but that's difficult because they have such a long waiting list ... although [support] is there, the resources are not adequate to supply for the needs of the community', (P15)

These issues were felt to put added pressure onto schools: *'[long waiting times] can hamper our ability to support that person because we don't necessarily have the expertise involved for their particular need'* (P18). There was a perception

that local authorities were ‘making more financial decisions whereas [schools are] making more person-centred decisions. I think that’s the difference’ (P16).

Results: having a say

As seen in Table 3, methods used to elicit student voices involved asking students directly; via alternative communication methods; via indirect means; and via the individualisation of education and targets. Participants often reported using a combination of different methods, depending on the individual student and their circumstances. Using thematic analysis, two themes were identified in relation to supporting students to have a say in their education: (1) *uncertainty – are we doing the right thing?*; and (2) *the need for greater flexibility within the school environment*.

Theme 1: Uncertainty – are we doing the right thing?

Despite using various tools and techniques to support students in having a say in their education, participants doubted whether they were using the ‘right’ strategies to elicit the voices of their vulnerable students: ‘The less verbal, I feel like it’s really tricky’ (P20). Concerns were raised regarding how to interpret students’ voices, suspecting that some students were inclined to produce socially desirable or echolalic responses:

‘You may just get an echolalic response [or] you may just get somebody answering the questions they need to answer. So [in response to] “How are you feeling?”’, they pick happy because it is the response they think they should be giving rather than being able to interpret their own emotions’. (P24)

Table 3: Methods of supporting students to have a say in their education

Category (n, %)	Examples	N (%)
Eliciting pupil voice via direct feedback	Staff prompting students for their views/opinions; student council	23 (56.1)
The provision of varied communication methods	Using varied communication methods (for example, Makaton/symbols); giving options (for example, choice boards or verbally)	20 (48.8)
Indirect means	Observations; via parents	19 (46.3)
Individualisation of education and targets as per student interests	Annual reviews/transition interviews; via EHCPs	14 (34.2)

Note: As categories were not mutually exclusive, some percentages equal more than 100%.

This was deemed to be crucially important, as once students' views were elicited, professionals worked hard to act upon them: *'it isn't just they're given a say and we don't react to it we actually do react to it and make changes'* (P33).

Theme 2: The need for greater flexibility within the school environment

Some aspects of the school systems and structures were felt to inhibit participants' ability to elicit their students' voices, such as the need to follow curriculums (*'They do have some say in what activities we offer them but it's difficult because we also have to comply with the requirements of our accreditation'*; P15) and timetables:

'Sometimes I feel really guilty that they aren't getting enough of a choice. Because the school follows such a strict timetable. So whilst students have choices in "small matters" they don't necessarily have choice in bigger things'. (P38)

Despite participants providing their students with an outlet to make their voice heard, they felt this was an area that they could improve further. Suggestions to achieve this included increased funding:

'The only way it can be really effective for them is if they have more choices which is quite a hard thing to do within a school environment with budgets and staffing and they all have different things that they love doing' (P38)

and asking students to evaluate their experience more often:

'Some of them are doing work experience so maybe we should review it more often to check, "Is this person still enjoying it?" We generally take our cues from behaviour' (P20)

Results: achieving better outcomes

As seen in Table 4, when asked what they considered a particularly 'good' outcome for their students, participants emphasised independence, further education/employment, quality of life, and being able to achieve their own goals. Via thematic analysis, two themes were identified in this area: (1) *the need to take an individualised approach to identifying outcomes* and (2) *concerns regarding the lack of opportunities for autistic young people with additional learning needs*.

Theme 1: The need to take an individualised approach to identifying outcomes

Participants highlighted that goals and outcomes are dependent on each individual student: *'In all the young people on site, there isn't an outcome that's the same for one to the other'* (P23). A lot of the time, this was linked to their differing abilities:

'the [students] who have more academic ability ... could end up following a college course and maybe end up on a supported internship that someone with less ability won't be able to' (P18)

or their differing experiences (*'It's so wide and varied depending on who the student is, their previous history, their profile'*; P32) and preferences (*'I don't think we should assume that all people want to have the same outcome'*; P17). Participants also highlighted that *'the goalpost can sometimes need to change'* (P23) and that goals and outcomes can evolve over time.

While employment and academic achievements were perceived as good outcomes, participants acknowledged that these may not be possible for all students to achieve. Instead, they emphasised the importance of offering pupils the chance to engage in meaningful activities:

'as much as employability is an issue, our students will be faced with a lot of free time on their hands ... I think we could spend way more time trying to develop [their] hobbies and interests' (P14)

Promoting happiness was also seen as a priority:

'my main thing is just that they're happy and they're doing things that they like doing and they're with people and they're communicating and they're in a nice environment where they feel safe'. (P38)

Theme 2: Concerns regarding the lack of opportunities for autistic young people with additional learning needs

Participants were concerned regarding the lack of opportunities for autistic young people with additional learning needs following their formal education:

'they have such a sheltered life here all the time that when they go out into the big bad world, it's not always going to be easy for them' (P28)

Table 4: Education professionals’ perceptions of ‘good’ outcomes for autistic young people

Category	Examples	N (%)
Independence	Managing own time, making own decisions	23 (56.1)
Education and employment	Gaining qualifications, paid employment	22 (53.7)
Quality of life	Health, happiness, well-being	20 (48.8)
Achieve own goals	Be doing something that they want, developing hobbies and interests	11 (26.8)

Note: As categories were not mutually exclusive, some percentages equal more than 100%.

The minimal work experience and general employment opportunities for students was emphasised: *‘there are lots of organisations who are very reluctant to have anybody with special needs and to take part in their work experience’* (P13). This was linked to a lack of autism-specific training for employers:

‘I’m not saying it’s easy because of course the employer needs to be trained and then the team needs to be trained and then everyone has to work to support that [autistic] person’ (P12)

It was also linked to a perceived underestimation of autistic people and their abilities:

‘there is not much awareness and people don’t understand how an autistic person can contribute to business or society in a different way ... in different types of sectors they can be really beneficial’. (P12)

Even when students were able to secure work-related opportunities, participants felt that they were often not given the support needed to fulfil the roles:

‘We’ve got one young person [who is] very independent and she would be an ideal candidate for a supported internship but the criteria is to be able to travel independently and her anxiety [means] she just can’t do it’. (P18)

The need to *‘give these young people equal opportunity’* (P8) was emphasised, as *‘maybe some [young people] find things difficult, but they will be able to do*

it, so we just need to find ways around it' (P8). Opportunities were felt to be particularly limited 'for those more complex, less able, there doesn't seem to be enough out there' (P18).

Despite the many concerns raised, participants tried their very best to support their students in their next steps, constantly looking to the future:

'My concentration has never been on who Johnny is when he's 5 years old [or] when he's 15 years old. For me it's always who is Johnny at 30 years old and how are we supporting him and empowering him to make choices that positively influence his adult life then'. (P1)

Discussion

This research aimed to better understand the impact of the Children and Families Act 2014 and associated SEND Code of Practice by eliciting the views and experiences of education professionals who are supporting an underrepresented group in research: autistic young people with additional learning needs in post-16 education. We focused on three key areas: (1) the *help and support* that special education professionals provided to autistic young people with additional learning needs; (2) how education professionals supported autistic young people with additional learning needs to *have a say* in their education; and (3) what education professionals view as good outcomes for their students, and how they support them in *achieving better outcomes*. The findings suggested that while education professionals were enthusiastic about the principles of the SEND reforms, they reported that further efforts were needed to fully support, elicit the voices, and realise the potential, of the young people with whom they work.

Help and support

The Children and Families Act 2014 and associated SEND Code of Practice state that young people with SEND should benefit from having different services (for example, education, health, social care) and organisations (for example, councils and schools) working together, to ensure that they get the right kinds of help and support, and are kept well informed about the help and support on offer to them (DfE & DoH, 2015). Yet our sample of education professionals noted two issues in this regard.

First, our participants discussed how, in the absence of funding, they were increasingly needing to rely on experiential knowledge, drawing on their own, or their colleagues', professional experience of what appears to 'work' for

their autistic pupils (see also Parsons et al., 2013). While participants noted that their schools did provide ample training to support them, constraints (notably time) meant that they were not always able to implement this knowledge in practice. Given the financial demands on schools, it appears counter-productive for them to invest much-needed funds in training for their staff without providing them with the time and resources to embed this learning into their classroom practice. While this finding is not specific to post-16 education for autistic young people with additional learning needs, an emphasis on implementation with this vulnerable group, at this crucial phase of education, is arguably more important here than at any other time.

Second, our participants emphasised how the onus for supporting autistic young people with additional learning needs in post-16 education rested on education professionals, with little input and support from other services. This observation echoes findings from other research studies evaluating the SEND reforms (for example, Boesley & Crane, 2018; Palikara et al., 2018), which emphasise the lack of input from health and social care in supporting young people with SEND. This is despite collaborative working between these three services being a key tenet of the Children and Families Act, and the participants in our study emphasising that this has the potential to be incredibly effective. It is essential that meaningful collaboration between these services begins early in the educational journey and proceeds through to post-16 education. Further, it is crucial that the dedicated structures and staff roles to support EHCPs within education are mirrored in health and social care.

Having a say

The Children and Families Act 2014 and SEND Code of Practice emphasise that young people with SEND and their families need to have their wishes and feelings taken into account, and their views and concerns taken seriously. The education professionals in our sample embodied this principle, emphasising the importance of using a wide range of strategies to elicit the voices of their pupils, all of which hinged on knowing their pupils well. Yet participants discussed challenges associated with eliciting the voices of their pupils, especially those with limited verbal communication. This becomes particularly critical in post-16 education, as young people prepare to leave the ‘safety net’ of education and their ability to convey their views and opinions becomes even more essential. While our participants did report a wide range of ways in which to elicit the voices of their pupils, they were unsure of the success of their approaches. Recent research has evidenced innovative methods of documenting pupil voice, such as digital stories (Parsons et

al., 2020) and Talking Walls (Richards & Crane, 2020). Yet these approaches still rely on the skills of educators who know their pupils well and are able to interpret their voices to a degree (as per Richards & Crane, 2020). Even if education professionals are able to elicit and document the voices of their pupils genuinely and meaningfully, this becomes tokenistic if their views cannot be acted on. In the current sample, participants emphasised how, despite their best efforts to support their pupils to participate in the decisions that shape their lives, it was not always possible to act on their views. For example, education professionals explained how it could be difficult to provide choice to students if doing so meant compromising the requirements of their accreditation. Complementing evidence-based initiatives to document pupil voice, there should be greater emphasis on the flexibility within schools and associated external frameworks, to enable educational professionals to act meaningfully on the voices of their pupils.

Achieving better outcomes

In addition to supporting young people within education settings, a key goal of the SEND reforms is to promote successful outcomes once these formal education provisions end. To that end, young people with SEND can potentially be supported through to the age of 25 years, if they need more time to prepare for adulthood. This support is achieved via the EHCP, which sets out an individualised approach to enable the young person to achieve the outcomes that they are striving for. This individualised approach was emphasised among our sample, yet it was also noted that an individualised approach can only be effective if there are suitable opportunities available for young people up to 25 years, which was often not the case. Cultivating vulnerable young people's ambitions in the absence of any way to support them to achieve their various goals will undoubtedly lead to great frustration and disappointment.

To improve this situation, we suggest the need for a more integrated through-line between school and work. First, this should focus on flexible employer-school partnerships that can be tailored to the needs of the young people in a particular setting and can therefore facilitate workplace training and experience for autistic young people with additional learning needs. The limited schemes that already exist (such as Project SEARCH; Rutkowski et al., 2006) have already been shown to be successful (Romualdez et al., 2020). We recommend turning these pockets of good practice into a more extensive nationwide programme of work placements for autistic young people. Indeed, work experience appears to be a key factor involved in successful employment outcomes for autistic young people: employment rates for those who

worked for pay during high school (90%) were double the employment rates of those who did not (40%) (Roux et al., 2015). What we urge, however, is that the responsibility for creating these workplace–school partnerships should not fall solely to education professionals, who already feel the responsibility lies heavily with them. Likewise, the burden of organising these should not rest on parents, whose role in advocating for their children’s needs can take a huge toll on their health (Crane et al., 2021b). Partnerships between education professionals, employers, parents and young people themselves will be crucial in this regard.

An additional benefit of a more widespread programme of placements may be a positive impact on stigma surrounding young people with additional learning needs. Our participants in the current study expressed concerns in this regard, especially for their pupils with more profound needs. While negative stereotypes about people with disabilities are often held by potential employers, the majority of employers who do hire disabled people are positive about their contribution (Burke et al., 2013; Mawhood & Howlin, 1999) and value the diverse skills they bring to the workplace. We hope that a more extensive network of placements would herald a radical shift in the thinking of the employment sector – moving from the focus on deficits to an emphasis on unique contributions to the workforce. The importance of having high ambitions for autistic young people with additional learning needs, and high-quality careers advice, is also critical in this regard.

Limitations

While it is essential to elicit the views of education professionals on the post-16 educational experiences of autistic young people with additional learning needs, it is important for future work to complement this with the views of both young people and their families. Although there has been some work to this effect with parents (Crane et al., 2021b) and young people (Gaona et al., 2019), it can be challenging to elicit the views of autistic young people with additional learning needs (some of whom are unable to participate in verbal interviews). A further limitation of our work is that participation in the research was voluntary, and the schools that opted to take part tended to be those that were high performing (rated ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted; and, in many cases, well-financed). If these schools reported struggling, it may well be that we have underestimated the challenges schools more generally have faced in implementing the principles of the Children and Families Act and SEND Code of Practice; indeed, anecdotally, one of the

participating schools that was not as well financed did not have access to the same initiatives as the others.

Conclusions

Overall, this research has provided important insights into the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014 and associated SEND Code of Practice for autistic young people with additional learning needs in post-16 education, from the perspectives of education professionals. Our findings highlight that although our education professionals undertook a wide range of training, they felt they lacked the time to fully implement their newfound knowledge, leading to a reliance on experiential expertise. Likewise, while staff utilised a variety of ways to elicit the voices of pupils, they were uncertain how effective these were. Additionally, they questioned the ethics of eliciting voice in relation to pupil outcomes, when the lack of available opportunities for their young people meant that they were unlikely to be able to support them in achieving their goals. We recommend greater investment in the implementation of knowledge gained from staff training, the flexibility for schools to be able to meaningfully elicit and act on pupils' voices, and more vocational opportunities for autistic young people with additional learning needs. This would enable the principles of the SEND reforms, which were widely seen as positive, to become a closer reality.

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Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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