



A Systematic Literature Review:

The School Counsellors role in addressing the needs of Autistic Students in Mainstream Secondary School in Ireland.



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

## Literature Review - Contents

Glossary of Terms.....	3
Abstract.....	5
Background - Aims, Objectives and Research Questions.....	5
Methodology – Data Search and Eligibility .....	7
Limitation of the research .....	8
Figure 1 - Flow Diagram - PRISMA Model .....	10
Figure 2 - Table of all papers – Authors, Aims, Design and main findings .....	11
<b>Findings and Results – A synthesis of the data from the selected papers</b>	
a. Defining Autism.....	18
b. The prevalence of Autism in mainstream secondary schools.....	19
c. The language of Autism.....	19
d. An exploration of the challenges for Autistic Students in Secondary School.....	20
e. Considerations and Best Practice for School Counsellors.....	23
i. School based Interventions.....	24
ii. Addressing Social deficits in the classroom.....	26
Ethical considerations.....	27
Recommendations for further research.....	27
Conclusion.....	28
References.....	29

## Glossary of Terms

<b>ADD</b>	Attention Deficit Disorder
<b>ADHD</b>	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
<b>AON</b>	Assessment of Needs
<b>APA</b>	American Psychological Association
<b>ASD</b>	Autism Spectrum Disorder
<b>ASC</b>	Autism Spectrum Condition
<b>CAHMS</b>	Child Adolescent and Mental Health Service
<b>CBA</b>	Classroom Based Assessment
<b>CDC</b>	Centre for Disease Control and Prevention
<b>DARE</b>	Disability Access Route to Education
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering equality of opportunity in schools
<b>DSM-V</b>	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 5th Edition
<b>EBD</b>	Emotional/Behaviour Disturbance
<b>IACP</b>	Irish Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists
<b>IEP</b>	Individual Education Plan
<b>IICP</b>	Institute of Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy
<b>IPLP</b>	Individual Profile and Learning Programme
<b>LCA</b>	Leaving Certificate Applied
<b>MGLD</b>	Mild General Learning Disability
<b>NBSS</b>	National Behaviour Support Service
<b>NCGE</b>	National Centre for Guidance in Education Guidance
<b>NCSE</b>	National Council for Special Education

<b>ND</b>	Neuro Diverse
<b>NDA</b>	National Disability Authority
<b>NEPS</b>	National Education Psychological Service
<b>NT</b>	Neuro Typical
<b>OCD</b>	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
<b>OT</b>	Occupational Therapist
<b>SEN</b>	Special Education Needs
<b>SENO</b>	Special Education Needs Organiser/Officer
<b>SET</b>	Special Education Teacher
<b>SLD</b>	Specific Learning Disability
<b>SLT</b>	Speech and Language Therapist
<b>SNA</b>	Special Needs Assistant
<b>SSLD</b>	Specific Speech and Language Disorder/Difficulty
<b>SSP/F</b>	Student Support Plan/File
<b>ToM</b>	Theory of Mind
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation

## **Abstract**

**Background:** The paper aims to examine the prevalence of Autism among the mainstream secondary school population and the current level of supports for Autistic students along with an outline of future statutory plans to provide additional supports. The paper also explores the definition of Autism, the challenges these students may encounter in school and some recommendations on best practice for school counsellors when they are working with this population.

**Purpose:** To establish if Autistic students have specific challenges in mainstream secondary school and if so, how can school counsellors provide the most appropriate and efficacious support to those students.

**Methodology:** An in-depth search of electronic databases and a further investigation of the relevant reading material and reference sections followed by a rigorous filtering of eligible papers resulted in 26 papers being deemed suitable for inclusion.

**Results:** Autistic students experience above average levels of anxiety, depression, and isolation along with significant challenges around academic achievement compared to their neurotypical peers and the paper outlines the strategies and modalities that school counsellors can employ to offer equity of opportunity for success to these students.

**Conclusion:** The paper offers a synthesis of a selection of research papers backed up through some statutory reports and recommended reading on the subject of providing the best supports to Autistic students in a mainstream secondary school setting.

**Keywords:** Autism Spectrum Disorder, ASD, Definition, Language, Mainstream Secondary School, Challenges, Interventions, School Counsellor, Support.

## **Background - Aims, Objectives and Research Questions**

Of the population of Autistic Students in Ireland there are currently 65% in mainstream school, 21% in Autism Classes in a mainstream school and 14% in special educational settings (ASIAM Policy Office, 2019).

The statutory obligation on the state for the provision of education to people with disabilities is set out in The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (Irish

Statute Books, 2021). The act states that People with disabilities shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have disabilities. Schools have an obligation to assist children with disabilities to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives. The bill further adds that the state shall provide for consultation with parents of children with disabilities in relation to the education of those children, and for those purposes to establish a body to be known as the National Council for Special Education.

There is another bill entitled the “Autism Spectrum Disorder Bill 2017” (Government of Ireland, 2017) which will afford additional rights to people with Autism in the area of education and service provision and has been passed by the Seanad but has yet to be passed by the Dail. The bill, when enacted, will allow for each person with Autism to be able to access the multidisciplinary services of psychologists, psychiatrists, speech/language therapists, occupational therapists, behavioural therapists, social workers and any other professional as deemed appropriate – following a statutory entitlement to an “Assessment of Need” (Government of Ireland, 2004).

Prior to these acts, most Autistic students attended special education settings (Kenny et al., 2020). The Special Education review committee first muted the concept of mainstreaming students with disabilities (SERC, 1993) and this was strengthened by the EPSEN Act 2004 along with the ratification of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2010) which changed the landscape of education for children with Autism and now the majority are educated in a mainstream setting.

The authors aim for this paper to establish if the students in mainstream secondary schools have any specific challenges and difficulties as a result of their Autism, and if so, in what ways might a School Counsellor provide the most appropriate and efficacious support to Autistic students towards the prospect of Autistic students experiencing a more equitable path through their teenage years in school.

### **Objectives of this research paper:**

To undertake a systematic review of the qualitative (and quantitative) literature in order to:

- a) Define Autism and ascertain its prevalence among the student population of mainstream secondary schools in Ireland.
- b) To Scope out the most appropriate and acceptable language to use when discussing issues around Autism.
- c) To review existing research in relation to the current experiences of Autistic students in mainstream secondary school.
- d) To establish what (if any) challenges or difficulties Autistic students might experience.
- e) To explore and discuss how School Counsellors might best support these students.

### **Research Questions**

1. How is Autism defined?
2. What is the prevalence of Autism in Secondary Schools in Ireland?
3. What is the most appropriate language to use in relation to Autism?
4. Do Autistic students have any specific challenges in mainstream secondary schools?
5. How can a School Counsellor support an Autistic Student in a mainstream secondary school setting?

### **Methodology**

#### **Data Search**

A systemic data search was carried out on Google Scholar and EBSCO (Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection) using the keywords outlined above (with the addition of *Ireland, Asperger's, Guidance, Psychotherapist*) which resulted in 4219 papers and a search on Google Scholar (including PubMed, ResearchGate, Ed.gov, Nih.gov, urgent.be, academia.edu, ouw.edu.au, sage Journals, Wiley online Library & tandfonline.com) which had a further 5740 papers. The top 211 searches were considered as these all pertained to the educational settings and the remainder were focussed on employment, institutions and residential settings and were deemed inappropriate. A further 132 papers were considered from a search of the reference sections on the previously sourced papers. Some papers were inaccessible behind a fee pay-wall, so these were excluded leaving 83 eligible papers which

were read and filtered, and a final 26 papers were deemed to be the closest to the subject matter for this paper. The systematic process as used by McLeod & Cooper (2011) was adapted as the model for design of the graphic layout of papers reviewed and a flow of information followed the PRISMA methods of Moher et al. (2009).

Research was carried out remotely throughout the first 2 quarters of 2021 as the college is currently closed due to COVID-19 restrictions and library access was not possible.

### **Eligibility - Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

Initially only papers which referenced Autism from the latest volume of the DSM i.e., volume five (V) were eligible for consideration although a screening of excluded papers was carried out and 23 papers pre-DSM-V were deemed suitable for inclusion based on their specificity in relation to the topic. Papers had to refer to the provision of counselling to Autistic clients or to counselling in educational settings and papers which focussed on other settings (institutions, residential & day-care centres) were eliminated. Included only were peer reviewed papers - and other papers, websites, reports which were not peer reviewed were excluded. Papers behind a fee pay-wall were not considered. Initially only qualitative papers were considered eligible, however a number of papers with mixed methods were so closely associated with the topic that the author deemed them suitable to be included. Finally papers which were not in the English language were also eliminated.

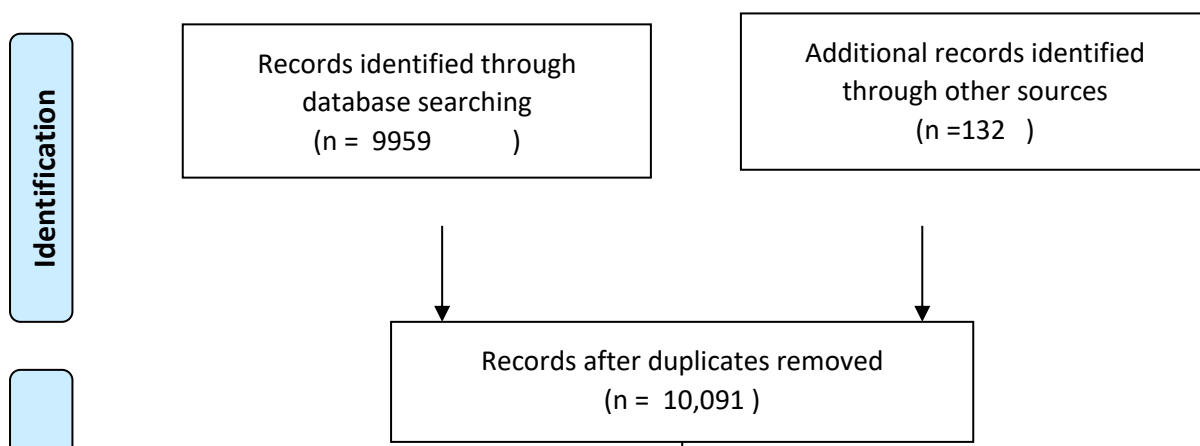
### **Limitations of the literature review**

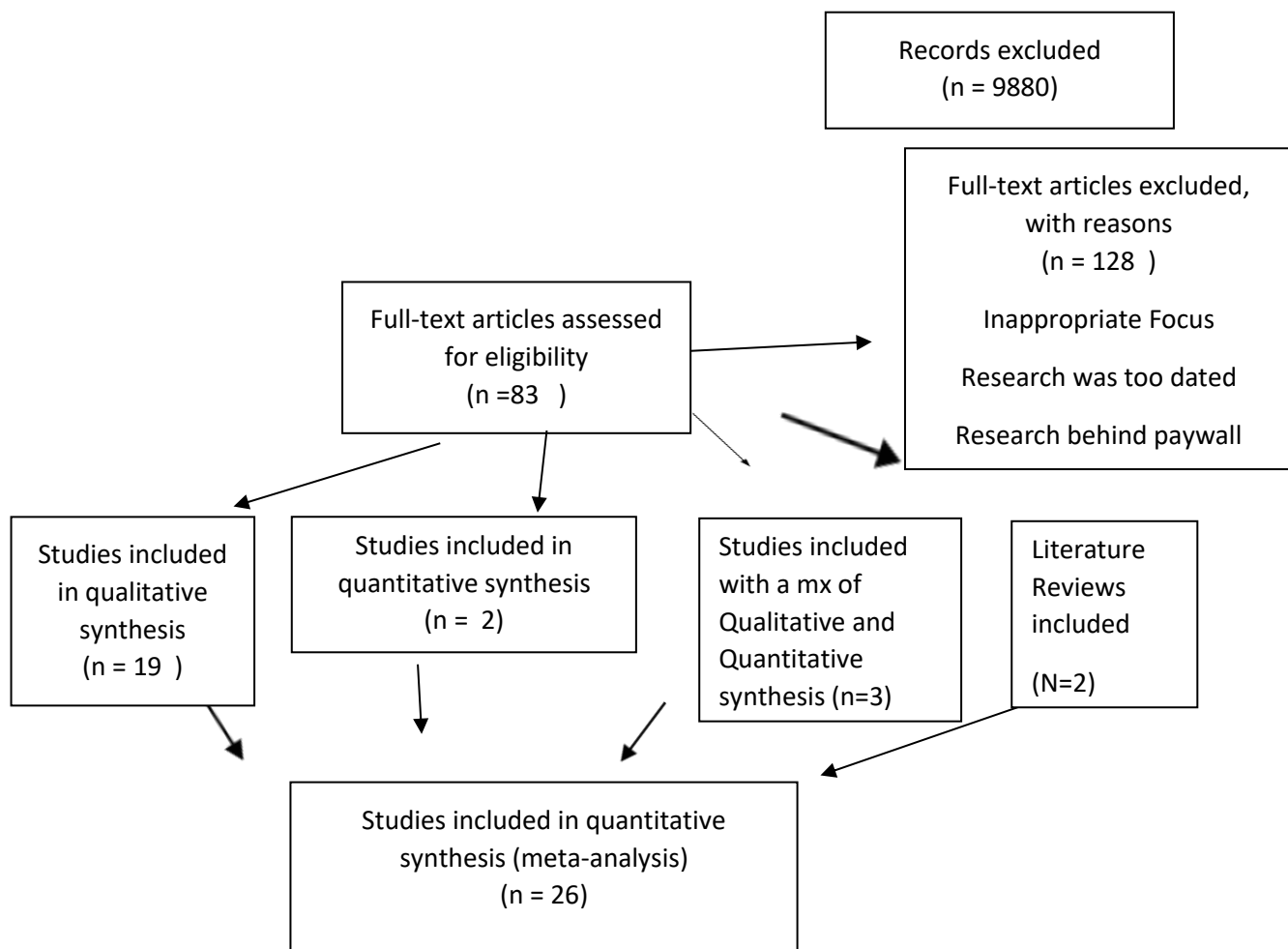
There is a vast body of research around the area of Autism although little exists specifically dealing with the provision of counselling in mainstream secondary schools to Autistic students. The author has had to try and synthesise data from papers which deal with counselling autistic clients and school counselling in a more general setting.

The research is also limited to what is freely available online as the author eliminated papers which had a fee attached to their retrieval. The access to material was limited to digital searches as libraries are currently closed/restricted due to the Covid-19 pandemic regulations.



**Figure 1 - Flow of Information of the different stages of the Systematic Review Process – PRISMA model (Moher et al. 2009)**





**Figure 2: All Papers includes in this systematic literature review**

<b>Bibliographic Details</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Ashburner,J., Ziviani,J.,& Rodger,S. (2010).	To compare teachers' perceptions of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to their perceptions	Qualitative	Fifty-four percent of students with ASD were rated as under-achieving academically as compared to 8% of typically developing students. Students with ASD seem to be underperforming relative to their level of ability and are struggling to

	of typically developing students with regard to capacity to perform academically and regulate emotions and behaviour in mainstream classrooms.		maintain their attention and regulate their emotions and behaviours in mainstream classrooms, despite receiving a range of specialist support services in the classroom
ASIAM Autism Charity (2021)	To promote the most inclusive language when discussing Autistic people and issues associated with the Autism Community	Qualitative	It is preferable to say Autistic people as opposed to people with Autism. The language should follow the social model of disability as opposed to the medical model of disability. It is preferable to use "Autism Spectrum Condition" instead of "Autism Spectrum Disorder" Despite medical professionals' close involvement in diagnosing autism and developing strategies in addressing its challenges, many autistic people feel very strongly about how the condition is often referred to in clinical terms

<b>Bibliographic Details</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Auger, R.W. (2013)	To create synthesis of recent research literature related to ASD for the purpose of providing school counsellors with addressing the needs of ASD students.	Qualitative	Students with ASD have been rated by teachers as being more Anxious and withdrawn, more depressed, more aggressive, more perfectionistic, more emotionally unavailable, and are more likely to underachieve academically as compared to typically Developing peers.

Bellini, S. (2006)	To outline the development of Anxiety in ASD adolescents	Systematic Review of Literature	<p>Anxiety and poor stress management are common concerns in clinical samples of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Anxiety may worsen during adolescence, as young people face an increasingly complex social milieu and often become more aware of their differences and interpersonal difficulties.</p> <p>The results of a multiple regression analysis suggest that the proposed model (i.e., the combination of social skills and physiological arousal) is a significant predictor of social anxiety in this sample. A developmental pathways model is proposed that identifies potential predisposing or protective factors that may contribute to the development, protection, or remediation of social anxiety in adolescents with autism.</p>
Boyd, B. A., Conroy, M. A., Asmus, J., & McKenney, E. (2011).	To descriptively examine the initiations, responses, and hypothesised outcomes of prosocial behaviours via direct observation of minors with ASD in natural classroom settings	Qualitative	Results indicated that the participants displayed low rates of prosocial behaviours (i.e., initiations and responses) when interacting with their peers; however, when prosocial behaviours did occur many of the participants' prosocial behaviours were followed by obtaining a tangible item or peer attention.

<b>Bibliographic Details</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Camarena, P. H., & Sarigiani, P. A. (2009).	To compare the aspirations of Autistic students against neurotypical aspirations	Qualitative	Social problems are evident throughout the school career of students with ASD and the main concern of parents of children with ASD who are planning to attend college is social adjustment.
Couturier, J. L., Speechley, K. N., Steele, M., Norman,	To perform a comparison of parents' perceptions of the	Qualitative	The response rate in the ASD group was 82.2% (37/45) and 55.8% (43/77) in the comparison group. The prevalence of sleep problems in the ASD group was reported by

R., Stringer, B., & Nicolson, R. (2005).	prevalence, severity, and pattern of sleep problems in ASD children versus neurotypical children		parents as being significantly higher than in the comparison group (78% and 26%, respectively; $p < .002$ ), as was the severity (mean score 48.2 and 39.0, respectively; $p < .001$ ).
Demurie, E., De Corel, M., & Roeyers, H. (2011).	A comparison of capacity for empathy between ASD adolescents and neurotypical adolescents	Qualitative through observation	Adolescents with ASD who viewed videotaped interactions between pairs of teenagers struggled to correctly infer the thoughts and feelings of the teenagers
Emam, M. M., & Farrell, P. (2009).	To observe 17 pupils with ASD ranging from 7 to 16 years, all of whom were placed in a regular class in one of eight mainstream schools on a full-time basis followed by interviews with their teachers, teaching assistants (TAs) and SEN coordinator.	Qualitative through observation and semi-structured interviews	Findings suggest that tensions reported by school staff are inherently shaped by the ASD-related manifestations, particularly those pertaining to their difficulties in social and emotional understanding.
Gjevik, E., Eldevik, S., Fjæran-Granum, T., & Sponheim, E. (2011).	To ascertain the prevalence of comorbid conditions in ASD adolescence	Qualitative	Seventy-two percent was diagnosed with at least one comorbid disorder. Anxiety disorders (41%) and ADHD (31%) were most prevalent. Obsessive-compulsive disorder and oppositional defiant disorder/conduct disorder were the other prevalent presentations.
<b>Bibliographic details</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Goldman, S. E., McGrew, S., Johnson, K. P., Richdale, A. L., Clemons, T., & Malow, B. A. (2011).	To assess the relationship between sleep and behaviour in 1784 children, ages 2–18, with confirmed diagnosis of ASD	A mix of Qualitative And Quantitative studies	Poor sleepers had a higher percentage of behavioural problems on all PCQ scales than good sleepers. Over three-fourths had problems with attention span and social interactions.
Hess, K. L., Morrier, M. J., Heflin, L.	To identify strategies used in education of	Qualitative	Analysis revealed the choice of strategies varied by grade level and classroom type (e.g., general education, special

J., & Ivey, M. L. (2008).	children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD)		education). Results highlight clear implications for preservice and in-service educator training.
Hodge, N. (2012).	To define Autism and to outline best practice for therapists when connecting with Autistic clients	Literature Review	A successful strategy is likely to be one that involves validating the lived experience of the client , identifying together their skills and abilities, and then using these to develop a programme of change with a focus on problem solving within the real-life context.
Humphrey, N., & Symes, W. (2010).	To identify the role social support plays in determining pupils' response to bullying and to identify barriers to the development and utilisation of social support when bullying occurs.	Qualitative	The role played by potential advocates such as school counsellors is very important and their perceived efficacy in providing support is a key element of the success of a student completing school.  Another key finding was that Autistic students had a lack of trust in most other people in the school including students and staff.
Kasari, C., Rotheram-Fuller, E., Locke, J., & Gulsrud, A. (2012).	To explore intervention for improving the social skills of high functioning children with autism spectrum disorders in general education classrooms	A mix of qualitative and quantitative	Significant improvements can be found in social network salience, number of friendship nominations, teacher report of social skills in the classroom, and decreased isolation on the playground for children who received PEER interventions.

<b>Bibliographic Details</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Kenny, N., McCoy, S., & Mihut, G. (2020).	To examine a series of recent reforms in Ireland's provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) and the key debates emerging from these reforms.	Qualitative	Schools require autonomy to support inclusion. Existing evidence highlights the centrality of sufficient, and appropriate, accountability measures to ensure resources and provisions best meet the Autistic student's needs.
Klin A (2006).	To examine the processes that may lead to the emergence of the genetic	Qualitative	There are strong genetic links among developmental disorders, with recurrence risks within sibships of the order of 2 to 15% if a broader

	heterogeneous phenotypes associated with autism, and its variants.		definition of affectedness is adopted.
Mahan, S., & Matson, J. L. (2011).	To compare scores of typically developing children and adolescents to those diagnosed with ASD on all subscales and composites of the Behaviour Assessment System for Children "BASC-2"	A mix of Qualitative and Quantitative	The ASD group scored significantly higher on all clinical subscales and composites (i.e., hyperactivity, conduct problems, externalising composite, depression, atypicality, withdrawal, attention problems, and the Behavioural Symptoms Index). However, the ASD group scored significantly lower on the adaptability composite and all subscales comprising this composite.
Obrustnikova, I., & Cavalier, A. R. (2011).	To examine the perceived barriers and facilitators of participation in after-school physical activity by children with autism spectrum disorders.	Qualitative	Most ASD adolescents never receive phone calls from peers and their social deficits serve as barriers to participation in after-school activities.

<b>Bibliographic details</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Orsmond, G. I., & Kuo, H-Y. (2011).	To explore the daily lives, particularly discretionary time, of adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)	Qualitative	ASD Adolescents spend considerable time in discretionary activities, with watching television and using a computer alone or with their mothers. They spent little time engaged in conversations or doing activities with peers.
Renty, J., & Roeyers, H. (2006).	to identify and describe factors associated with variations in the level of parental satisfaction with formal support and	Quantitative	The study revealed that parents experienced difficulties with the diagnostic process, with support and education provided by mainstream settings and with the accessibility of autism-specific service provisions. Conversely,

	education for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Flanders		parents reported to be satisfied with the quality of autism-specific support and education. Predictors of overall satisfaction were parental involvement in formal support, knowledge of available service provisions and time between first consultation and final diagnosis.
Rotheram-Fuller, E., Kasari, C., Chamberlain, B., & Locke, J. (2010).	To assess if children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are increasingly included in general education classrooms in an effort to improve their social involvement.	Qualitative	Across grade levels, peers less frequently reciprocated friendships with children with ASD than students in the matched sample. While children with ASD were not more likely to be rejected by peers, they were less accepted and had fewer reciprocal friendships than matched peers at each grade level. Although 48.1% of children with ASD were involved in the social networks of their classrooms, children with ASD were more likely to be isolated or peripheral to social relationships within the classroom across all grade levels

<b>Bibliographic Details</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Samson, A. C., Huber, O., & Ruch, W. (2011).	To explore the fear that ASD minors may have in relation to ridicule by their peers in relation to recalled experiences of having been laughed at in the past.	Quantitative	Individuals with ASD are less able to laugh at themselves (gelotophilia), but enjoy laughing at others (katagelasticism, a more hostile form of humour) to the same extent as the peer control group did.
Simonoff, E., Pickles, A., Charman, T., Chandler, S., Loucas, T., &	To identify the rates and type of psychiatric comorbidity associated with ASD and explore	Qualitative	Seventy percent of participants had at least one comorbid disorder and 41% had two or more. The most common diagnoses were social anxiety disorder (29.2%) attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder



Baird, G., (2008).	the associations with variables identified as risk factors for child psychiatric disorders.		(28.2%) and oppositional defiant disorder (28.1%) Of those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, 84% received a second comorbid diagnosis.
Songlee, D., Miller, S. P., Tincani, M., Sileo, N. M., & Perkins, P. G. (2008).	To investigate the effects of teaching the Test-Taking Strategy adolescents with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) through an intensive after-school program.	Qualitative	The results of this study showed that most adolescents with ASD can successfully acquire, generalise, and maintain the use of a comprehensive test-taking strategy with appropriate accommodations. In addition, both participants' and their parents' satisfaction related to the test-taking instruction was high.
White, S. W., Koenig, K., & Scahill, L. (2010).	To examine feasibility and preliminary efficacy of a structured, group social skills training program for high-functioning youth with ASD	Longitudinal Qualitative	Treatment integrity was acceptable. Nine participants demonstrated significant improvement based on reliable change indices. Gains were not, however, uniform across school and home, nor were they consistently maintained following treatment.

## Findings/Results - A synthesis of the findings and results from the selected papers.

### a) Defining Autism

When considering the best way forward for the provision of support to the students with Autism in secondary schools, we must first explore what Autism is and the following is a definition from the National Disability Authority (National Disability Authority (NDA). 2014)

"Autism is a lifelong developmental disability, sometimes referred to as Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). Its causes are not fully understood, although there is some evidence that genetic factors are involved. The term 'spectrum' is used because while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty, namely social communication, social interaction, and social imagination/play – and the condition affects

each Autistic person in different ways. Some can live relatively independently – in some cases without any additional support – while others require a lifetime of specialist care."

The Diagnostic Statistical Manual – 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) adds that Autism is a heterogeneous neurodevelopmental condition, characterised by early onset difficulties in the dyad of social communication and social interaction along with unusually restricted, repetitive and inflexible patterns of behaviours, interests and activities. While the International Classification of Diseases – 11th edition (World Health Organisation, 2018) further adds that Autistic people frequently have further additional challenges such as anxiety, gastro-intestinal complications and seizures and Autistic people have atypical cognitive profiles, executive dysfunction and impaired social cognition and perception for the individual's age and sociocultural context".

Harris (2017) is an adult with Autism and a national spokesperson on the subject, and he contends that we need to be careful when we try and define Autism as he maintains that "When you meet one individual with Autism, you only meet one individual with Autism" and he further adds that "Autism does not define me, I define my Autism".

### **b) What is the prevalence of Autism in the mainstream school population?**

The prevalence of Autism among the general population does not have a definitive figure as the variance of diagnoses is different throughout the world as developing countries do not assess children to the same degree as more developed nations (The Borgen Project, 2021). In Ireland the figure varies from one source to another based on the criteria used, however the most common statistic cited from a meta-analysis of studies across the UK and Ireland put the prevalence at one child per one hundred born which is 1% (National Disability Authority, 2014 & WHO-ICD 11) and according to the Department of Education and Skills (2020) there are 2,758 students with Autism currently accessing mainstream secondary education.

### **c) The language of Autism**

There is a diversity of opinion regarding the use of language when it comes to Autism and a cohort of the Autism community will refer to the population as “People with Autism” while another cohort describe themselves and the population as “Autistic People”. The first group feel that you should put the person first and the Autism second whereas the second group feel that Autism is a significant part of their identity and they wish to be referred to as “Autistic people” (ASIAM Autism Charity, 2021). The author will use both terms interchangeably throughout this paper. In general, it is recommended that we do not use the term “has Autism” as this seems to imply a medical model approach, and pathologises the person with what is generally considered to be a medical label as opposed to an aspect of their identity.

The term “Asperger’s Syndrome” is a previously used term to describe a form of Autism that would indicate that the person is “high-functioning” in mainstream society. Clinicians found that people with this diagnoses of “Asperger’s” were often unable to access the full suite of services that other Autistic people could access and so when the DSM-V was published they eliminated the diagnoses of “Asperger’s Syndrome” and suggested that all forms of Autism are diagnosed broadly under the same term of “Autism Spectrum Disorder” so that all autistic people can access all of the services as required (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The term “High Functioning” has also been discouraged as it is not an official diagnostic term and by inference it indicates that those not in this category of Autism are somehow “lesser” and the term is now deemed to be derogatory (Autism Awareness Australia, 2021).

#### **d) An exploration of the challenges for Autistic Students in Secondary School.**

Students with ASD have been rated by teachers as being more anxious and withdrawn, more depressed, more aggressive, more perfectionistic, more emotionally labile, and more apt to underachieve academically as compared to typically developing peers (Auger, 2013). Students with ASD can be easily overwhelmed by the abundant sensory stimuli (light, sound, colour, touch, taste, and smell) that permeate the school environment, and loosely structured classrooms can flood them with anxiety (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Anxiety is a frequent companion for students with ASD; high levels of social anxiety can both hinder the development of their social relationships and interfere with their enjoyment of the relationships they do have (Bellini, 2006).

While students with ASD experience many issues that impact their school success, deficits in the social arena are perhaps most challenging. From an early age, children with ASD show

much lower rates of prosocial behaviour than typically developing peers (Boyd, Conroy, Asmus, & McKenney, 2011) and struggle with age-appropriate social skills (Mahan & Matson, 2011). They also tend not to be included in the social networks of classrooms (Rotheram-Fuller, Kasari, Chamberlain, & Locke, 2010), exhibit a social naiveté that can lead to peer victimisation (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), and display difficulty in being able to understand the perspective of another person (Demurie, De Corel, & Roeyers, 2011). Social problems are evident throughout the school life of students with ASD and the main concern of parents of children with ASD who are planning to attend college is social adjustment (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). The social challenges are not restricted to the school setting. In comparison to nondisabled adolescents, who tend to spend significant free time with peers, many adolescents with ASD spend the majority of their free time alone or in the company of their immediate family (Orsmond & Kuo, 2011). Most ASD adolescents rarely interact on social media with their peers (Shattuck, Orsmond, Wagner, & Cooper, 2011), and their social deficits serve as barriers to participation in after-school activities (Obrustnikova & Cavalier, 2011).

Ashburner et al., (2010) assert that Students with ASD were rated as being more anxious, withdrawn, depressed, inattentive, hyperactive, oppositional, and aggressive. He adds that Students with ASD are at increased risk for a range of developmental problems, including social deficits, work experience limitations, peer victimisation and academic underachievement. Almost half had problems with perfectionism and 53% had clinically significant problems with emotional regulation. More than half (54%) of the students with ASD were rated as underachieving at school while Hodge (2012) adds that many people with ASD have a higher prevalence of eating disorders, bi-polar depression and instances of substances misuse . Another recent study found similar broad differences between parents' ratings of children with ASD versus typically developing children. Children with ASD were described as struggling with functional communication, social skills, adaptability, daily living skills, withdrawal, attention problems, hyperactivity, somatisation, and depression (Mahan & Matson, 2011). As these children with ASD move into adolescence, their difficulties with anxiety, organisation, social reciprocity, and emotional expressiveness present challenges for both their academic performance and the student-teacher relationship. Many students with ASD have executive functioning deficits, which, along with organisational challenges and high anxiety, can lead to struggles with test performance (Songlee et al., 2008).

A relevant construct that has received a good deal of research attention with ASD individuals is Theory of Mind (ToM) which is the ability to attribute mental states such as intentions, beliefs, and feelings, to oneself and others and then use these mental states to explain and predict behaviour (Demurie et al., 2011). Put more succinctly, ToM refers to how well students can understand their own thoughts and feelings and the thoughts and feelings of others. A recent research study of ToM found that adolescents with ASD who viewed videotaped interactions between pairs of teenagers, significantly struggled to correctly infer the thoughts and feelings of the teenagers compared to their neurotypical peers (Demurie et al., 2011).

The researchers suggested that the difficulty people with ASD tend to have is discerning subtle senses of humour. They often have challenges understanding jokes and tend to operate on factual accounts and so irony, cynicism and sarcasm make it hard for them to differentiate hurtful mocking from good-natured teasing. Interpersonal humour appears to be a language people with ASD often do not fully understand (Samson et al., 2011). This research also shows that students with ASD are often isolated in school and so they do not pick up localised information on the “rumour-mill” which means that they might not be up to date on “school gossip”, which can further isolate them and leave them prone to bullying and are subsequently excluded from the in-jokes of the other students, and miss out on some of the expected social constructs that arise from being “plugged in” to the unofficial social network of the school yard (Samson et al., 2011).

Another of the problem issues that are more likely to occur with youth with ASD is sleep disturbances, with previous research indicating that as many as three-quarters of young children with ASD experiencing sleep problems (Couturier et al., 2005). Furthermore, a strong relationship exists between sleep problems and problem behaviours. A study of more than 1,700 youths with ASD found that 67% of the poor sleepers were reported to also have hyperactivity versus 43% of good sleepers; 23% of poor sleepers had self-injurious behaviour versus 10% of good sleepers (Goldman et al., 2011).

In addition to the core ASD characteristics of social impairments, communication difficulties, and restricted and stereotypical interests, students with ASD are at increased risk for a variety of neurological, biological and mental health problems with 42% having a diagnoses of Anxiety and the other main comorbid conditions being ADD/ADHD, OCD, Depression, Epilepsy, Gastrointestinal complications, Dyspraxia, Fragile X syndrome, Folate metabolism,

Gender Dysphoria, Mitochondrial Diseases, Neurofibromatosis, Schizophrenia, Schizoid Personality Disorder, Sleep disorders, Sensory Disorders, Tourette's, Psychosis and Tinnitus (Klin, 2006) . One recent study (N = 137) found that parents reported an average of 23.3 psychiatric symptoms in their children (Hess, Matson, & Dixon, 2010). Studies from multiple countries have found that more than two-thirds of individuals with ASD have a comorbid psychiatric condition, and approximately a third have two or more (Gjevik et al., 2011; Hess et al., 2010; Simonoff et al., 2008).

Attwood (2007) contends that Autistic people may have difficulties expressing emotions in a conventionally recognisable way, inflexibility with change and difficulty adapting to new tasks and routines along with the fact that 70 % of ASD adolescents identify as non-heterosexual (National LGBT Health Education Center, 2020) leading to multiple oppressive identities which the report claims serves to exacerbate the prevalence of bullying.

#### **e) Considerations and Best Practice for School Counsellors when supporting Autistic Students**

Kasari, Rotheram-Fuller, Locke, & Gulsrud (2012) and White, Koenig, & Scahill, (2010) have identified the need for schools to provide programs to students with ASD to improve social skills, reduce anxiety, improve interpersonal perspective taking and to teach test-taking strategies.

Allison Hope-West (Priory education and children's services, 2017), highlights the different teaching methods autistic children need: "Pupils with autism require bespoke multi-disciplinary packages which include therapeutic support to help them to engage with learning. They need predictable environments with structure and high levels of routine along with packages of social learning and interaction."

The Irish education system reportedly falls short of the provision of such an idealised statement and students with Autism rarely have access to the services they need within the school system (The Irish Times Newspaper, n.d.)

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) have the statutory remit to resource schools with the recommended supports for each student with additional needs through the provision of a Special Education Needs Co-Ordinator (SEN-Co) for each school. Their role is to assess the situation for each student through a combination of their own metrics and measures, clinical psychologists attached to the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS), private clinical psychology reports and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) recommendations (NCSE, 2015).

Each child with additional needs has a “Student Support File” which should contain all the necessary elements of their support needs. They will each have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), a behavioural plan/contract, any targets set, their individualised timetable, teaching methods recommended, tracking, recording and reviewing process, and an Individual Profile and Learning Programme (IPLP) - each of which set out the obligations, resources available and personalised recommendations in order for that student to be offered the best chance of successfully obtaining an education to the level that they are able for (NCSE 2015). The NCSE point out the fact that they have concerns about the limitations on schools to provide all the supports that student with additional needs:

“The NCSE has concluded that the current support allocation model does not provide all children with equitable access to educational supports. It may reinforce advantage and confirm disadvantage – those who can, or whose school can, afford to pay for private assessments can access additional supports immediately, where eligible; those who cannot are deprived of such supports until they can be assessed through the public system.”

There is a little more hope for the inclusion of psychotherapists in the mainstream education system in the report from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) called “Guidelines for supporting students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties” (The National Council for Special Education, 2015) when they refer to the requirements for “a few” students at the more severe end of the emotional regulation difficulties:

“This involves a more intensive, individualised response for those with more severe and/or persistent needs and will often involve liaison with outside agencies and professionals.”

A report from the taskforce for the provision of services for people with Autism (Department of Education and Science, 2001) went further to specify that:

“Counselling needs to be made available to the student with ASD..... the eventual number of psychologists will need to rise significantly above that included in the NEPS Development Plan.... to match the increasing numbers of individuals identified with ASDs who need therapy support services.”

### **i) School-based Interventions**

Studies indicate that a child-focused intervention designed to improve the child’s social skills, and a peer-focused intervention called PEER – which is designed to train and reinforce peers to socially engage children with ASD (Kasari et al., 2012). At the end of the 6-week intervention period, the outcomes were better for the peer-focused approach. Specifically, the children whose peers had been the focus of the intervention received higher social skills ratings from teachers, were more likely to be selected for friendship by typically developing peers and had shifted to a more socially central position on the playground.

According to Bellini (2006), School counsellors can play an important role in helping students with ASD cope with the anxiety and peer interaction. A two-pronged approach to intervention has been supported by the literature: (a) teaching social skills to improve students’ ability to successfully participate in peer activities, and (b) teaching relaxation skills to help students manage the physiological arousal that fuels anxiety. School counsellors can provide these interventions in small counselling groups or in individual counselling sessions with students with ASD.

Therapists should seek out the ASD students and introduce themselves and explain the type of service on offer at the school - as the ASD students are less likely to initiate a counselling process unprompted. The therapist can then help to identify the students strengths and abilities and can guide them through the process of self-acceptance. (Hodge, 2012).

The research also suggests that enhancing the two-way communication between parents of students with ASD and the school can be an important task for school counsellors. Parents report a strong desire to receive timely information from the school and to offer helpful information to the school regarding the unique needs and characteristics of their child (Renty



& Roeyers, 2006). School counsellors can often serve as liaisons between school and home in cases where the lines of communication have been fractured or not well established.

School counsellors can provide individual and group counselling services to students with ASD. Furthermore, through consultation they can help teachers and parents better understand the unique nature of youth with ASD, helping these key adults respond to students with ASD with compassion and support rather than judgment borne out of misunderstanding. Students with ASD who are often misunderstood and underserved, deserve the best that schools and school counsellors can offer. As the research base regarding students with ASD continues to grow, school counsellors can become better informed and better able to meet the needs of this important population of students (ASIAM Policy Office, 2019).

Gray (2013) suggests that school counsellors employ the use of Social Stories which provide brief, individually designed stories that are used to enhance social understanding by providing a specific and personally tailored social skill lesson to a student with ASD. The goal of a Social Story is to share accurate social information in a reassuring manner easily understood by the recipient. The practitioner may use cartoon type drawings or photographs to create a story on a sheet of paper outlining the main aspects that a student can expect from an upcoming event like a school trip, a process like getting ready for PE, what happens at the Dentist, how a funeral process rolls out or a state examination process.

Apart from the provision of actual counselling in schools, School Counsellors should endeavour to seek to establish a peer-mentor programme/buddy system like the “Lunch Bunch” in the school according to the Centre for Autism Research (2014).

Cynthia Morton (High School Counsellors 2017) adds that it is helpful to link students with Autism with responsible peers who can act as role-models for practicing social skills. She also promotes the establishment of social skills/friendship skills, CoderDojo, chess and boardgame lunch-time clubs in schools and a programme to train advocacy skills to student with ASD. Morton (2017) adds that training should also take place to ensure all staff including teachers, administrators, security, janitorial, bus drivers, caterers, management, and volunteers have an awareness of the broad aspects of the spectrum of Autism. The provision of similar training should also be rolled out to all students and parents. The guide also highlights the need for schools to be aware of the sensory needs of autistic students and to minimize the impact of

bright lighting, strong smells, loud noises, confusing colour schemes and have pre-arranged dietary requirements agreed upon. Students may also need to access quiet toileting options and private changing areas depending on their levels of anxiety.

ii) **Addressing Social Deficits in the classroom.**

There can be a tendency among teachers to misinterpret the social idiosyncrasies and ToM problems of students with ASD as reflecting disinterest or disrespect in the classroom (Eman & Farrell, 2009). School counsellors can help teachers understand the impact of ASD on students and reframe the students' social behaviours as symptoms of the disability rather than intentional acts of mal-adapted behaviour. Teachers, in turn, can support students with ASD by working to develop a positive relationship and to position themselves as a confidant, in cases where the school counsellor is unavailable, a student with ASD may need to talk to a trusted adult about a situation such as being bullied (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The researchers go on to say that another very effective anecdotal intervention was observed when the school counsellor would help individual students to identify a trusted adult within the school community to be their trusted ally and then the counsellor orchestrated a process to create a bond between the student and the adult and this relationship became an extra support for the duration of their time in school.

The use of visuals to explain concepts or rules or processes are helpful for ASD people and concrete instructions written down make following a classroom intervention more manageable (Hodge, 2012)

School guidance counsellors are the predominant source of psychological support to students with Autism in a secondary school setting. Some schools bolster the services through employing specialised therapists to assist with supporting Autistic students, however , there is no policy, funding, protection, or guidance around these services.

**Ethical considerations**

The author submitted a research proposal which outlined the background, purpose, aims, objectives, methodology and limitations for ethical approval to the IICP college ethics committee in advance of submitting this literature and obtained their approval in advance of

carrying out any formal research. All IICP ethical guidelines have been observed in the collection, acknowledging and storage of data.

### **Recommendations and Suggestions for further research**

The author suggests that research is carried out at government level in relation to how the Department of Education and Skills can provide an equitable environment for Autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. This research shows a dearth of support for these students who display above average levels of anxiety and discomfort in settings that were not designed with their needs in mind. A holistic approach to a review (through an Autistic lens) of the psychological needs and physical setting in school along with a review of the teaching methods employed, would greatly benefit Autistic students, and go a long way towards providing an equitable level of opportunity for success.

### **Conclusion**

This paper provides a synthesis of the data from a selection of research papers which outlines the main terms used when we discuss Autism along with the correct language that should be employed. The paper outlined the prevalence of autism in the general and school population and highlighted the specific challenges that Autistic students experience in mainstream secondary school. There followed a discussion about the recommended interventions and modalities that school counsellors can adopt to support these students in order to try and offer them a better chance at academic and social success. There is an outline of the ethical considerations of the study and finally some recommendations for further research towards offering a more equitable experience in mainstream secondary schools for Autistic students.

Word count (to exclude figure 1 and figure 2) - 4844

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - DSM V* (5th ed.). <https://cdn.website-editor.net/30f11123991548a0af708722d458e476/files/uploaded/DSM%2520V.pdf>
- ASIAM Autism Charity. (2021). *The Language of the Autism Community*. <https://asiam.ie/about-autism/autism-faqs/>
- ASIAM Policy Office. (2019). *INVISIBLE CHILDREN - SURVEY ON SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM AND WITHDRAWAL IN IRELANDS AUTISM COMMUNITY*. <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Invisible-Children-Survey-on-School-Absence-Withdrawal-in-Irelands-Autism-Community-April-2019.pdf>
- Ashburner, J., Ziviani, J., & Rodger, S. (2010). Surviving in the mainstream: Capacity of children with autism spectrum disorders to perform academically and regulate their emotions and behaviors at school. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 4, 18-27. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2009.07.002
- Attwood, T. (2007). *The Complete Guide to Aspergers Syndrome*. JKP.
- Auger, R. W. (2013). Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Research Review for School Counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 16(4), 2156759X1501604. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x150160405>
- Autism Awareness Australia. (2021). *The Language Of Autism*. <https://www.autismawareness.com.au/news-events/aupdate/why-we-should-stop-using-the-term-high-functioning-autism/>
- Bellini, S. (2006). The development of anxiety in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 21, 138-145. doi:10.1177/10883576040190020201
- Boyd, B. A., Conroy, M. A., Asmus, J., & McKenney, E. (2011). Direct observation of peer-related social interaction: Outcomes for young children with autism spectrum disorders. *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal*, 19, 94-108. doi:10.1080/09362835.2011.565724
- Camarena, P. H., & Sarigiani, P. A. (2009). Postsecondary educational aspirations of high-

functioning adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and their parents. Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 24, 115-128.

doi:10.1177/1088357609332675

Couturier, J. L., Speechley, K. N., Steele, M., Norman, R., Stringer, B., & Nicolson, R. (2005). Parental perceptions of sleep problems in children of normal intelligence with pervasive development disorders: Prevalence, severity, and pattern. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 4, 815-822.

doi:10.1097/01.chi.0000166377.22651.87

Demurie, E., De Corel, M., & Roeyers, H. (2011). Empathic accuracy in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and adolescents with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 5, 126-134.

doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2010.03.002

Department of Education and Science. (2001). *Summer: SEN : The Report of the Task Force on Autism. October 2001.*

Department of Education and Skills. (2020). Key Statistics in Education in Ireland 2019/2020. *Www.Education.ie*, 5(1), 55. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/key-statistics-2019-2020.pdf>

Emam, M. M., & Farrell, P. (2009). Tensions experienced by teachers and their support for pupils with autism spectrum disorders in mainstream schools. European Journal of Special Needs Education, 24, 407-422.

Gjevik, E., Eldevik, S., Fjæran-Granum, T., & Sponheim, E. (2011). Kiddie-SADS reveals high rates of DSM-IV disorders in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 41, 761-769. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-1095-7

Goldman, S. E., McGrew, S., Johnson, K. P., Richdale, A. L., Clemons, T., & Malow, B. A. (2011). Sleep is associated with problem behaviors in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders. Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 5, 1223-1229.

doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2011.01.010

Gray, C. (2013). What are Social Stories? Retrieved from

<http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories/what-are-social-stories>

- Harris, A. (2017). 'IF YOU'VE MET ONE INDIVIDUAL WITH AUTISM, YOU HAVE MET ONE INDIVIDUAL WITH AUTISM.' College of Psychiatrists of Ireland.  
<https://www.irishpsychiatry.ie/blog/if-youve-met-one-individual-with-autism-you-have-met-one-individual-with-autism/>
- Hess, K. L., Morrier, M. J., Heflin, L. J., & Ivey, M. L. (2008). Autism treatment survey: Services received by children with autism spectrum disorders in public school classrooms. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 38, 961-971.  
doi:10.1007/s10803-007-0470-5
- High School Counsellors (2017) 'helping-students-with-autism-tips-for', available:  
<http://forhighschoolcounselors.blogspot.com/2017/04/helping-students-with-autism-tips-for.html>.
- Hodge, N. (2012). Counselling people labelled with asperger syndrome. *The SAGE Handbook of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 554–558. <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/6259/>
- Humphrey, N., & Lewis, S. (2008). 'Make me normal:' The views and experiences of pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools. *Autism*, 12, 23–46.
- Humphrey, N., & Symes, W. (2010). Responses to bullying and use of social support among pupils with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) in mainstream schools: A qualitative study. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 10, 82-90. doi:10.1111/j.1471-3802.2010.01146.x
- Kasari, C., Rotheram-Fuller, E., Locke, J., & Gulsrud, A. (2012). Making the connection: Randomised controlled trial of social skills at school for children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 53, 431-439. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2011.02493.x
- Kenny, N., McCoy, S., & Mihut, G. (2020). Special education reforms in Ireland: changing systems, changing schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 0(0), 1–20.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1821447>
- Klin A (2006). "Autism and Asperger syndrome: an overview". *Rev Bras Psiquiatr.* 28 (suppl 1): S3–S11. doi:10.1590/S1516-44462006000500002.

- Mahan, S., & Matson, J. L. (2011). Children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders compared to typically developing controls on the Behavioral Assessment System for Children, Second Edition (BASC-2). *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5, 119-125. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2010.02.007
- McLeod, J., & Cooper, M. (2011). A protocol for systematic case study research in pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy. *Counselling Psychology Review*, 26(4), 47–58. <http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/id/eprint/34227>
- National Disability Authority. (2014). *Reasonable Accommodations for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. October, 1–36. <http://nda.ie/nda-files/Reasonable-Accommodation-for-People-with-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-updated-20151.pdf>
- National LGBT Health Education Center. (2020). *Neurodiversity & Gender-Diverse Youth : An Affirming Approach to Care*. [www.lgbthealtheducation.org](http://www.lgbthealtheducation.org)
- Nations, U. (2010). *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.
- NCSE. (2015). *Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools*. NCSE Policy Advice Paper Number 5. 184.
- Obrustnikova, I., & Cavalier, A. R. (2011). Perceived barriers and facilitators of participation in after-school physical activity by children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Development and Physical Disabilities*, 23, 195-211. doi:10.1007/s10882-010-9215-z
- Orsmond, G. I., & Kuo, H-Y. (2011). The daily lives of adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder: Discretionary time and activity partners. *Autism*, 15, 579-599. doi:10.1177/1362361310386503
- Priory education and children's services. (2017). Autism in mainstream education. In *Priory education and children's services*. <https://www.priorychildrensservices.co.uk/news-blogs/unqualified-and-unstructured-autism-in-mainstream-education/>
- Renty, J., & Roeyers, H. (2006). Satisfaction with formal support and education for children with autism spectrum disorder: The voices of the parents. *Child: Care, Health, and Development*, 32, 371-385. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2214.2006.00584.x

Research Centre for Autism. (2014). School Counsellors and Autistic Students. *The Childrens Hospital of Philadelphia*.

Rotheram-Fuller, E., Kasari, C., Chamberlain, B., & Locke, J. (2010). Social involvement of children with autism spectrum disorders in elementary school classrooms. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51, 1227-1234. doi:10.1111/j.

Samson, A. C., Huber, O., & Ruch, W. (2011). Teasing, ridiculing and the relation to the fear of being laughed at in individuals with Asperger's syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 41, 475-483. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-1071-2

Simonoff, E., Pickles, A., Charman, T., Chandler, S., Loucas, T., & Baird, G., (2008). Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders: Prevalence, comorbidity, and associated factors in a population derived sample. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47, 921-929. doi:10.1097/CHI.0b013e318179964f

Songlee, D., Miller, S. P., Tincani, M., Sileo, N. M., & Perkins, P. G. (2008). Effects of test-taking strategy instruction on high-functioning adolescents with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 23, 217-228. doi:10.1177/1088357608324714

Special Education Review Committee (SERC).1993.Report of the Special Education Review Committee. Dublin: Department of Education

The Borgen Project. (2021). *Prevalance of Autism in Developing Countries*.  
<https://borgenproject.org/autism-in-developing-countries/>

The Irish Times Newspaper. (n.d.). *teachers-who-do-not-support-students-with-special-needs-may-be-in-breach-of-law-1 @ www.irishtimes.com*.  
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/teachers-who-do-not-support-students-with-special-needs-may-be-in-breach-of-law-1.3791491>

The National Council for Special Education. (2015). *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*. 1–55.  
<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Special-Education/Guidelines-for-Post-Primary-Schools-Supporting-Students-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Mainstream-Schools.pdf>



WHO. (n.d.). En @ Icd.Who.Int. In *Icd-11*. <https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/1890228613>

World Health Organisation (WHO). (2018). En @ Icd.Who.Int. In *International Classification of Diseases for mortality and morbidity statistics - ICD-11* (11th Editi).



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

# Master of Arts in Integrative Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy

***“When you meet one Autistic Person -  
you just meet one Autistic Person”***

**An Analysis of the role of the Counsellor for  
Autistic Students during their experience of  
Secondary School.**

Michael Ryan

October 2021



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

# **Master of Arts in Integrative Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy**

**Title of Research Study:**

**An Analysis of the role of the Counsellor for Autistic Students during their experience of Secondary School**

**Michael Ryan**

**Student Number: 190203**

**Research Supervisor: Eileen Finnegan**

**A Paper Submitted to the Institute of Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy (IICP), Dublin, Ireland in partial fulfilment for the reward of the Master of Arts in Integrative Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy**

**8<sup>th</sup> October 2021**

## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of a Masters of Arts in Integrative Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy , is entirely my own work devised specifically for this programme and has not been submitted for any other award for a Masters of Arts at any other University, nor has it been taken from the work of others, any such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

I agree for this dissertation to be deposited in the college's library and institutional internal repository subject to the Irish Copyright Legislation and the IICP college conditions of use and acknowledgement.

Signed: Michael Key Date: 03/09/2021

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the Autistic Clients with whom I work, as their determination, resilience and courage has prompted me to carry out this piece of research.

I wish to also acknowledge the support of Gayle Doyle (C&A Programme Leader) and all of the IICP faculty, lecturers and support staff for their help and assistance in getting us all through the course. Thanks for allowing me onto the course and for believing in me from the beginning.

Special thanks to Eileen Finnegan, my research supervisor for her patience, guidance, generosity of time, advice, and encouragement.

Thanks to all my fellow students who have been of enormous support throughout the whole process. We participated on this course mainly through the COVID-19 pandemic and we all adapted and adjusted as necessary to carry each other through.

I want to thank my family and friends for their patience, support, and encouragement throughout the past 2.5 years. Particular thanks to Susan and Aoife who kept me on track with the (almost) daily walks and a chance to debrief the process.

Thanks also to the participants for this study without whose generous sharing of expertise and spirit of co-operation, the study couldn't have happened.

I honour my partner, Gavin, for putting up with me for the past 23 years and especially for the duration of this course and thank him most sincerely as I know he picked up all the additional elements of normal life to free me up to focus on the course.

## Table of Contents

Glossary of Terms.....	41
Introduction - Purpose of the research.....	43
Overview of the Literature Review.....	43
Research Methodology	
Introduction.....	46
Aims and Objectives.....	46
Methodological Approach.....	46
Data Collection.....	46
Data Analysis Methods/Research Design.....	47
Table 1 - Braun & Clarke’s six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis.....	47
Data Protection.....	48
Bias.....	48
Ethical considerations.....	48
Access, Sampling and Recruitment.....	49
Table 2 - Participant Profiles .....	49
Conclusion.....	50
Findings and Results	
Introduction.....	51
Table 3 – Superordinate & Subordinate Themes of the study.....	51/52
Superordinate and Subordinate Themes	
Superordinate Theme 1 – It’s like wearing a jumper made of broken Glass	
The Spectrum of challenges for Autistic Students.....	53
Subordinate themes for Theme 1.....	53
1.1 Torture – Personal Challenges .....	53
1.2 Torment – Environmental Challenges .....	55
1.3 Trauma – Educational Challenges .....	55
Superordinate Theme 2 - “It’s not the job of the Autistic student to teach the counsellor” The Prism of Support in Schools.....	57
Subordinate themes for Theme 2.....	57

2.1 Investing - in appropriate training for School Counsellors and School Staff .....	57
2.2 Inclusive – Supports that have an inclusive team, setting and therapeutic approaches .....	58
2.3 Involvement - of the Autistic student in all aspects of their school life and involvement of professional therapists to support the guidance team.....	60
 Superordinate Theme 3 - “Knocked back, knocked back, knocked back”. The range of barriers to equity for Autistic students through - Blind-spots, Budgets and Bias.....	65
Subordinate themes for Theme 3.....	65
3.1 Blind spots – Some counsellors and educators not willing to learn about Autism.....	65
3.2 Budgets – The financial barrier to providing appropriate supports .....	66
3.3 Bias - Some school managements do not want a diverse student population.....	67
Conclusion.....	67
 Discussion:	
Introduction.....	68
Superordinate Theme 1 – “It’s like wearing a jumper made of broken glass” The Spectrum of challenges for Autistic Students .....	68
Superordinate Theme 2 – “It’s not the job of the Autistic student to teach the counsellor” The Prism of Support in Schools .....	69
Superordinate Theme 3 - “Knocked back, knocked back, knocked back”. The range of barriers to equity for Autistic students through – Blind-spots, Budgets and Bias.....	70
Limitations and suggested recommendations for further research.....	70
Conclusion.....	71
References and Bibliographical Sources.....	72
 Appendices :	
Appendix 1 - Participant Invitation Letter.....	77

Appendix 2 – Participant Information Sheet.....	79
Appendix 3 – Participant Consent Form.....	83
Appendix 4 – Interview Schedule Questions.....	84
Appendix 5 - Participant debrief Sheet.....	86
Appendix 6 – Participant Progress Checklist.....	87
Appendix 7 – Sample Transcription with Coding.....	88



## Glossary of Terms

<b>AON</b>	Assessment of Needs
<b>APA</b>	American Psychological Association
<b>ASC</b>	Autism Spectrum Condition
<b>ASD</b>	Autism Spectrum Disorder
<b>ASIAM</b>	Autism Spectrum Information and Meeting (National Autism Charity)
<b>CAHMS</b>	Child Adolescent and Mental Health Service
<b>CBA</b>	Classroom based assessment
<b>CDC</b>	Centre for Disease Control and Prevention
<b>DARE</b>	Disability Access Route to Education
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering equality of opportunity in schools
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>DSM-V</b>	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 5 <sup>th</sup> Edition
<b>EBD</b>	Emotional/Behaviour Disturbance
<b>IACP</b>	Irish Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists
<b>IEP</b>	Individual Education Plan
<b>IICP</b>	Institute of Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy
<b>IPLP</b>	Individual Profile and Learning Programme
<b>LCA</b>	Leaving Certificate Applied
<b>MGLD</b>	Mild General Learning Disability
<b>NBSS</b>	National Behaviour Support Service
<b>NCGE</b>	National Centre for Guidance in Education Guidance
<b>NCSE</b>	National Council for Special Education
<b>ND</b>	Neurodiverse/Neurodivergent
<b>NDA</b>	National Disability Authority
<b>NEPS</b>	National Education Psychological Service
<b>NT</b>	Neurotypical
<b>OT</b>	Occupational Therapist
<b>PDA</b>	Pathological Demand Avoidance

<b>SEN</b>	Special Education Needs
<b>SENO</b>	Special Education Needs Organiser
<b>SET</b>	Special Education Teacher
<b>SLD</b>	Specific Learning Disability
<b>SLT</b>	Speech and Language Therapist
<b>SNA</b>	Special Needs Assistant
<b>SSLD</b>	Specific Speech and Language Disorder/Difficulty
<b>SSP/F</b>	Student Support Plan/File
<b>Stim</b>	To stimulate oneself in order to regulate – e.g. – flap, rock, pace, clap etc
<b>ToM</b>	Theory of Mind
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation

## INTRODUCTION

### Purpose of the Research

This research paper sets out to discover the experiences of Autistic students as they progress through mainstream secondary school. If challenges or difficulties are identified, the researcher aims to uncover what those challenges might be, what can be done to rebalance the equity for Autistic students and identify any barriers that may be present which might in turn prevent the possibility of achieving such equity.

### Overview of the Literature Review

From a total data search of 9959 research papers, 26 were chosen following a rigorous funnelling process. These papers included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed studies and first defined Autism from a synthesis of papers as:

*"Autism is a lifelong developmental disability, sometimes referred to as Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). Its causes are not fully understood, although there is some evidence that genetic factors are involved. The term 'spectrum' is used because while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty, namely social communication, social interaction, and social imagination/play – the condition affects each Autistic person in different ways. Some can live relatively independently – in some cases without any additional support – while others require a lifetime of specialist care."*

The prevalence of Autism among the general population does not have a definitive figure as the variance of diagnoses is different throughout the world as developing countries do not assess children to the same degree as more developed nations but a meta-analysis of global studies estimates the ratio of Autistic People to Neurotypical people is 1:100 (The Borgen Project, 2021).

There is a diversity of opinion regarding the use of language when it comes to Autism and a cohort of the Autism community will refer to the population as "People with Autism" while another cohort describe themselves and the population as "Autistic People" (ASIAM Autism Charity, 2021). The author will use the terms "Autistic Student" and "Autism Spectrum Condition" (ASC) in this paper.

When examining the experiences of Autistic teenagers, students with ASC have been rated by teachers as being more anxious and withdrawn, inattentive, hyperactive, oppositional, more depressed, more aggressive, more perfectionistic, more emotionally labile, and more apt to underachieve academically as compared to typically developing peers (Auger, 2013). Students with ASC can get overwhelmed by the abundant sensory stimuli (light, sound, colour, touch, taste, and smell) in the school environment (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). High levels of social anxiety can both hinder the development of their social relationships and interfere with their enjoyment of the relationships they do have (Bellini, 2006). Ashburner et al., (2010) & Hodge (2012) adds that many people with ASC have a higher prevalence of eating disorders, bi-polar depression, and instances of substances misuse. According to Klin

(2006) students with ASC are at increased risk for a variety of neurological, biological, mental health problems and the other main comorbid conditions being ADD/ADHD, OCD, Depression, Epilepsy, Gastrointestinal complications, Dyspraxia, Fragile X syndrome, Folate Metabolism, Gender Dysphoria, Mitochondrial Diseases, Neurofibromatosis, Schizophrenia, Schizoid Personality Disorder, Sleep disorders, Sensory Disorders, Tourette's, Psychosis and Tinnitus.

When the research explored the school's role in supporting ASC students, Kasari, Rotheram-Fuller, Locke, & Gulsrud (2012) and White, Koenig, & Scahill, (2010) have identified the need for schools to provide targeted and specific programs to students with ASC to improve social skills, reduce anxiety, improve interpersonal perspective taking.

Another study by Kasari et al. (2012) indicated that a child-focused intervention designed to improve the child's social skills, and a peer-focused intervention called PEERS is designed to train and reinforce peers to socially engage children with ASC.

There can at times be a tendency among teachers to misinterpret the social idiosyncrasies and Theory of Mind (ToM) problems of students with ASC as reflecting disinterest or disrespect in the classroom (Eman & Farrell, 2009). School counsellors can help teachers understand the impact of ASC on students and reframe the students' social behaviours as symptoms of the disability rather than intentional acts of mal-adapted behaviour. Teachers, in turn, can support students with ASC by taking appropriate training to understand the needs of Autistic students and working to develop a positive relationship and to position themselves as a confidant, in cases where the school counsellor is unavailable (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

When examining the role that school counsellors play in supporting Autistic students, a report from the taskforce for the provision of services for people with Autism (DES, 2001) specifies that:

*"Counselling needs to be made available to the person with ASD..... the eventual number of psychologists will need to rise significantly above that included in the NEPS Development Plan.... to match the increasing numbers of individuals identified with ASDs who need therapy support services in schools."*

According to Bellini (2006), School counsellors can play an important role in helping students with ASC cope with the anxiety and peer interaction. A two-pronged approach to intervention has been supported by the literature: (a) teaching social skills to improve students' ability to successfully participate in peer activities, and (b) teaching relaxation skills to help ASC students manage the physiological arousal that fuels anxiety - in small counselling groups or in individual counselling sessions.

Therapists can then help to identify the students' strengths and abilities and can guide them through the process of self-acceptance. (Hodge, 2012).

As the research base regarding students with ASC continues to grow, school counsellors can become better informed and better able to meet the needs of this important population of students (ASIAM Policy Office, 2019). Through consultation they can help teachers and

parents better understand the unique nature of the students with ASC, helping these key adults respond with compassion and support rather than judgment borne out of misunderstanding.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the Aims and objectives of the research along with the methodological approach and research design, with an outline of the way data was collected, analysed, and stored. The chapter also outlines the access, sampling and recruitment, explores any researcher biases, and outlines the ethical considerations for the study.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this study is to perform an in-depth thematic analysis of the way in which Autistic students experience secondary school. The study also explores the general awareness of Autism among the school community and what the needs are for Autistic students, and finally the paper analyses the barriers that might exist towards preventing Autistic students from achieving equity of opportunity in school.

The main objectives of the study are to identify best practice methods in relation to how school counsellors can provide support to Autistic students and to establish how any barriers to equity can be addressed.

The study will adhere to all ethical guidelines in relation to the research for this arena and to ensure a respectful approach is employed in relation to any vulnerabilities for the population involved in this paper.

### **Methodological Approach**

This research issue is about the discovery and comprehension of meaning so a qualitative research approach was used (Dallos & Vetere, 2005). A Thematic Analysis method was chosen because it is seen to be the most effective for investigating a phenomenon as personal and subjective as Autism (Guest et al., 2012).

### **Data Collection**

Smith et al. (2012) describe qualitative research and Thematic Analysis in particular, as "a conversation with a goal". Using a laptop and an approved video conferencing tool called Zoom, semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded (see Appendix 4 for the interview schedule of Questions.). Questions were posed to participants in an open-ended and unbiased manner as advised by Smith & Osborn (2003). While questions were listed with a particular flow in mind, at times participants answered out of sequence and the researcher had to veer "off-script" at times to follow along with a participant's story around particular topics which emerged unexpectedly.

## Data Analysis Methods/ Research Design

The researcher used the Braun and Clarke (2013) 6 step method for analysing the data as it was deemed most suitable to the study to offer a flexible structure. The 6 steps are outlined in the table below:

Step No.	Step Name	Step Work
Step 1	Become familiar with the data	Read and Re-read transcripts and associated literature and note/highlight important elements.
Step 2	Generate initial codes	Organise the data in a meaningful and systematic way. Coding data into small chunks of meaning. This study used open coding, meaning that the researcher did not have pre-set codes, but developed and modified the codes as he worked through the coding process.
Step 3	Search for themes	A theme is a pattern that captures something significant or interesting about the data and/or research question - to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations, and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.
Step 4	Review themes	Review, modify and develop the preliminary themes that were extracted in Step 3. Identify which are Superordinate themes and which are Subordinate themes.
Step 5	Define themes	The final refinement of the themes and the aim at this stage is to identify the 'essence' of what each theme is about. What is the theme saying? If there are subthemes, how do they interact and relate to the main theme? How do the themes relate to each other?
Step 6	Write-up.	A structured analysis of the findings of the research along with a critique of how the data relates to the research question - and a demonstration of an understanding of how the data from the literature and the participants compliment, collide and/or contradict each other.

**Table 1: Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis**

## **Data Protection**

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) ensures each individual has the right to personal data protection, access to their gathered data, and the right to have their data corrected (European Commission, 2020). All consent forms, recordings, transcripts, and field notes were securely held (where applicable) in a physically secured storage facility or in a password-protected software filing system to which only the researcher had access (Smith et al., 2012:53). After their interviews, the participants were given the option of requesting changes to or redaction of any element of their data (Smith et al., 2012:54).

## **Bias**

The researcher remained aware that he works in schools with Autistic students and knows first-hand their experiences of secondary schools and ensured that the questions and conversations with participants were not skewed to mirror any specific reflection of the researchers' views.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations were tested at every point throughout the study. Each element of the process adhered to best practice ethical guidelines and participants were not approached from any of the vulnerable populations identified by the IICP college ethics committee. Voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were all observed and underlying all of these was the principle of doing no harm.

Participants were offered the right to withdraw from the research at all points up to and including the final submission. Participants were informed (Appendix 2) that the findings are intended for publishing in journals, media and on the internet for general access in order to promote the best practice findings for therapists to use when working with Autistic clients.

Each individual's anonymity and confidentiality were respected, and electronic data is being safely stored in password protected files on a password protected laptop and any hard copy data is being kept in a locked filing cabinet. Consent forms (Appendix 3) were signed (by hand and scanned or consented electronically and emailed). As the consent forms contain the participants name, therefore they are not anonymised, and are stored also in a separate secure locked cabinet.

If any participants got triggered through their involvement in the study and felt that they may need some psychological support - they were offered an option to contact the researcher after their participation or alternatively to link with the debrief therapist whose contact details were on the debrief information sheet (Appendix 5).

Ethical regulations that guide our research occur on three levels: legislative, professional, and personal (Cohen et al., 2018).



## Access, Sampling and Recruitment

The participants were selected through purposive sampling (Lavrakas, P. 2008) as a means of having a cross-section of involvement through their professional experience of Autism. The researcher selected the sample to attempt to cover an encompassing breath of practical and clinically evidenced knowledge of Autistic students' experiences . Three male participants and three female participants responded positively, so the sample is equally balanced from a gender perspective.

Participant	Reference in Study	Gender	Role	Connection to Autism Community	Years Experience
1	FT - The Female Therapist	F	Counsellor/ Psychotherapist	Works as a Therapist with teenagers who have an Autistic and/or other Neuro-Diverse diagnoses	30+
2	MT - The Male Therapist	M	Counsellor/ Psychotherapist	Works as a therapist with Autistic teenagers and Adults	20+
3	DP - The Deputy principal	M	Deputy Principal of a mixed gendered mid-sized Urban Secondary School	A cohort of Students are Autistic or have a neuro-diverse diagnoses attend the school.	30+
4	P - The Principal	M	Principal of a mixed-gendered large Rural Secondary School	A cohort of students are Autistic or have a neuro-diverse diagnoses attend the school.	30+
5	PhDR - The PhD Researcher	F	PhD Researcher and Autism advocate	PhD researcher who is carrying out a research study on "Best Practice for therapists who see Autistic clients".	25+
6	SP- The Service Provider	F	CEO of an NGO	CEO of an NGO which provides services to Autistic Clients	40+

**Table 2: Participant Profiles**

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the methodology underpinning this research study. It outlined the aims and objectives of the research along with the methodological approach and research design, with an outline of the way data was collected, analysed, and stored. The chapter also explores any researcher biases, outlined the ethical considerations for the study and finally sets out the access, sampling and recruitment processes.

## FINDINGS AND RESULTS

A Thematic Analysis Methodology was chosen as the most appropriate process to give voice to the participant in analysing the experiences of Autistic students as they pass through the secondary school stage of life, the suggested means through which they might obtain support and the barriers they face as they strive for equity of opportunity.

A purposeful sample of 6 participants were chosen to capture a breath of experience which spanned the therapeutic and educational elements of the Autistic student's experience. The participants were a School Principal, School Deputy Principal, Female Therapist, Male Therapist, PhD Researcher, and a Service Provider – all are professionally involved with Autistic Teenagers.

Three superordinate themes emerged through the rich, and at times passionate, disclosures from the participants and these overarching themes are further examined through nine subordinate themes.

The Superordinate and Subordinate themes are outlined in Table 3 below:

Superordinate Theme 1	Superordinate Theme 2	Superordinate Theme 3
<p><b>“It’s like wearing a jumper made of broken glass”.</b> The Spectrum of Challenges for Autistic Students - Torture, Torment and Trauma</p> <p><i>“And I didn't really understand what that's like for them till I spoke to a student with autism who said that certain materials for them was like wearing a jumper made of broken glass. So that's what it felt like”</i> -DP</p>	<p><b>“It’s not the job of the Autistic student to teach the counsellor”</b> The Prism of Support through - Investing, Inclusion, and Involvement.</p> <p><i>“It’s not the Autistic young person’s job to teach the counsellor. So don't sit in front of them if you're not ready....prepare yourself ....do the work. Because they don't need to have to train you”</i> -P</p>	<p><b>“Knocked back, knocked back, knocked back”</b> The range of barriers to equity for Autistic students through - Blind-spots, Budgets and Bias.</p> <p><i>“... have been through a system where they have been constantly knocked back, knocked back, knocked back, put on waiting lists, waiting for this service waiting for that service, not accessing services”</i> -DP</p>
Subordinate Theme 1.1	Subordinate Theme 2.1	Subordinate Theme 3.1

<p><b>Torture – The Personal Challenges</b></p> <p><i>“... they are trying to push through and mask that that everything's okay...resulting in extreme exhaustion.... torture.”</i> – FT</p>	<p><b>Investing - in appropriate training for School Counsellors and School Staff</b></p> <p><i>“...The guidance counsellor's need to become specialists themselves by investing in the appropriate CPD training that's needed to equip them...understanding autism, and autism awareness.. behaviours and the challenges that Autistic children have... the caretaker...the secretary...everyone.”</i> – DP</p>	<p><b>Blind spots – Some counsellors and educators not willing to learn about Autism.</b></p> <p><i>“One barrier is a blind-spot in understanding....I don't think enough therapists are educated on autism. I have heard counsellors who have said to me, why don't you just stick with the mainstream? You know, one other therapists said to me, Are you mad? And I think that says it all”.</i> – MT</p>
<p>Subordinate Theme 1.2 –</p> <p><b>Torment – The Environmental Challenges</b></p> <p><i>“there's not one (Autistic) client I've had in mainstream high-school that has not had quite severe bullying and the tormenting tends to go unnoticed... it's very subtle”</i> –PhDR</p>	<p>Subordinate Theme 2.2</p> <p><b>Inclusive – Supports that have an inclusive team, setting and therapeutic approaches.</b></p> <p><i>“.... the students supporting team meet weekly...the team includes the chaplain the counsellor, the deputy principal, the SEN coordinator, the school completion coordinator.. and constantly checking to see where that child is”</i> – DP</p>	<p>Subordinate Theme 3.2</p> <p><b>Budgets – The financial barrier to providing appropriate supports.</b></p> <p><i>“..... the barrier too... financially, we can't provide those professionals to come in privately, that's just not financially feasible.....that child needs access to a private service Counselling Service... and the parents... weren't in a position or couldn't afford it”</i> – DP</p>
<p>Subordinate Theme 1.3 –</p> <p><b>Trauma – The Educational challenges</b></p> <p><i>“...they can be profoundly uncomfortable, which results in quite severe trauma for them, resulting in school refusal, lack of engagement and isolation”</i> – P</p>	<p>Subordinate Theme 2.3</p> <p><b>Involvement - of the Autistic student in all aspects of their school life and involvement of professional therapists to support the guidance team.</b></p> <p><i>“Involve the students themselves and their families .....an interview with mom, dad, family, whatever, how, you know, how do you feel I can support the student?”</i> – SP</p>	<p>Subordinate Theme 3.3</p> <p><b>Bias - Some school managements do not want a diverse student population.</b></p> <p><i>“you're gonna' get teachers and principals and Deputy principals who are biased and don't particularly want people on the (Autism) spectrum in their schools, because they're seen as a nuisance.... I think the first job for the school counsellor is to get the principal on board....”</i> – SP</p>

**Table 3– Superordinate and Subordinate Themes**

## **Superordinate Theme 1 - “It’s like wearing a jumper made of broken glass”.**

### **The Spectrum of Challenges for Autistic Students - Torture, Torment and Trauma**

All participants all indicated that there are significant challenges for Autistic students in secondary school and these challenges are examined through three sub-themes – Torture (Personal) , Torment (Environmental) and Trauma (Educational).

#### **Subordinate Theme 1.1: -Torture - The Personal Challenges**

*“... they are trying to push through and mask that that everything's okay...resulting in extreme exhaustion.... torture.”*

– FT

“Stimming” is a form of self-regulation achieved through repetitive movements - flapping their arms, rocking over and back, or pacing. The participants claim that Autistic students didn’t feel comfortable to perform such rituals for fear of bullying or seeming different to their peers.

The FT explains that the Autistic students can display a profound empathy for others which can be exhausting and overwhelming as there are so many local and global issues to have concerns about.

The MT and PhDR declared that Autistic Students often lack the language to communicate their feelings and so they experience great frustration:

*“they weren't able to ask for help.....or they didn't have a good experience of when they did ask for help”*

– PhDR

Masking is where an Autistic person will copy and replicate behaviours of their peers to get through the school day and portray a false version of themselves just to “survive” the school experience. Girls tend to mask more than boys.

*“....a lot of them come home and sleep when they get home....because they've spent so much time working so hard to look like everybody else”*

– PhDR

There are a lot of issues also for Autistic students around gender identity and sexual orientation which at times require additional levels of support for the student and sometimes the families according to P.

All participants spoke of the heightened prevalence of anxiety, depression, worry and stress among Autistic students.

*“Depression is 70% of Autistic people compared to 12% of neurotypical people.. self-harm, .... It's like 25%, compared to 2%.....eating disorders, suicide, anxiety, mood disorders are all massively higher in the Autistic population”*

– PhDR

Autistic students experience higher incidents of bullying (and fear of bullying) as a result of appearing neuro diverse.

*“there's not one (Autistic) client I've had in mainstream high-school that has not had quite severe bullying..... the bullying tends to go unnoticed, because it's very subtle”*

- PhDR

Autistic students can have some limited capacity to absorb chunks of classwork. The SP described the challenge for an Autistic client that was learning about the various rooms in a castle, and he couldn't take in any more information past a certain point:

*“I have no more room in my head for any more rooms. I'm done. I'm done”*

- SP

Participants described the anxiety caused by having to give classroom-based presentations or school performances.

*“..if they're asked questions in front of their class... it's difficult for teenagers to ask them to stand up in (front of) their peers....If they want to, that's fine. And if it's safe for them to do it.”*

– FT

Therapists may need to assist parents who do not wish to seek a diagnosis of Autism for their children which results in a loss of access to special education accommodations for this cohort of students. Another challenge is experienced by other parents who accept the diagnoses and wants support but cannot access services through the health services because of waitlists for assessments and services in the public system.

*“I've been working with ASD teenagers that are coming up to 15 and 16 and have never had speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, psychologists ..... Parents are getting more anxious, which means child or teenagers are get more anxious, so the system isn't working”*

– FT.

## **Subordinate Theme 1.2 - Torment – The environmental challenges.**

*“there's not one (Autistic) client I've had in mainstream high-school that has not had quite severe bullying and the tormenting tends to go unnoticed... it's very subtle”*

-PhDR

All participants spoke of Sensory Issues in the school environment being overwhelming for Autistic students – e.g., flickering and buzzing of fluorescent tubes, colours on walls, noise from metalwork and woodwork rooms - as well as on corridors and in the yard from typical teenage boisterousness. There are also teachers shouting in classrooms, smells from canteens, home economics rooms, locker rooms, disinfectants, and strong teenage perfumes - and unpleasant touch sensations from woollen uniforms and laboratory and PE clothing. According to the P “it's the extreme lack of understanding of sensory overload”.

*“...just take the canteen for example...sounds of plates and cutlery and talking and lots of people in close proximity shoving'.... it's just sensory overload.”*

– PhDR.

*“...there's lots of noise .....some of them cower into the corner, or they might put their hands over their ears...”*

– DP

*“And I didn't really understand what that's like for them till I spoke to a student with autism who said that certain materials for them was like wearing a jumper made of broken glass. So that's what it felt like”*

-DP

Participants also described the difficulty that Autistic people have with dealing with changes to their surroundings, the timetable, deadlines, trips, locations, personnel, and the dynamics of their setting.

*“...they may not have the executive functioning needed to manage your timetable and get from one place to another...any change in the school day, that's going to throw an Autistic child”*

– PhDR

## **Subordinate Theme 1.3 - Trauma – The Educational Challenges**

Some Autistic students experience of secondary school can be “profoundly traumatic”

*“...they can be profoundly uncomfortable, which results in quite severe trauma for them, resulting in school refusal, lack of engagement and isolation”*

– P

There's a big challenge in relation to the transition from primary to secondary as they move from a situation where they have the same room and teacher all day to secondary school where there are so many new changes to contend with.

*".....trying to get used to a timetable or using the diary effectively...going into a mainstream setting where they might have 7,8,9,10 different teachers to contend with, all with different teaching styles and 9 or 10 different subjects".*

– DP

*"So, it's not to just have one blinkered way, because it's not going to suit everyone and expect everybody in that classroom to follow that....."*

– FT

*"they're coming out with a lot of damage, a lot of mental health, damage for trying to be in an environment that's not made for them..... So, they're often left with, you know, really poor conditions of worth, because they can't learn the way they're being taught"*

– PhDR

Some students do not wish to have close proximity to the SNA - it's just to avoid being "othered" by having a "carer" in school.

*"Does the child like the SNA sitting beside them, do they want the SNA sitting beside them,?..."*

- DP

The FT points out that public transport can pose challenges because of the proximity of people, the lack of structure and predictability and the potential for bullying from peers in an unsupervised space:

The process of accessing assistive technology can be overwhelming and some students refuse to use the equipment that they are entitled to as it singles them out amongst their peers.

*"....there's huge things for using a laptop and school and huge forms be filled in when we use this as an example"*

– FT.



**Superordinate Theme 2 - “It’s not the job of the Autistic student to teach the counsellor”  
The Prism of Support in Schools through - Investing, Inclusion, and Involvement.**

Following the identification of the challenges that Autistic students faced in school, the researcher sought to examine how such challenges might be eliminated or supported and this theme will be examined through three sub-themes, Investing in appropriate staff training, Inclusive supports, settings and therapeutic approaches and Involvement of students in decisions about their school life experience and Involvement of professional therapists to support the guidance team.

**Subordinate Theme 2.1 - Investing - in appropriate training for School Counsellors and School Staff**

*“It’s not the Autistic young person’s job to teach the counsellor. So don’t sit in front of them if you’re not ready....prepare yourself ....do the work. Because they don’t need to have to train you”*

-P

*“....The guidance counsellor’s need to become specialists themselves by investing in the appropriate CPD training that’s needed to equip them...understanding autism, and autism awareness.. behaviours and the challenges that Autistic children have... the caretaker...the secretary...everyone.”*

– DP

Teacher training around Autism was reported by most participants to be wholly inadequate and the respondents feel that a greater emphasis needs to be put into upskilling teachers so that they can understand what will work best in the education system for Autistic students.

*“Firstly, being properly trained themselves around neurodiversity, and understanding that things like anxiety, and emotionality and social skills and metacognitive skills, they present sometimes very differently in a neurodiverse young person...”*

- P

*“....The guidance counsellor’s (need to) become specialists themselves by doing the appropriate, CPD training that’s needed to equip them...understanding autism, and autism awareness.. behaviours and the challenges that Autistic children have...and the caretaker...the secretary...everyone.”*

– DP

**Subordinate Theme 2.2 - Inclusive – Supports that have an inclusive team, setting and therapeutic approaches.**

*“... the students supporting team meet weekly...the team includes the chaplain the counsellor, the deputy principal, the SEN coordinator, the school completion coordinator.. and constantly checking to see where that child is”*

– DP

The FT and DP feel that it's important for the counselling room setting to have clear space for an Autistic person to pace and stim. Therapists should avoid perfumes/aftershave, scented candles, or plug-in diffusers. Have stim toys, box of balls, Sandtray/miniatures, sorting games, tactile fabrics, fidget toys, puppets, art materials, picture collage, music, writing materials, boardgames, puzzles, ear-defenders, stress balls, blanket, eye mask, exercise cards, resistance bands, online games, YouTube, tissues, bubbles, smelling bottles, snacks, books, and a quiet tent available. Choose soft colours, mellow lighting and no flicking or buzzing from lights, no water features or white noise from technology (like laptop) and should be positioned away from noise, strong smells from laboratories, workshops, and home economics rooms – and have seating options for example the option for the young person to sit on a beanbag with no specific requirement to face the therapist.

*“a small room might be intimidating for them; it might be overwhelming.... because we work through our body. So, if they want to get up and walk around, or if they need to stim”*

– FT

*“ If you want to stim... if you want to flap..... giving permission there”*

- PhDR.

Therapists might consider an option for the therapy to take place in the open air where a student can walk and talk – SD.

Respondents mentioned that the setting should be a calming environment.

*“Avoid any kind of annoying noises like a ticking clock, computer whirring, water feature, water pipes... loud fan etc..... Be aware if a siren goes off... to stop and observe if they've been distracted by that.”*

– PhDR

The MT feels that Parents also need support, especially when the Autism diagnoses is first discovered.

*“.....the parents....be empathetic towards them, and try to understand the journey that they have been on...”*

– DP.

At times the DP suggests that accessing counselling outside the school setting may be most comfortable for an Autistic student.

The PhDR suggests that therapists use the “ 10 Spoons Method of stress management”

*“So, at the start of the day you have 10 spoons. And throughout the day, each thing you do will take a spoon....So little things take a lot of energy that other people don't think about. So, break times, the small break times, you have to go and top up that energy, because you've used a lot”*

– PhDR.

Alternatives to Talk-therapy may be required for shy or non-verbal or shy Autistic students so using ice-breaker games like using “Emotions Cards”, scaling measurements, worksheets, checklists, mood thermometers or Emojis representing each emotion as a visual tool to help - or identify their feelings, moods, and emotions (Cooke, 2020).

*“Alexithymia .... like eight out of 10 Autistic people can't find words to describe feelings.”*

– PhDR

The FT cautions that while some students react well to mindfulness and meditation as tools to help them to relax, it is not for everyone. She adds that anxiety management and resilience training is a positive intervention for all students.

Therapists should wear neutral clothing for comfort and consistency:

*“In clothes that are too bright, I found that checked shirts, they can make someone go a bit dizzy. So, it's kind of wearing quite neutral sort of colours”*

– PhDR.

The SP suggests that counsellors might consider requesting the school to establish school buddy/mentor systems – link junior students with senior students.

The FT states that counsellors may have to work with parents and the young person around acceptance and self-acceptance and Therapists are encouraged to promote positive self-talk and encourage the Autistic student to become ambassadorial about their condition and where possible to spread awareness to others if confidence allows.

*"...if you think that you're different ..... maybe use that theme as an opportunity to build self-esteem and confidence and self-acceptance ... and less anxiety can come with that...that's deep work..... If they feel accepted, then they'll accept themselves too."*

– FT

### **Subordinate Theme 2.3 - Involvement - of the Autistic student in all aspects of their school life and involvement of professional therapists to support the guidance team.**

*"Involve the students themselves and their families .....an interview with mom, dad, family, whatever, how, you know, how do you feel I can support the student?"*

– SP

Secondary school counsellors are advised by the DP and SP to link in with the families and the primary school to comprehensively plan transitions for Autistic students.

The majority of participants feel that Schools need to source specifically trained counsellors who can support the guidance function at the school who can work with Autistic students across the whole of their school experience. They felt too that Schools should also have access to qualified Occupational Therapists and Speech and Language therapists. Having that additional support means the Autistic children have an extra voice for them in the school and additional support that guidance counsellors usually don't have time for:

*"And an awful lot of self-harm, and suicidal ideation that they've identified and picked up on or have been disclosed to....it's extraordinary the level of disclosure to that external counsellor...it's about that really safe space with a professional who has that capacity to ask the right question and wait for the right answer."*

- P

*"We have brought in counselling services, and psychotherapy services...as that child has autism ...we are not able to right now, in terms of children with autism.... The counsellor in the school just wasn't equipped to deal with that situation "*

- DP

*"...the teacher can't be everything to a child...so and so needs....specialised counsellors...occupational therapy.. speech and language and things like that.,"*

– FT

Schools are advised to have a co-ordinated multi-disciplinary meeting to monitor ongoing elements of how to support Autistic students.

*"... the students supporting team meet weekly...the chaplain the counsellor, the deputy principal, the SEN coordinator, the school completion coordinator.. and constantly checking to see where that child is"*

– DP.

Autistic students should have permission to stim in class, a choice of seating position, use of ear defenders, have flexibility in the uniform/footwear a pass that allows them to leave class a few minutes ahead of the others

Schools might consider having a small secluded walled garden, open library, or quiet space in the yard for those students who require time at the breaks to replenish their energies.

*“...a young boy who will go out into the yard on his own who would stand on his own he would talk to himself he would regulate himself by doing a bit of stimming, with his arms and stuff like that he might run from one spot to the other and run back and forth about 20 times or so”*

– DP

Gender neutral bathrooms are suggested by some participants as a compromised way for Autistic students to have safe, private, and quiet opportunity to use the bathroom in peace with less risk of bullying and the ability to escape the sensory overload of the school environment when it gets too much.

Schools might consider having no bell as the P states *“the arbitrary nature of the flexibility of few minutes between the various student groups allow for less jostling on the corridors”*.

Autistic people often have a specific area of interest and teachers are encouraged to use their special interests when considering interventions, projects, and presentations.

Participants recommend that schools use the LAOS Framework<sup>1</sup>, the principles of the “TEACCH® Autism Program”<sup>2</sup>, the principles of Universal I Design for Learning (UDL)<sup>3</sup> and the FOOT<sup>4</sup> system of focus for teaching students with special needs.

Schools are advised by almost all the participants to prepare and train students for change-management and to give as much notice about changes in advance. They should also have provision to use Alternative methods of communication such as visual displays for directions and emergency procedures, notice of changes in personnel or upcoming events and alarms with flashing lights for those who use ear defenders.

Schools are encouraged to have a multi-sensory room in the school:

*“Take them out on a movement break, give them an opportunity to get away from the situation to regulate themselves, because maybe that's what they need to do before they go into a red zone where they just can't cope.”*

– DP

The DP suggests that schools offer choices around attending large gatherings in the school like assembly hall – possible alternatives may be considered through the creative use of technology and to offer choices around Classroom Based Assessments (CBA’s) so that students who cannot work in groups or present in front of the class have less anxiety-inducing options to submit the work.

*“...they're dreading it. And, again, it, their performance won't be what it could be because they're fighting anxiety to do it”*

– PhDR.

---

<sup>1</sup> LAOS- Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality framework for Post-Primary Schools is designed to give a clear picture of what good or very good practices in a school look like. The framework is built around the areas of teaching and learning, and leadership and management

<sup>2</sup> TEACCH Principles - First, physical structure refers to individual’s immediate surroundings. Daily activities, such as playing and eating, work best when they are clearly defined by physical boundaries. Second, having a consistent schedule is possible through various mediums, such as drawings and photographs. Third, the work system establishes expectations and activity measurements that promote independence. Ideal work systems will communicate objectives with minimum written instructions. Fourth, routine is essential because the most important functional support for Autistic individuals is consistency. Fifth, visual structure involves visually based cues for reminders and instruction

<sup>3</sup> UDL- Universal Design for Learning is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn, including Students with Disabilities. UDL aims to improve the educational experience of all students by introducing more flexible methods of teaching, assessment, and service provision to cater for the diversity of learners in our classrooms. This approach is underpinned by research in the field of neuroscience and is designed to improve the learning experience and outcomes for all students.

<sup>4</sup> FOOT – Focus On One Thing - Focus on Improving oral comprehension in the classroom aimed at Students with Speech & Language Difficulties / ASC Students; all students will benefit. Strategy: RREG Repeat, Rephrase, Exaggerate, Gesture. Rationale. Repeat: a basic yet highly effective teaching strategy Rephrase: simplified version of the message may be clearer for student; broadens vocabulary Exaggerate: magnifying the concept clarifies core meaning. Gesture: using non-verbal means of communication reinforces meaning and helps comprehension.

Homework policy – Autistic students can be given a time frame for the homework (e.g., 20 minutes per subject) and just stick to that and whatever work gets done is accepted as homework completed in full. Offer options to written work so they can produce a PowerPoint or an audio file instead.

*“Even studying can be very difficult for them to really, really difficult for them to get quite stressed about exams in general”*

– FT

Training for all staff (teaching and ancillary) and school counsellors can be provided through the specialist organisations of Middletown Autism<sup>5</sup> and ASIAM<sup>6</sup>.

Autism awareness events at school throughout the year are encouraged by all participants which promotes positive language around neurodiversity.

School management and SEN co-ordinators are encouraged by most of the participants to ensure that they communicate individual needs of Autistic students to all staff in the school, where appropriate - and with sensitive information seek permission and inform those who need to know.

Schools can consider shorter timetables to match the student’s capacity for managing their anxieties according to the MT and the PhDR. SNA’s may assist students to colour code their folders for each subject and demonstrate organisational skills at breaks and home time to prepare for the classes ahead.

The DP suggests where possible, schools should aim for smaller class size and to offer separate centre supervised by an SNA for inhouse exams – and also that schools should aim to provide an Autism Specific Classroom where students can be based while they integrate to mainstream in accordance with each student’s ability. It is helpful to try and identify a champion at the school for each Autistic Student – One good adult to advocate or be a “go-to” person for that student.

*“I will call a meeting...because sometimes I'm their voice when they can't communicate”*

– PhDR

---

<sup>5</sup> An Evaluation of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland - Middletown Centre for Autism and National Council for Special Education Evaluation Framework – a 55-point framework for “Autism-Proofing” a school.

<sup>6</sup> Autism Friendly Schools Pilot Project - ASIAM - This project aims to support schools in the provision of inclusive educational placements for Autistic children and young people alongside specialist provision. This project will reaffirm good practice and support those wishing to foster a school culture that is inclusive of Autistic students. The project will cover the following areas: Teaching and learning, inclusive school culture, Leadership and management & Staff professional development.

Use of appropriate and inclusive language is very important – ensuring that positive and acceptance of diversity is included.

*“a lot of the young people don't have a lot of language around emotionality and introspection, and metacognition, they don't have words sometimes. So using....I'm a big fan of the psychodynamic approach, the one step removed. So, you know... being able to use tools that allow a child to navigate their process, or their emotionality or their challenge in that moment, that aren't just around verbal skills” .*

-P

*“Direct language without inference, no reading between the lines to make something look softer. Direct ....being direct”*

– PhDR.

*“a lot of autistic students take things in a literal sense...So it's how you say things when you're giving them that response or you're giving them that piece of advice, just be mindful of the language you use, and how that language is structured and how it's delivered”*

-DP

Schools should try and establish social or academic groups where Autistic students can meet others of similar interests

*“You get less bullied If you're part of a group...so you get a boost of social self-esteem from the group... “*

– PhDR

All respondents felt that schools should have robust policies on anti-bullying and enforce them and

The FT reminds us that no two Autistic people are the same and you cannot assume what works for one student will work for another.

*“When you meet one Autistic person; you meet one Autistic person”*

– FT



**Superordinate Theme 3 - “Knocked back, knocked back, knocked back”. The range of barriers to equity for Autistic students through - Blind-spots, Budgets and Bias.**

*“... have been through a system where they have been constantly knocked back, knocked back, knocked back, put on waiting lists, waiting for this service waiting for that service, not accessing services”*

-DP

In this final section of the findings, the researcher identifies potential barriers to progress for the Autistic students and outlines these barriers through three sub-themes – Blind-spots in counsellors and educators not willing to learn about Autism, Budgets – The financial barrier to providing supports, and Bias - where some schools are not as open to diversity as others.

**Subordinate Theme 3.1 - Blind-spots – Some counsellors and educators not willing to learn about Autism.**

*“One barrier is a blind-spot in understanding....I don't think enough therapists are educated on autism. I have heard counsellors who have said to me, why don't you just stick with the mainstream? You know, one other therapist who knows that I work with Autistic teenagers said to me, “Are you mad”? And I think that says it all”.*

-MT

The participants felt that there was a lack of appropriate and adequate training for teachers, ancillary staff, and counsellors on their formal training programmes.

*“....miniscule training has been included in the actual training of teachers on the ground....”*

– SP

*“...they might have had an hour's autism training.....a model of training needs to be there that everybody's following... about how the brain is different, how stigma affects things, how mental health can be much worse in Autistic people.”*

– PhDR.

*“.... the horror stories are that the schools will not give the support, and actually are making like hell for these children.....they can't go to school...because it's not a safe place for them..... the school counsellors probably overworked..... There is probably one counsellor in a school per 500 or something”*

– FT

Some teachers find that Autistic students can be challenging, and teachers can experience frustration and stress trying to provide appropriate support in class:

*"I have teachers who are clients..... about the kind of the difficulty, they've had in the classroom that day with Autistic students...."*

– MT

The PhDR points out that it is not the Autistic student's job to train/teach the counsellor.

*".... do the research to know about Autistic people to begin with....".*

– PhDR.

The Autistic community are greatly mis-understood according to the FT. She adds that counsellors who do work with Autistic clients find the work very rewarding, enriching, and interesting.

*"..... what strikes me is how much people are missing out because I've managed to engage with this person sitting in front of me, were able to communicate no bother... I find Autistic clients really interesting."*

– FT.

### **Subordinate Theme 3.2 - Budgets – The financial barrier to providing appropriate supports.**

*"..... the barrier too... financially, we can't provide those professionals to come in privately, that's just not financially feasible.....that child needs access to a private service Counselling Service... and the parents... weren't in a position or couldn't afford it"*

– DP

*"That's all down to finances ... and making sure that the counsellor that is in place, you know, that you can pay for the training for them... that's kind done as standard. But again, that kind of comes down to finances again, doesn't it?"*

-PhDR

The participants too felt that as a result of the lack of appropriate services which would provide their necessary interventions:

*"...if you don't provide that service then you deny that child the opportunity to access counselling that they really really need...."*

– DP

*"ERSI did a piece of research, which basically has said that the people in Ireland, particularly ASD have the worst (services) in Europe"*

– SP

**Subordinate Theme 3.3 - Bias - Some school managements do not want a diverse student population.**

*“you're gonna' get teachers and principals and Deputy principals who are biased and don't particularly want people on the (Autism) spectrum in their schools, because they're seen as a nuisance.... I think the first job for the school counsellor is to get the principal on board....”*

– SP

Some participants felt that there was a lack of willingness at some schools by management, teachers, and counsellors to provide the appropriate services to Autistic students..

According to the MT, some counsellors are afraid to engage with Autistic clients through a lack of understanding. The DP claims that it is just a matter of appropriate training and a will to educate yourself to understand the condition.

*“...people really didn't understand or didn't want to understand .... Schools must bring awareness to the whole school community about the needs of Autistic students ... information nights...do courses all around autism ...”*

– DP

*“A lot of guidance counsellors avoid Autistic students.... there needs to be a much higher level of awareness....”*

– P

*“... it's at policy level where secondary school teachers do their courses ..... one of those years should be mandated to the type of training around Autistic students... .... arm yourself with how the child's brain works”*

– SP

**Conclusion**

This findings section outlined the contributions, views and experiences of the 6 participants in relation to their knowledge around the experience of Autistic students in secondary school, the challenges they have there, the supports that they require and an outline of the barriers towards offering these students equity of opportunity.

Three Superordinate themes were identified and discussed them through nine subordinate themes. The findings demonstrated the complex and diverse range of issues, considerations, supports and barriers that the students and the schools have to deal with.

## DISCUSSION

### Introduction:

The research sought to explore the experiences of Autistic students in a secondary school setting, the challenges they face, the supports they require and the barriers to equity of opportunity. The study was a thematic analysis based on interviews with purposeful sampling of six professionals who work in this area and the discussion below is based on the three main themes identified.

### **Superordinate Theme 1 - “It’s like wearing a jumper made of broken glass”. The Spectrum of Challenges for Autistic Students - Torture, Torment and Trauma.**

Research participants were asked an unbiased question - “Please outline your views on the experiences of Autistic students in secondary school?” and all participants began by highlighting the challenges that Autistic students faced in a mainstream secondary school environment which confirmed the situation as was evidenced in the literature review. The study participants were at times very passionate about the heartbreak that they felt for the myriad of challenges that this population of students endured and the complex nature of the breath of difficulties that inappropriate settings cause for Autistic students.

The research found that students faced challenges across three main areas which were - Firstly their personal challenges which were specific to their own anxieties, limitations and tolerances which were aligned with views of Auger (2013). Secondly the environmental challenges which were affected by the inaccessible and at times hostile physical setting along with restrictive and prohibitive school policies as was also outlined by Kasari et al. (2012). And Thirdly, the educational challenges which arose from the limitations of the personnel and the resources available in schools, the difficulties in managing how subjects were taught, and how school policies were implemented - which tallied with repeated recommendations for additional professional and physical supports for Autistic Students in reports by the Department of Education and Skills as far back as 2001 and more recently in 2020. (DES, 2001 & 2020).

The research also showed that schools in general were trying to make as many accommodations as they could to enhance the experience for Autistic students, however there was evidence of disparity as each school varied in their dedication and commitment to such accommodations.

The participants felt that since the introduction of the EPSEN (2004) Act which outlined a move away from “Special”<sup>7</sup> school settings towards offering all students the option to access mainstream education – schools have not been resourced – financially or educationally – to provide adequate supports.

---

<sup>7</sup> The Deputy Principal does not approve of the word “Special Educational Needs” and requests that we use the term “Additional Educational Needs”. He also discourages the term “Autism Unit” and suggests using “Autism Class” instead as the term unit pathologises the space.

**Superordinate Theme 2 – “It’s not the job of the Autistic student to teach the counsellor”  
The Prism of Support in Schools through - Investing, Inclusion, and Involvement.**

All participants spoke of the need to improve the specifics around Autism in training processes that teachers and counsellors experience in their college courses. There seems to be a dearth of emphasis on the quality of the training as supported by Morton (2017). Without adequate training, teachers and counsellors cannot provide the appropriate setting for an Autistic student, as was emphasised in the literature by Humphrey & Symes, (2010) and the SP questions – *“How can you teach somebody when you don’t understand how their brain functions? - arm yourself with how the child’s brain works”*

The P suggested that schools adopt a TEACCH method of armouring schools with an evidenced based model of supporting Autistic schools as outlined in the findings and backed-up in the literature review by Kasari (2012), who suggests that school counsellors working with Autistic students could operate through a PEERS model of imparting social skills and resilience building tools.

The question around the counselling room setting also elicited quite a substantial response from the participants who emphasised the need for therapists to ensure their setting is at least the safe-haven and tranquil space that Autistic students deserve. Therapists must ensure such serenity is offered to students who attend counselling at school and/or at a service outside the school setting, if provided by an independent counsellor.

All participants felt that there is a need for therapists to have an expertise in Autism which had also been outlined in the literature by Belini (2006) and was also highlighted by Reports issued from the DES (2001) and NCSE (2015). Both reports indicated the need for *“additional qualified Autism-specific counselling”* to be available in mainstream schools. These recommendations were echoed by most of the participants who witnessed that counselling was most effective for Autistic students when additional support was brought in/bought in to support the guidance/counselling function in schools.

Despite all the challenges outlined in the study it is important to note that some Autistic students have positive experiences in mainstream secondary schools and as the MT stated, some students do go on to become high-achievers and enjoy successful lives.

*“I have clients who have come out the other side, even though it may have been difficult, and they have some of the highest paid jobs in the country now”*

– MT

And he adds that the majority of SNA’s and school staff that he encounters are *“absolutely brilliant”* and aim to provide the best support that they can to the Autistic students at their school.

### **Superordinate Theme 3 - “Knocked back, knocked back, knocked back” The range of barriers to equity for Autistic students through - Blind-spots, budgets, and bias.**

There was quite a strong emphasis around the lack of understanding about autism among the teaching and counselling teams and these blind spots left Autistic Students without adequate supports, accommodations, and opportunities to thrive.

Among the staff that are willing to provide the necessary supports, there simply isn't enough time allocated to the teaching staff to adhere to best practice recommendations in the classroom or to the guidance team who have approx. 500 other students to psychologically support while also trying to uphold their other statutory obligations of career guidance, CAO applications, chaplaincy tasks and arranging awareness weeks and events across all other elements of school life.

The researcher was quite surprised to hear that finances were not the dominant theme when it came to barriers for supporting Autistic students although it was mentioned by all participants to one degree or another. The financial barriers were mainly highlighted when it came to sourcing additional specialised counselling professionals to support the guidance team at the school. This initiative, although recommended in state reports as outlined earlier, has never received statutory funding and schools are left in the difficult predicament of trying to fund-raise for this support and so there remains disparity between schools in relation to the psychological support that they can provide to Autistic students.

Another somewhat surprising and disappointing barrier that emerged in the findings was the lack of will from some school management teams to include the needs of the Autistic students as they were deemed to be a “nuisance” in terms of the amount of accommodations required compared to the neuro-typical cohort of students.

### **Limitations and Suggested areas for Further Research**

The paper had limited scope for a more in-depth exploration of the lived experience of Autistic students as their voice was heard vicariously through the experiences of the professionals who work with them. The paper was also limited by word-count and the researcher struggled to adequately offer the full voice to the participants as their rich knowledge and experience had to be filtered and condensed in the findings section.

The author suggests that further research could focus on globally sourced and empirically evidenced best-practice models for schools to adapt in order to provide the most effective and appropriate supports to Autistic students.

## **Conclusion**

Adolescent Autistic teenagers don't bypass adolescence and come with all the trappings of this stage of life along with all of their unique qualities and challenges that their Autism offers. This research paper has outlined the specific challenges, supports and barriers to supports that are aspects of the structures and systems of mainstream schools in Ireland in 2021.

The research aimed to critically examine the experiences of Autistic students in secondary school while also exploring how the education system and those involved in it, might improve the situation for this population of students, with an emphasis on how therapists and educators might consider more in-depth training in order to better understand neuro-divergent teenagers towards a brighter and more equitable experience for Autistic students as they pass through the secondary school period of their lives.

**Word Count (Excluding Graphs/Tables/Footnotes) - 6581**

## References and Bibliographical Sources:

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - DSM V* (5th ed.). <https://cdn.website-editor.net/30f11123991548a0af708722d458e476/files/uploaded/DSM%2520V.pdf>

ASIAM Autism Charity. (2021). *The Language of the Autism Community*. <https://asiam.ie/about-autism/autism-faqs/>

ASIAM Policy Office. (2019). *INVISIBLE CHILDREN - SURVEY ON SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM AND WITHDRAWAL IN IRELANDS AUTISM COMMUNITY*. <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Invisible-Children-Survey-on-School-Absence-Withdrawal-in-Irelands-Autism-Community-April-2019.pdf>

Ashburner, J., Ziviani, J., & Rodger, S. (2010). Surviving in the mainstream: Capacity of children with autism spectrum disorders to perform academically and regulate their emotions and behaviours at school. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 4, 18-27. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2009.07.002

Attwood, T. (2007). *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. JKP.

Auger, R. W. (2013). *Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Research Review for School Counsellors*. *Professional School Counselling*, 16(4), 2156759X1501604. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x150160405>

Autism Awareness Australia. (2021). *The Language of Autism*. <https://www.autismawareness.com.au/news-events/aupdate/why-we-should-stop-using-the-term-high-functioning-autism/>

Bellini, S. (2006). *The development of anxiety in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders*. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 21, 138-145. doi:10.1177/10883576040190020201

Boyd, B. A., Conroy, M. A., Asmus, J., & McKenney, E. (2011). Direct observation of peer-related social interaction: Outcomes for young children with autism spectrum disorders. *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal*, 19, 94-108. doi:10.1080/09362835.2011.565724

Braun, V and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, [online], 3(2), 77-101 available : <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/11735> [accessed 23rd March, 2021]

Braun and Clarke, V (2012) 'Thematic Analysis in Coopers, H. (Ed) *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Research Designs: Vol.2*. 57-71; [online], available: doi: 10.1037/13620-004 [accessed 30th May 2021].

Camarena, P. H., & Sarigiani, P. A. (2009). *Postsecondary educational aspirations of high-functioning adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and their parents*. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 24, 115-128. doi:10.1177/1088357609332675



Cohen, Manion, L., and Morrison. K. (2018) *Research Methods in Education*, 8th ed. London: Routledge.

Cooke, M. (2020), *An exploration on the role of the guidance counsellor in supporting autistic students in post primary school*. M.A. dissertation, University of Limerick: Limerick

Couturier, J. L., Speechley, K. N., Steele, M., Norman, R., Stringer, B., & Nicolson, R. (2005). Parental perceptions of sleep problems in children of normal intelligence with pervasive development disorders: Prevalence, severity, and pattern. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 4, 815-822. doi:10.1097/01.chi.0000166377.22651.87

Dallos, R. & Vetere, A. (2005). *Researching Psychotherapy and Counselling*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Demurie, E., De Corel, M., & Roeyers, H. (2011). *Empathic accuracy in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and adolescents with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder*. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5, 126-134. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2010.03.002

Department of Education and Science. (2001). Summer: SEN : *The Report of the Task Force on Autism*. October 2001.

Department of Education and Skills. (2020). *Key Statistics in Education in Ireland 2019/2020*. [www.education.ie](https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/key-statistics-2019-2020.pdf), 5(1), 55. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/key-statistics-2019-2020.pdf> [accessed 23rd March, 2021]

Emam, M. M., & Farrell, P. (2009). Tensions experienced by teachers and their support for pupils with autism spectrum disorders in mainstream schools. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 24, 407-422.

European Commission. (2020). *Protection of personal data*. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/your-rights-eu/know-your-rights/freedoms/protection-personal-data\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/your-rights-eu/know-your-rights/freedoms/protection-personal-data_en) [accessed 23rd March, 2021]

Gjevik, E., Eldevik, S., Fjæran-Granum, T., & Sponheim, E. (2011). Kiddie-SADS reveals high rates of DSM-IV disorders in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 41, 761-769. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-1095-7

Goldman, S. E., McGrew, S., Johnson, K. P., Richdale, A. L., Clemons, T., & Malow, B. A. (2011). *Sleep is associated with problem behaviors in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders*. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5, 1223-1229. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2011.01.010

Gray, C. (2013). *What are Social Stories?* Retrieved from <http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories/what-are-social-stories> [accessed 3rd March, 2020]

Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781483384436>

- Harris, A. (2017). 'IF YOU'VE MET ONE INDIVIDUAL WITH AUTISM, YOU HAVE MET ONE INDIVIDUAL WITH AUTISM.' College of Psychiatrists of Ireland. <https://www.irishpsychiatry.ie/blog/if-youve-met-one-individual-with-autism-you-have-met-one-individual-with-autism/> [accessed 3rd March, 2021]
- Hess, K. L., Morrier, M. J., Heflin, L. J., & Ivey, M. L. (2008). Autism treatment survey: Services received by children with autism spectrum disorders in public school classrooms. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 38, 961-971. doi:10.1007/s10803-007-0470-5
- High School Counsellors (2017) 'helping-students-with-autism-tips-for', available: <http://forhighschoolcounselors.blogspot.com/2017/04/helping-students-with-autism-tips-for.html>. [accessed 3rd March, 2021]
- Hodge, N. (2012). *Counselling people labelled with Asperger syndrome*. The SAGE Handbook of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 554–558. <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/6259/>
- Humphrey, N., & Lewis, S. (2008). 'Make me normal:' *The views and experiences of pupils on the Autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools*. *Autism*, 12, 23–46.
- Humphrey, N., & Symes, W. (2010). Responses to bullying and use of social support among pupils with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) in mainstream schools: A qualitative study. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 10, 82-90. doi:10.1111/j.1471-3802.2010.01146.x
- Kasari, C., Rotheram-Fuller, E., Locke, J., & Gulsrud, A. (2012). Making the connection: Randomized controlled trial of social skills at school for children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 53, 431-439. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2011.02493.x
- Kenny, N., McCoy, S., & Mihut, G. (2020). Special education reforms in Ireland: changing systems, changing schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 0(0), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1821447>
- Klin A (2006). "Autism and Asperger syndrome: an overview". *Rev Bras Psiquiatr.* 28 (suppl 1): S3–S11. doi:10.1590/S1516-44462006000500002.
- Lavrakas, P. (2008). *Encyclopaedia of Survey Research Methods*. Sage : London. doi : <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963947.n419>
- Mahan, S., & Matson, J. L. (2011). *Children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders compared to typically developing controls on the Behavioral Assessment System for Children, Second Edition (BASC-2)*. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5, 119-125. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2010.02.007
- McLeod, J., & Cooper, M. (2011). A protocol for systematic case study research in pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy. *Counselling Psychology Review*, 26(4), 47–58. <http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/id/eprint/34227>

National Disability Authority. (2014). *Reasonable Accommodations for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. October, 1–36. <http://nda.ie/nda-files/Reasonable-Accommodation-for-People-with-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-updated-20151.pdf>

National LGBT Health Education Center. (2020). *Neurodiversity & Gender-Diverse Youth : An Affirming Approach to Care*. [www.lgbthealtheducation.org](http://www.lgbthealtheducation.org)

Nations, U. (2010). *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

NCSE. (2015). *Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools*. NCSE Policy Advice Paper Number 5. 184.

O'Brien, C. (2019) teachers-who-do-not-support-students-with-special-needs-may-be-in-breach-of-law-1. *The Irish Times Newspaper*  
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/teachers-who-do-not-support-students-with-special-needs-may-be-in-breach-of-law-1.3791491> (accessed March 10th 2021)

Obrustnikova, I., & Cavalier, A. R. (2011). Perceived barriers and facilitators of participation in after-school physical activity by children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Development and Physical Disabilities*, 23, 195-211. doi:10.1007/s10882-010-9215-z

Orsmond, G. I., & Kuo, H-Y. (2011). *The daily lives of adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder: Discretionary time and activity partners*. *Autism*, 15, 579-599. doi:10.1177/1362361310386503

Priory education and children's services. (2017). *Autism in mainstream education*. In Priory education and children's services. <https://www.priorychildrensservices.co.uk/news-blogs/unqualified-and-unstructured-autism-in-mainstream-education/>

Renty, J., & Roeyers, H. (2006). *Satisfaction with formal support and education for children with autism spectrum disorder: The voices of the parents*. *Child: Care, Health, and Development*, 32, 371-385. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2214.2006.00584.x

Research Centre for Autism. (2014). *School Counsellors and Autistic Students*. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Rotheram-Fuller, E., Kasari, C., Chamberlain, B., & Locke, J. (2010). Social involvement of children with autism spectrum disorders in elementary school classrooms. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51, 1227-1234. doi:10.1111/j.

Samson, A. C., Huber, O., & Ruch, W. (2011). Teasing, ridiculing and the relation to the fear of being laughed at in individuals with Asperger's syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 41, 475-483. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-1071-2

Simonoff, E., Pickles, A., Charman, T., Chandler, S., Loucas, T., & Baird, G., (2008). Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders: Prevalence, comorbidity, and associated factors in a population derived sample. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47, 921-929. doi:10.1097/CHI.0b013e318179964f

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2012). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. Sage Publications: London

Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (p. 51–80). Sage Publications : London

Songlee, D., Miller, S. P., Tincani, M., Sileo, N. M., & Perkins, P. G. (2008). *Effects of test-taking strategy instruction on high-functioning adolescents with autism spectrum disorders*. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 23, 217-228.  
doi:10.1177/1088357608324714

Special Education Review Committee (SERC).1993.*Report of the Special Education Review Committee*. Dublin: Department of Education

The Borgen Project. (2021). *Prevalence of Autism in Developing Countries*.  
<https://borgenproject.org/autism-in-developing-countries/>

The National Council for Special Education. (2015). *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*. 1–55.  
<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Special-Education/Guidelines-for-Post-Primary-Schools-Supporting-Students-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Mainstream-Schools.pdf>

World Health Organisation (WHO). (n.d.). En @ Icd.Who.Int. In *Icd-11*.  
<https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/1890228613>

World Health Organisation (WHO). (2018). En @ Icd.Who.Int. In *International Classification of Diseases for mortality and morbidity statistics - ICD-11 (11th Editi)*.

Songlee, D., Miller, S. P., Tincani, M., Sileo, N. M., & Perkins, P. G. (2008). *Effects of test-taking strategy instruction on high-functioning adolescents with autism spectrum disorders*. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 23, 217-228.  
doi:10.1177/1088357608324714

White, S. W., Koenig, K., & Scahill, L. (2010). *Group social skills instruction for adolescents with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders*. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 25, 209-219. doi:10.1177/1088357610380595

## Appendix 1 : Participant Invitation Sample Letter



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

Name: MICHAEL RYAN – STUDENT NUMBER 190203  
Address: 30 WOODBROOK SQUARE, RIVERWOOD RD, CATLEKNOCK, D15VH70  
Email: michael@peaceofmind.ie  
Phone: +353879568983  
Date: 24.06.2021

---

### LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study:

**An analysis of the Counselling Support Services for Students with Autism in a Secondary School Setting.**

Dear ,

My name is Michael Ryan, and I am a student on the MA in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy Programme at IICP Education and Training Ltd.

I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my master's degree, and I would like to invite you to participate. I am carrying out a study with the title - **An analysis of the Counselling Support Services for Students with Autism in a Secondary School Setting**. I hope to try and ascertain if Autistic students have specific additional challenges in mainstream secondary schools and to produce a model of best practice for the provision of counselling services to Autistic students in this setting.

If you decide to participate you will be invited to talk about your knowledge of any challenges that you feel Autistic Students may have in mainstream secondary schools and how you feel they can be best supported by school counsellors in this setting.

Because of the restrictions around face-to-face meetings as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interview can be video and audio recorded interview via the medium of Zoom, so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will be reviewed by me and transcribed and analysed by myself. They will then be destroyed within 18 months of the study being submitted. You do not have to answer any question that you do not wish

to answer. There are no anticipated direct benefits to you in taking part in this study. However, possible benefits may be the personal satisfaction in contributing to the research project and in the process of reflecting on how we might improve the situation for Autistic Students in their secondary school experience.

While this study does not involve any significant risks, there may be discomfort in voicing personal or negative opinions. There will be an opportunity to debrief with myself or independently to an accredited psychotherapist who has agreed to provide this service – Lorraine Mooney - should you wish to do so on 085 806 3574.

Participation is confidential. Research information will be kept in a secure location at my office at 30 Woodbrook Square, Riverwood Road, Castleknock, Dublin 15 D15VH70. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings or conferences, but your identity will not be revealed. Taking part in the study is your decision. You may also withdraw from the study at any time or decide not to answer any questions posed. I am happy to answer any question you have about the study.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions in relation to the study please feel free to ask through the contact details above, and I will respond as soon as possible.

If you feel that you are clear on the study and would like to participate, please fill out the consent form below and return to me. If you can sign electronically please do so or print off and fill out the details required and send me a scan or photo of the signed form.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Ryan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right from the end of the name.

---

Michael Ryan – Student No. 190203

## Appendix 2 : Participant Information Sheet - Sample



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

Name: MICHAEL RYAN - STUDENT NUMBER 190203  
Address: RIVERWOOD ROAD, CASTLEKNOCK, D15  
Email: michael@peaceofmind.ie  
Phone: +3538795689XX  
Date: 24.06.2021

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Title of Study:

**An analysis of the Counselling Support Services for Students with Autism in a Secondary School Setting**

**Researcher:** Michael Ryan

Please call on +3538795689XX or email michael@peaceofmind.ie if you require clarification or have any questions or concerns.

**Academic Supervisor:** Eileen Finnegan IACP, IAHIP, EAP, FTAI.

You are invited to participate in a research study that will explore if Autistic students have any specific additional challenges in mainstream secondary school settings and examine how school counsellors can provide the most appropriate and effective support in this setting. Before you decide to participate it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to ask about anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

## **1. Purpose of the Study**

I am a final year student on the MA in Child and Adolescence Psychotherapy at IICP Education and Training Ltd.

The purpose of this study is to establish if Autistic students have specific additional challenges in the mainstream secondary school setting and if so, how school counsellors can provide the most effective and appropriate supports to Autistic students.

## **2. Why you have been asked to participate**

You have been invited to participate because you have been identified as a participant who has knowledge in this area and your input is considered valuable in relation to identifying the current situation for Autistic students in a mainstream Secondary School setting and you may have valuable insights into how school counsellors can best support Autistic students.

## **3. What will happen if you decide to participate:**

If you decide to participate in this study, I will contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time to meet for an interview via Zoom. During this interview, I will ask you questions about your knowledge and views on additional or specific challenges for Autistic students in a secondary school setting and your insights about how school counsellors might provide the most appropriate and effective supports for Autistic students. This session will last approximately 60 minutes and the interview session will be audio and video recorded on Zoom so that I can be fully present to explore your experience of the topic as outlined above.

## **4. Potential benefits, risks, and discomforts**

There are no anticipated direct benefits to you in taking part in this study. However, possible benefits may be your personal satisfaction in contributing to the research project and in the process, of reflecting on your experience of identifying if Autistic students have any additional or specific challenges in mainstream secondary schools and you have an opportunity to contribute to identifying the most appropriate and effective supports that school counsellors can provide to Autistic students. I intend to disseminate the findings to relevant publications, conferences, training seminars/webinars and will make the findings available to relevant organisations. Furthermore, the study may provide insight for other



researchers/therapists/clinicians/family members and other interested parties in improving overall services for people with Autism.

While this study does not involve any significant risks, although rare, there may be minimal discomfort in voicing personal or negative opinions. You will have the opportunity to debrief with myself or if you prefer to debrief independently with another therapist – you can contact XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX - XXX XXXXXXXX who has agreed to provide this support for free to participants.

## **5. Data Collection and Storage**

Following completion of the interview, the recording will be saved to a secure PC, and it will be password protected. The written documentation will be stored in a secure locked cabinet. Research information will be kept in a secure location at the address listed above. The data will be destroyed 18 months after completion of the assignment.

## **6. Confidentiality, Anonymity and Results of Study**

Your identity will not be revealed in the research results. Your name, residence, place of employment, or other files will not be used in this study. Your involvement in this research and all information that you give will be kept strictly confidential. While excerpts from your interview may be used in subsequent reports, your name and any identifying information will be removed from all documentation, all efforts being made to ensure that you cannot be identified. All data will be stored, analysed, and reported in accordance with the Irish Data Protection Act, 1988 and the GDPR Act 2018 and will be destroyed within 18 months after the submission of this study.

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be free to withdraw at any time without needing to provide a reason - up to the submission of the findings report on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021. As consent is sent electronically, you will have a copy of your consent form for your records, or I can send it to you at any time. You are also free to decide not to answer any question asked in the interview or to request that certain answers are deleted from the transcript.

## 7. What happens after the study?

The results of this study will be used in an assignment for my MA Child & Adolescent Psychotherapy. Additionally, anonymous data that is generated may be used in future research papers or presentations. No identifiable data will be present in such papers or presentations. If you would like a copy of the final research paper, you can request it from me through the details provided at the top of this form.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the IICP Research Ethics Committee.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Ryan" followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

---

Michael Ryan

Researcher

### Appendix 3 : Participant Consent Form Sample



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

#### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Participant:**

**Title of Project:** An analysis of the Counselling Support Services for Students with Autism in a Secondary School Setting

**Researcher:** Michael Ryan – Student number - 190203

Because of the current restrictions as a result of COVID-19, the exchange of physical documents is discouraged so please sign this document and send a scan or a photograph of a signed copy back to me at michael@peaceofmind.ie or by phone to +3538795689XX - or if you have the software, please electronically sign below and email back a copy to michael@peaceofmind.ie to confirm that the following criteria have been met:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 24.06.2021 for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, including after the interview and up to 31.08.2021 without having to provide any reason. If I choose to withdraw, I can decide what happens to any data I have provided.
3. I understand that my interview will be audio and video recorded and subsequently transcribed.
4. I agree to take part in the above study.
5. I agree that this form that bears my name and signature may be seen by a designated supervisor/auditor.

**Name of Participant :**

_____	_____	_____
XXXXXX XXXXX	Date	Signature
<b>Name of Researcher :</b>		
<i>Michael Ryan</i>	24.06.2021	<i>Michael Ryan</i>
_____	_____	_____
Michael Ryan	Date	Signature

## Appendix 4: Interview Schedule



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

### Interview Schedule

**Title of Project:**

**An analysis of the experiences of Autistic students in secondary school.**

**Researcher:** Michael Ryan – Student number – 190203

**Research Question:**

**What are the participant views about the experiences of Autistic people in mainstream secondary schools?**

**Section one: Background information**

Can you please outline your current role and what type of setting are you involved in – including scope and scale of your organisation?

Can you give a brief outline of your interest around the topic of Autistic Students in a Secondary School setting?

**Section two: This section is to do with your views about the needs of Autistic Students in mainstream secondary school.**

Please outline your views on the experiences of Autistic students in secondary school...

What are your views in relation to ASC students and peer connections in school...?

How might an Autistic person experience the physical environment at a secondary school?

Can you please outline your views on how Autistic students might experience the teaching styles and tests/exams?

Before we leave this section – is there anything else you wish to add about how ASC students might experience secondary schools?

### **Section three – School counsellors’ role in supporting Autistic Students**

School counsellors may interact with Autistic students – is there anything they might do to provide the best support?

Before we leave this section are there any other areas that counsellors need to be aware of in relation to providing a service to Autistic students?

### **Section three: Awareness of Autism among the school community**

Please outline your views in relation to how schools can best support the journey through secondary school for an Autistic student.

What are your views about the current awareness levels among teaching and ancillary staff around the needs of Autistic students?

Before we leave this section - are there any other issues that schools need to be mindful of around awareness of Autism in the school setting?

### **Section four– Supports in mainstream secondary schools for Autistic Students**

What do you understand to be the current support structures that are in place for Autistic students in secondary schools?

Before we leave this section – are there any other issues that schools need to be mindful of in relation to the support needs of Autistic students?

### **Finally – The Barriers that may exist towards the provision of appropriate and effective supports to students in a mainstream secondary school setting:**

What if any barriers can you identify that might prevent school counsellors from providing the support that Autistic students may need?

## Appendix 5: Debrief Sheet



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

### PARTICIPANT DEBRIEFING SHEET

**Participant ID:**

**Title of Project:** An analysis of the Counselling Support Services for Students with Autism in a Secondary School Setting

**Researcher:** Michael Ryan - Student number – 190203

13.07.2021

Dear ,

I would like to thank you most sincerely for participating in the recent research interview and for your ongoing contribution to this research project. I very much appreciate the assistance with this study on **“The analysis of the Counselling Support Services for Students with Autism in a Secondary School Setting”**.

I am mindful of the sensitive nature of the topic under discussion and that, on occasion, a participant in this type of research interview may find it challenging and require additional support.

If any issues have arisen for you during or following on from the research project, please feel free to contact XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX who is an accredited psychotherapist on +353XXXXXXXXXX who has agreed to provide support to participants on this study and will arrange a session for you. Additionally, please feel free to contact me directly if you would find it helpful to discuss any aspects of your participation in the research. I can be reached at the details below.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Michael Ryan' followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Michael Ryan – Researcher

+353879568983 - michael@peaceofmind.ie

## Appendix 6 – Checklist for Monitoring Progress for Each Participant



-IICP\_MA\_C&A\_2019-2021\_MR\_190203

### Checklist for Participants for the Research Study

**An analysis of the Counselling Support Services for Students with  
Autism in a Secondary School Setting.**

**Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_

Letter of Invitation Sent	
Research Study Information Letter Sent	
Consent form Sent	
Consent Form Returned Signed	
Interview Arranged Zoom Link Sent	
Date and Time of Interview	
Interview Recording Complete	
Transcription of Recording Complete	
Debriefing/Thank you letter sent	

## Appendix 7: Sample Transcription and Coding

**Researcher** 19:32

You mentioned earlier about the sensory challenges. I was wondering about say... what experience an Autistic student might have in relation to say that that sensory stuff - the sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and the physical environment of a school.

**Participant** 19:51

Yeah, you know, I can see that happen. For example, in our school, we move from class to class, okay, so they will change classrooms, maybe six to nine times a day, right. And therefore, that will require the student will get up out of his seat and, and have to organize themselves, you know, get whatever materials and books they need, and then move to the next class. Now, during the COVID, that has changed slightly, and we had them in the base classroom, so they stayed in the classroom, but normally that challenge would, would arise. And when it does arise, it means that they're going out into a corridor where there's lots of noise. And, you know, so many kids on the spectrum don't do that kind of level of noise very well. And it kind of upsets them. And sometimes it you know, sort of.... some of them cower into the corner, or they might put their hands over their ears, and might just affect them in terms of, you know, the the level of focus that they had, during the lesson, they finished of the lesson and now they're going into the corridors and get from one place to the other - for neurotypical child that's very easy to do. For a child on the spectrum, that's a massive challenge. I also think like, it could be as simple as the teacher in the classroom and the tone that they use, and the level of you know, what level they're at, when they're speaking, other teachers can be very loud or cross or whatever the case may be, that can impact on the child. You know, it's an interesting one, as well as in terms of, of, it could be as simple as smells in the classroom could be something that could trigger a reaction for a particular child on the spectrum, whereas that mightn't bother the neurotypical child. But for it, it might just play on the mind of the child with autism, and then they just focus on that kind of tunnel vision. And that's all the things about and they don't focus on what the lesson is about.

**Researcher** 21:59

Are there specific areas in the school that create a reaction?

**Participant** 22:05

Laboratories...Yeah, laboratories - The metalwork room, for example, we had one student on the spectrum who just stood couldn't cope after a couple of weeks of doing metalwork because of the level of noise and all the machinery and all, so we had that conversation with parents, and we took him out of the setting and we put him into a different subject which was actually Home Economics where he managed a little bit better, because the noise levels weren't as high, , but he just couldn't cope with the metalwork.....

**Researcher** 22:38

And other areas?

**Participant** 22:39

The Locker areas can cause a thing and the canteen area itself, the level of noise and the buzzing and stuff, we do find it some of the kids on the spectrum prefer to just isolate into rooms on their own and sit down and have their lunch. And we provide for that. Because we have to be mindful to, you know, that kind of, you're constantly thinking of how best to support them. And, you know, you're not supporting them by putting them into these situations where they can't cope. So, you have to look and say, right, well, that's not working.



So, we'll do this instead, and we'll see will that work and if that doesn't work we will go for a different option. So, we're always kind of mindful that that's today and to talk to the child, that stuff is so important. You know, I mentioned inclusiveness and stuff, but children on the spectrum, some people find, teachers might find a little bit kind of socially awkward when it comes to talking to kids on the spectrum. And it's really important that they do talk, you know, and include and they be surprised and what's important is to try and find something that they have an interest in. I've gone off on a different tangent.

**Researcher 23:53**

That's okay. It will probably come up in in other questions. So, you know, don't worry, it's all relative and relevant, I guess. And the sense about say class size and exam hall size, what experiences might an Autistic student have there?

**Participant 24:13**

Just in terms of exam halls, usually children on the spectrum are entitled to what they call reasonable accommodation. So, what we do in our school is any children who just can't cope with an exam hall setting, will automatically for in house exams, have an SNA, sit in a room and might be sitting in a room with two children or might be on their own. So, we make a provision that's very, very important because they just wouldn't be able to cope in those situations. In terms of exam class size, we're a small school. So, our classes maximum probably 24 in a class, but we would would, I mean the students who are on the spectrum, they all go to a main... they're all in a mainstream setting, okay, so they have an SNA a side.... we have a new system now, which we have to introduce in September where where our SNA's will all be assigned to a year group. So, you'll have an SNA for first year. So, you don't have an SNA for an individual student anymore. The SNA is given to the year group, first year, year group for second year, third year, and so on. So, we now have to kind of use our resources as best we can, that's going to be a challenge in itself. But in terms of class size, or our classes are small, so that's a good thing. And I think sometimes, you know, some of the kids on the spectrum are coming from primary school settings where they had small classes themselves. And it's probably preferred, because they can get as much help and the additional support as possible.

**Researcher 25:52**

And mmmm.....

**Participant 25:53**

But then saying that too, we do have kids on the spectrum who are managing very well, in those settings, right and are doing extremely well, and are actually, in some cases, are academically excelling, you know, and doing extremely well, in comparison to other neurotypical children and their ability. So, I mean, the small classes work. It's small class to us, in terms of, like, you know, 16/17 in a particular class in first year in the base class. And that's, that's a manageable number you know, and that works well. But I think it was increased to 30. That child with additional educational needs might lose out a bit. Does that make sense to you?