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"*Watching the loo door swing slowly open*": using visual metaphors to explore autistic experience through the medium of PGCE school placement

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Abstract

This study uses images to explore the experience of an autistic trainee maths teacher struggling to navigate the school placement environment. The use of 'illustrations of meaning' supports autistic communication of the experience and aims to enable a nuanced articulation of autistic viewpoint. As such it may elucidate the perspective of one autistic (purported) teacher, but also that more widely of autistic teachers and pupils and of autistic people in other employment and life situations. The paper was co-created by an autistic participant and an autistic researcher as a joint endeavour using participatory methodologies and exploring imagery and metaphor as vehicles of communication to share autistic lived experience. Suggestions for future professional support that emerge are shared.

Introduction

This paper uses a deliberately unconventional (in neurotypical terms) research approach in order to share autistic perspectives. Its purpose is threefold:

1. **To express an experience of an autistic person in school placements during teacher education.**
2. **To express an experience of an autistic person in school.**
3. **To express an experience of an autistic person.**

The autistic participant in this study ('Quince', a pseudonym) worked collaboratively and equally with the autistic lead researcher throughout the project. Quince is a maths graduate with over three years of successful experience working as an unqualified teacher in an Alternative Provision (AP) setting in the UK Midlands. This setting fully supported Quince in undertaking a university PGCE course to gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The lead researcher and co-creator of knowledge in this study is an ex-teacher and ex-teacher educator now specialising in participatory autism research. Both the participant and lead researcher are autistic, and both fully disclose this identity.

An autistic person in school placements during teacher education

We know that autistic people are seeking to become teachers (Lawrence, 2019b; Wood, 2020), and that having a teacher 'like them' can support minoritised pupils (Parker and Draves, 2018). We also know that navigating the teaching profession as an autistic person can be challenging, with autistic people experiencing difficulties both qualifying for, and staying in, teaching (Wood, 2024). This study hopes to further articulate elements of the experience of teacher education from an autistic perspective in the hope of facilitating more nuanced adjustments to support this valuable cohort.

An autistic person in school

We know that many autistic pupils struggle in school, with only 26% of those surveyed recently indicating that they are happy (NAS, 2023). Using the insights of an autistic adult to explore the school environment enables a maturity of expression not available to children or young people as they pass through the school system and articulates a more developed understanding of the lived experience of autism. This perspective, therefore, may enable greater 'voice' for the autistic experience of pupils in school.

An autistic person

Autistic people are born autistic and therefore, for us, autism is just 'how things are'. Although the voice and perspective of autistic people are becoming both more valued and stronger in autism research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Martin, 2020; den Houting et al., 2021; Pellicano and den Houting, 2022), there is nonetheless the barrier that it can be difficult to articulate autism when for those articulating it, to be autistic is simply to be human. Using an arts-based approach in this study may facilitate sharing of autistic humanity in a way that can be better accessed by those who are not autistic.

Further, the academic approach used in this paper aims to break free from constraints of neurotypical approaches to knowledge creation. By embracing an approach that both challenges preconceptions and celebrates autistic understanding, it aims to be epistemologically as well as ethically sound.

Why is it important to have autistic teachers?

There has been a call for many years for teacher education to better meet the needs of disabled student teachers, and to better embrace a social model (as opposed to a medical model) of disability (Antilla-Garza, 2015). Successful inclusion of disabled teachers may challenge ableist norms and foster a culture of inclusion for all members of the community (Neca et al., 2020). However, within teacher education, students with invisible disabilities report a fear of disclosure (Neca et al., 2020). Clearly, a need for support but a reluctance to trigger that support creates tension.

StEvens, an autistic teacher, suggests that 'when autistic teachers' voices are silenced [by this tension] the health of the entire school community becomes poorer' (2024 p. 1880). Research is clear about the contribution that teachers with disabilities can make

(Lawrence and Mahon, 2025; StEvens, 2024; Parker and Draves, 2018; Pritchard, 2010), where the high status of the teacher in the classroom can itself challenge the very notion of 'disability' (Ware, 2020). Research suggests that 'one way to disrupt perceptions of ablebodiedness is to increase the presence and voices of teachers with disabilities in schools' (Ware, 2020 p. 48).

Many autistic teachers report that being autistic is of benefit in connecting with their autistic pupils (Lawrence, 2019b; Wood and Happé, 2020). Providing these pupils, and their neurotypical peers, with positive autistic role models has been repeatedly stated as a motivating factor for autistic people to join the teaching profession (Davis et al., 2018; Lawrence, 2019b; Wood and Happé, 2020) and as a way to address stigma: 'exposure to realistic representations of people with disabilities can reduce misconceptions about them' (Jones et al., 2021 p.1255). Autistic teachers report that they value opportunities to provide essential expert knowledge of autism to support their colleagues (Wood and Happé, 2020). This is doubly important as research suggests that increased knowledge about autism delivered through training has limited impact on implicit bias (Jones et al., 2021). Rather, it is suggested that it is through 'knowing' autistic people that a more secure understanding of autism may be achieved (Lawrence, 2019a).

What are some of the challenges for autistic teachers that are already identified?

Interest in the experience of autistic teachers has blossomed in the ten years since the first publication of studies on the subject (Mooney, 2015; Davis et al., 2018; Wood and Milton, 2018; Lawrence, 2019b), not least through the creation of the *Autistic School Staff Project* (Wood and Happé, 2019). Challenges explored have included communication, emotional regulation, burnout and sensory challenges (Bonnello, 2015; Mooney, 2015; Lawrence, 2019b; Wood and Milton, 2018; Wood and Happé, 2020; Wood and Happé, 2023; Wood, 2024). Lack of support and understanding from colleagues and management, together with the impact of stigma and negative bias (Jones et al, 2021) have been cited as concerns (Jones et al, 2021), as have bullying and social ostracism, and the stresses of masking autistic behaviours (StEven, 2024; Wood and Happé, 2020).

The experience of Quince in this study is that of an autistic person who was judged as unable to meet the required government 'Teachers' Standards' and so qualify as a teacher. The study seeks to explore Quince's experience from the inside and to begin to articulate an understanding of *why* they struggled to attain these (neurotypically orientated) standards.

Why us? A co-created, 'insider' perspective

Inclusive practices in research that foreground the voices of those under discussion have gained ground in recent years, challenging notions of who should 'own' research and valuing insider perspectives and collaboration (Martin, 2020). Importantly, this current study is a co-creation of knowledge by autistic people working collaboratively and equally. Through its approach it aims to include autistic perspective in its own knowledge creation, a process that

aims to 'increase the epistemological integrity of studies that seek to explore important questions relating to the wellbeing of autistic people' (Milton and Bracher, 2013 p.66). This is both ethically and epistemologically important (Milton and Bracher, 2013; Chown et al., 2017). This study is positioned within a new neurodiversity framework, where both our understanding of autism and our autism understanding are undergoing a paradigm shift (Lewis et al., 2024; Pellicano and den Houting, 2023).

Why creative research methods?

Through exploratory methods, both *what* is communicated and *how* this is communicated are explored. The shared development of the method, and the shared autism of the co-researchers, has the potential to support both articulation and interpretation (Lewis et al., 2024; Lewis-Dagnell et al., 2023) and to be a 'neurodiversity-affirming approach to conducting research' (Lewis et al., 2024 p. 13).

The use of imaginative and figurative language to explore autistic lived experience itself challenges misconceptions regarding autistic 'literal' thinking and ability to work creatively (Baixauli et al., 2021). Study of figurative language understanding in autism has been ongoing for many years (Morsanyi et al., 2020; Kasirer et al., 2020; Vulchanova & Vulchanov, 2022) but is largely from the perspective of the type of metaphors and idioms created and comprehended, and the explanations for these from a psychological or linguistic perspective. There has been little interest in what the content of autistic creative imagery may tell us about that which the language seeks to convey.

Method for this study

Ethics committee clearance was granted by Bishop Grosseteste University prior to the commencement of the study, with particular sensitivity shown to the potentially emotive elements of the subject. Care and time were given to explore the experience, with the priority being to support Quince in understanding why they had, supposedly, 'failed' in order to support their development as an autistic person and autistic professional moving forward.

The lead researcher facilitated the initial unstructured discussions with Quince in response to the overarching research question, 'What are your perspectives as an autistic PGCE students who did not complete your teacher education to QTS?' Notes were taken throughout by both parties on large, shared sheets of paper, using marker pens. These provided a shared focus which was agreed as more comfortable for both as autistic people. The making of these notes, sketches and diagrams supported the developing conversation.

The 'jottings' created in this way were collated and the summaries produced further amended, clarified and added to, both regarding what had been said and what had been meant. This element gave further 'voice' in the creation of the data, and respected autistic potential requirements for enhanced processing time. Further, the co-creation of the data between (autistic) participant and (autistic) researcher conforms to recommendations by the

Draft Framework for Autism Research (Chown et al., 2017) as being epistemologically, as well as ethically, sound.

From the initial agreed summary, the co-creators worked together to identify emerging themes and to clarify the meaning of what had been discussed using the concept of metaphors or illustrations of meanings. Quince created (through description) ideas that they felt summed up, clarified or elucidated what they wanted to convey.   The lead researcher and Quince shared, discussed and developed the imagery described. This imagery was then translated into visual form by artist John Rimmer, and the results further explored and discussed by the co-creators and artist.

Findings

What emerged from this joint endeavour is a created document, a combined output edited, amended and expanded from the many conversations and discussions. It is presented in the first person in order to give immediacy and to facilitate the authentic 'voice' of the autistic experience. The sharing of this experience is supported by the discussed and agreed illustrations.

My experience was like a man drowning. As he loses consciousness, a helpful person throws a bucket of water over him to 'revive' him.

I knew people were trying to help me, but it was hard. People would talk to me about teaching and planning, making comments that were insightful and intended to be helpful, but talking about work meant that I did not actually get the work done. The lost preparation time in the day led to an unmanageable build-up of work to be completed in the evenings and at weekends.

Say you have an idea, and you're going in that direction, and then someone says, '...or you could do this' and then someone else says, '...or this'. They may be brilliant ideas, but can you include all of them? No, it's just not possible.

In essence, 'drowning' wasn't allowed at placement: I felt that it wasn't okay to struggle or not to know something. In my AP [Alternative Provision] setting I work with the pupils and share challenges. Teacher vulnerability there is not an issue and may even be an advantage in building trust and helping to find common ground for rapport. Pupils may feel like less of a failure if they can see that someone else also needs to find out or work out an answer. They then don't feel stupid.

The pupils in mainstream, though, were largely hostile to the possibility that I 'didn't know' or couldn't do something. They didn't accept any vulnerability of the teacher. They seem to want someone almost robotic.   You can't be caught on the back foot; to be honest, if you are they will take the opportunity to sweep your legs out from under you. The kids at AP are rowdier, but there is more acceptance. They might even take a minute and calm down if they see you struggling a bit, having trouble with spelling a word or with writing quickly enough. I don't feel that being an autistic teacher is an issue in the AP. For example, one time I was all over the place and one kid actually handed me their fidget toy to try to help…!

It was really hard to work at school when other people were around. Spaces are always occupied. Lack of a quiet space was one of the most difficult aspects to manage at placement. People were constantly walking in and out of rooms, there were crowds in the corridors, people everywhere. And even if I did eventually find a quiet area for a few minutes it was like being on the loo at a festival: even when you finally manage to get in there, other people are always outside waiting!

At first, I used to leave campus during my non-teaching time. The work required me to think about everything all the time, what to plan, what to do. Just leaving school gave me moments of space to relieve the pressure. I find the act of walking is itself relaxing – I pace if restless, being on my feet and walking feels positive – and the movements and sounds of cars going past helped me with regulation. Then I learned that school policies meant this was forbidden and I was told to stop leaving school. You seem to have some freedom, but it isn't actual freedom at all. It's like you're sitting there and people are waiting outside or walking past, and you're watching the loo door swing slowly open. There's nothing you can do: no privacy, a total lack of options. You have no control of what or when … or anything.

I felt that I was different and in the wrong place. I was the only trainee teacher in the maths department and also the only openly

autistic teacher at the schools. But a fish is supposed to be in with the fish. It might want to hang out with the frogs and it might become a fish that has grown a frog's legs, but the other fish won't like that.

I found comfort in hanging out in a different department (the Art department) but was reprimanded for not sticking to Maths. The Art department was more quirky. It has its own stereotype of being colourful, outgoing, relaxed, less formal and rigid – but perhaps there's some truth in that.
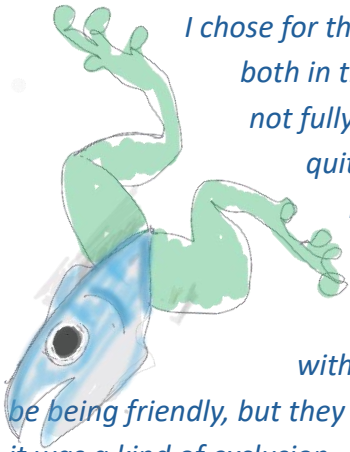
I chose for the fish to grow a frog's legs in this image because a frog can live both in the water and on land. It has an inherent adaptability, even if it is not fully one thing or the other. And a fish with a frog's legs is something quite close to an axolotl, which is becoming something of a neurodiversity icon.

Back with the 'fish' in the maths department, though, there were complex and unwritten social rules. I was told not to go with the frogs, so I tried to fit in with the fish, and the fish seemed to be being friendly, but they weren't really. I thought they were including me, but it turned out it was a kind of exclusion. They invited me to play this word game: "Would you rather 'x' or 'y'?" The unwritten social rules were, apparently, different for me and a complaint was made about me being 'unprofessional' when I joined in this verbal game. I feel that I was 'set up' regarding this and this led to feelings of betrayal and insecurity. I felt very much on the outside of the insider social group… and I only realised that this was a form of bullying when I saw it written here in these words.

I like the idea of sitting together with other people who 'get' me, on a sofa having a conversation. We're sitting together because that's more comfortable. We don't need to look at each other; we can all stare off into space! As sofa people we might be wearing baggy jumpers, jeans, hats or caps … individual clothes that are comfortable but also an expression of our identities. I'd be relaxed there, leaning back, shoes off – not planning to have to run at any moment. I wouldn't be on high alert anymore.

I didn't feel relaxed at placement. Dress codes are difficult for a male-presenting member of staff. It was insisted that male members of staff had to wear a full suit and tie whereas female-presenting members could look more casual. I felt tied up, weighed down, everything that's uncomfortable. At my AP setting I'm part of an autistic community. We all wear what we want, and that helps us to feel that we know who we are. The pupils also wear their own clothes, partly as an economic thing but also for comfort and as a form or acceptance. If we dictated a need to wear certain clothes, that might stop them from wanting to come in or from feeling comfortable and insisting on buying a uniform would be counterproductive.

Clothes are chosen I think mainly because of comfort, because they are comforting. I usually wear a cap. It keeps me calm, keeps the light from shining in my face. I have different ones

such as comics, anime and so on. They give a talking point and a form of connection with the pupils. Some pupils also wear tee shirts with slogans, band tee shirts and so on. They value these and this helps with self-esteem, and also with issues of hygiene etc. as they want to keep them clean and 'nice'. They might have bought expensive items off Vinted and be proud of them, and you can see them start to value who they are through these items and how they got them as a bargain.

There was always pressure on time at placement, including at lunchtimes, although the exception to this was when I ran a D&D [Dungeons and Dragons] club as a Wednesday afternoon activity. This space was healing even though it was still busy. I was able to talk to pupils in it and felt restored by being part of a D&D, autistic-accepting community. At AP I don't even get breaks during the day – I eat with the students, for example – but I find that I don't need breaks because I am part of an autistic group. Most pupils and many staff at the AP are autistic, so my needs (for example, to go quiet, to monologue, to 'joke and relax' etc.) are met internally and informally through shared understanding. The pupils who are not autistic also have this understanding because of their other needs (e.g. ADHD, trauma, PDA) and because of understanding from their peers. There is no need to mask or to be on high alert.
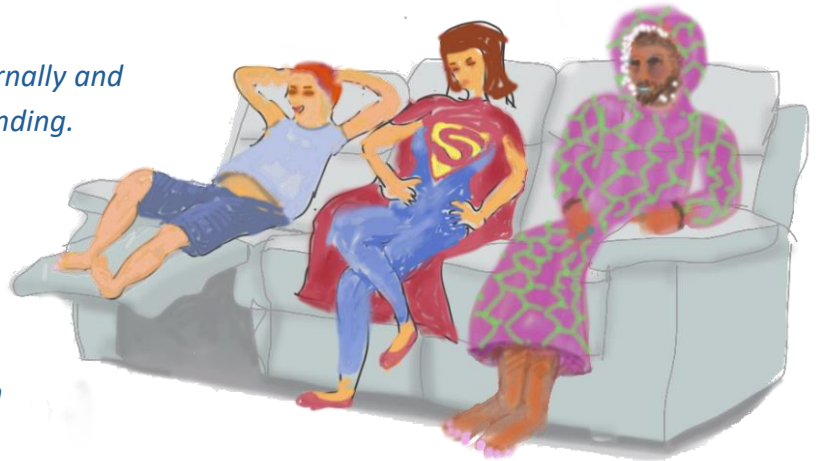

It was made very plain to me that I was required to mask my autism in order to be a 'successful' teacher. When I'm masking I feel like I'm the opposite of sitting on that sofa: I'm shoes on, sitting at the edge of a chair, highly alert and wearing layers of masks because people are staring straight at me. I made a decision during Covid lockdown that my mental health would be better supported if I were able to (at least partially) unmask and be openly autistic. This was effective until the PGCE year. In effect, I was told at both placements and at university that it was necessary to 'mask' in order to be a teacher. I was required to hide autistic or stimming behaviours (e.g. I was told to stand still, not to fidget, not to use fidget objects etc.) and was reprimanded for not stopping the autistic pupils from doing same. This requirement to mask made work a constantly hostile environment. Having partially unmasked before, it was hurtful, difficult and damaging to have to try to re-mask in this context.

I have this idea of taking masks off, a layer at a time. I might throw one into a skip or dustbin, but another time I might place one down more carefully onto a table. I'd sort through the masks, throw some away but keep some because not all masks are bad. For example, when you talk to a baby you put on your baby voice, which is like a mask. Or there's

the difference between how you are with family or even between different friendship groups. These are not necessarily 'bad' masks. Even people who are not autistic, they have masks too, they have these layers, even if they are not so intense. It is important to say that not all masks are a detriment. Some do help.

Also, there are different degrees of mask, from a 'mascot outfit' full head, which is big and thick and totally hides you so that it could be absolutely anyone inside, to perhaps just dark glasses, or a hat. The 'Advert Teacher' – the one they want you to be – has a teacher mascot outfit' on. It could be anyone underneath…! Especially during training, you're not allowed to add anything of yourself.

I've got this idea of rummaging through a bin as my experience as a trainee teacher, of having to try to get my masks back out of the rubbish. The masks are dirty, smelly and cracked, but I've realised I have to go back to wearing them. They're even potentially broken. How long has this one been there? Unmasking takes a long time. It is not something instant. I have to ask as I rummaged about in the rubbish, "Is this one of the first masks I took off that I'm trying to find at the bottom?" Even taking one off the top of the bin is still gross. It might not even fit any more – I might have outgrown it if it is a child's mask.
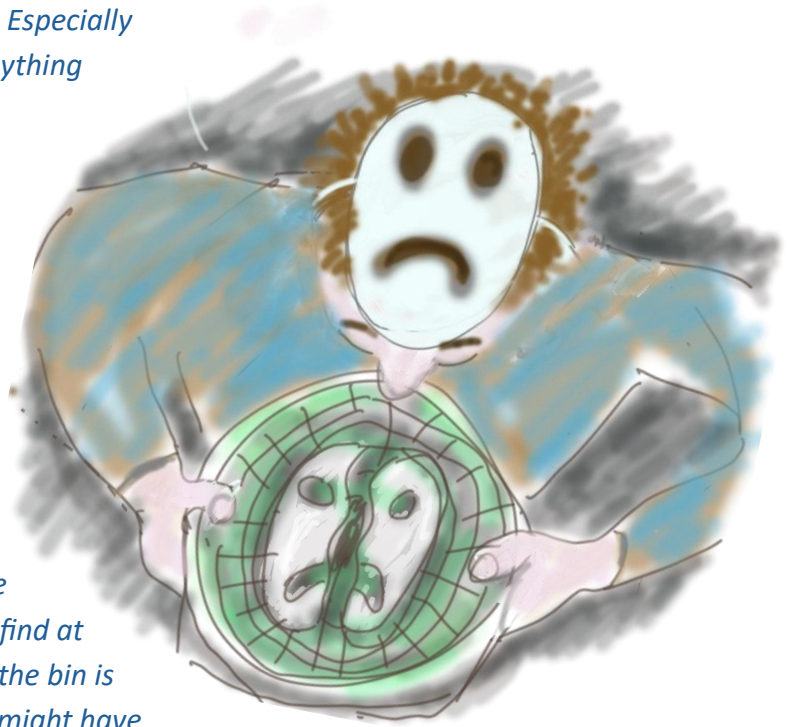
And then there's that feeling of having to re-put on an old mask that used to work. Now you find it is broken or dirty, so it's not going to work as well anymore. That is even more damaging for your self-esteem, having to wear it and it not even working as well as it used to. I'm left asking, "Why doesn't it do what it used to do for me?" It no longer works; it no longer protects me.

Discussion

One of the most striking elements of the findings in this study is that, arguably, Quince did not so much fail to become a teacher, as fail to become a neurotypical teacher. Many elements of their narrative, including the perceived need to mask, to present in the likeness of the 'advert teacher' or to be packed neatly into the sardine tin, convey a feeling of being different, and of not being accepted as such.

They are clear that the help they were given, although kindly meant, was often unhelpful to them. They were left with feelings of guilt that that they could not build on this help, and with the need for gratitude for what was not wanted. The water to revive the drowning man metaphor is a potent one here, and adroitly sums up Quince's position. Equally, and as importantly, the solutions that they found for themselves were rejected. They tried to build space and time for recovery and to reset into their day through leaving campus, but this was 'not allowed'. This tallies with findings from the *Autistic School Staff Project:*

> Other measures taken to cope [...] reveal tropes of withdrawal, escape and even invisibility. Participants might find 'ways to leave the classroom' or seek opportunities to work outdoors or with small groups. Going for a walk somewhere quiet could enable participants to escape the sense of chaos and 'realign' their senses.

> (Wood, 2024, p.42).

Quince chose to spend non-contact time in the Art department, but this too was forbidden. As Quince explains, the 'fish' did not like it when they grew frog's legs and tried to move away. This may, perhaps, show a lack of social understanding on Quince's part: perhaps they did not realise the extent to which mentoring notes or instructions may be given in short interactions due to the intensity of the teaching day; perhaps leaving the Maths department meant that they were difficult to locate, or that they gave an impression of absenteeism or lack of motivation; it may even be that there were jealousies or rivalries between the two departments of which Quince was unaware. However, exploration of the rationale for this issue would take time, and time is a rare commodity in schools.

Indeed, the intensity of the teaching day is vividly conveyed by Quince in the lack of time or space to be alone. The Portaloo image is a highly accessible one, which positions the requirement to be alone within a fundamental, biological need and which articulates the attainment of that need within the claustrophobic, unpleasant conditions and lack of time or privacy of this context. The door swinging slowly open and exposing their vulnerability is a compelling one.

The bullying behaviour of the verbal game described goes some way to articulating the nature of Quince's vulnerability. All teachers should be aware of the tactic of 'setting up' the autistic pupil to ask the inappropriate question in class or to give an inappropriate answer, but it is here presented as bullying by and of teachers. What appeared to be friendly behaviour was in fact highly hostile, and it was Quince who received the formal warning regarding professionalism.   StEvens (2024, p. 1878) identifies 'social ostracism and political backstabbing among colleagues' as issues reported in the literature (Davis et al., 2018; Wood and Happé, 2020). Had Quince been able to articulate the situation to their mentor at the time it would be hoped that this would have been recognised as unacceptable, but the fact that they did not understand it as bullying behaviour until they 'saw it written here' indicates a further issue. The considerable time and the various research and data gathering

approaches employed in this study have produced insights, but these are unlikely to be available within the busy and time-pressured context of teaching or teacher education.

Quince is able to give a clear and articulate indication of what it feels like to be accepted, and to be a part of a community, through the image of the various people on the sofa, all facing the same way, all different but contentedly together. This is an articulate portrayal of autistic acceptance and as such is an important element of this study. Description of comfortable autistic experiences is just as important as understanding of discomfort if we are to work on a blueprint for achieving it.

Perhaps most poignant, though, is the use of the familiar metaphor of the masks. We know that 'concealment of an autistic identity … can be associated with significant mental health difficulties for autistic people' (Wood, 2024 p.45), with the metaphor of the autistic mask used to represent the 'conscious or unconscious suppression of natural autistic responses and adoption of alternatives across a range of domains' (Pearson and Rose, 2021 p. 52). Quince is certainly not unique as an autistic person who feels 'obliged to pretend not to be autistic' (Mandy, 2019, p. 1879). However, what is powerfully described here is both the range of masks that might be worn, and the pain of having to 're-mask'. The challenge of projecting a false face to the world, together with the hiding of true identity, is here described with great clarity. The 'masks' are not all seen as inherently detrimental, and some (when removed) are kept carefully as valuable and valued. What is potently conveyed, though, is the humiliation and disgust of being required to re-assume a mask that has been discarded, and the vulnerability that follows when this mask no longer 'works'.

Linked to this concept are issues of disclosure. Quince chose to be open from the outset of the PGCE about their autistic identity and not to seek to hide it, in the expectation that this would lead to greater support and acceptance. However, as discussed, they did not find the help offered appropriate, and the hoped for acceptance was not forthcoming. A recent review of literature regarding the experiences of disabled pre-service teachers (Strimel et al., 2023), suggested that many of those who disclosed disabilities were subject to deficit ableist perceptions regarding their competencies and abilities, with many not completing their qualifications and being 'left with a damaged sense of identity and purpose' (Strimel et al., 2023 p. 22).

There is a difference, though, between issues of disclosure and of failure to mask. Gillspie-Lynch et al. (2021) suggest that the 'stigma' of autism may be related more to behaviours than to labelling. They identified that 'diagnostic labels were typically less stigmatized than behaviors' and that 'disruptive autistic behaviors … evoked more stigma than withdrawn behaviors' (Gillspie-Lynch et al., 2021 p. 459). This chimes with recent findings by Wood (2024) that autistic staff members felt perceived by their colleagues as ''weird', or even 'mad'' (Wood, 2024 p. 43). The advice – overt or implied – that Quince needed to mask in order to be a successful teacher remains deeply ableist: 'expecting everyone to fit right into a pre-existing work environment, and rub along happily and productively together, is an

ableist approach' (Grant and Kara, 2021 p. 603). There is little to suggest in Quince's narrative that it was the 'label' of autism that was the barrier to their success, but much to suggest that it was their authentic autistic self, manifested through unmasked behaviours, that was perceived as an issue. Their lack of attainment of qualified teacher status may have lain, at least in part, in the inability in those around them to accept them as autistic.

Conclusions and recommendations

Many of the recommendations that might emerge from this study are not new. Alexandra Newson's 2024 PhD exploring the experience of autistic educators in the US suggests the need for rejection of neuronormative standards in education and the creation of neuroinclusive spaces (Newson, 2024, p.105). Petty et al. (2023) suggest workplace adjustments for autistic people particularly within education, including provision of 'low-stimulus work spaces, clear instructions and flexible working hours (Petty et al., 2023 p. 236). Wood (2024) recognises the need for wider autism education for all staff, recognising the role that the 'oppressive and stigmatising nature of colleagues' language about autism' may have on autistic school staff (Wood, 2024 p. 48). Martin (2020) widens the discussion to include the marginalisation of many autistic academics, 'challenging narrow ideas about who should engage in research, emphasising the usefulness of insider perspective and collaborations, and prioritising inclusive practice' (Martin, 2020 p. 143).

In practical terms, some simple suggestions that emerge from the sharing of experience as articulated by Quince might include the following:

- Ensure that help offered is helpful to the autistic person. Providing neuronormative support may be counterproductive and may rather be a further source of stress.
- Facilitate privacy, 'down-time', recovery and reset as articulated as necessary by the autistic person. Trust the autistic person's own strategies to support their own wellbeing.
- Encourage social support as indicated as helpful by the autistic person. This may look different to that accessed by others but should not be seen as lesser.
- Trust the individual's individuality. Clothing, mannerisms, speech patterns etc. may 'look autistic', but that should not be perceived as negative.
- Support the autistic teacher to be the best autistic teacher that they can be, not merely strive to make them an adequate neurotypical teacher. Be prepared to explore alternative approaches and to accept that doing something differently can be to do it just as well, and sometimes may be to do it even better.

Of course, 'teacher' in the above could be exchanged for almost any profession or role, or indeed for 'pupil'. The lived experiences of autism as articulated through the examples and illustrations in this study are both highly personal and entirely transferable.

Indeed, if we are serious about supporting autistic people to thrive, perhaps what is most needed is for those people's autism to be recognised and not judged against

neuronormative criteria. And perhaps full acceptance of autistic teachers as autistic might be a good start to facilitating society's wider acceptance of 'autistic' in all autistic people.

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