



BISHOP  
GROSSETESTE  
UNIVERSITY

## [BG Research Online](#)

Lawrence, C. (2022) *Who are the experts? Why autistic voices should be central to autism training in schools*. BERA blog

*This is an accepted manuscript accepted by BERA in its final form on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2022.*

This version may differ slightly from the final published version.

Copyright is retained by the author/s and/or other copyright holders.

End users generally may reproduce, display or distribute single copies of content held within BG Research Online, in any format or medium, for personal research & study or for educational or other not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- The full bibliographic details and a hyperlink to (or the URL of) the item's record in BG Research Online are clearly displayed;
- No part of the content or metadata is further copied, reproduced, distributed, displayed or published, in any format or medium;
- The content and/or metadata is not used for commercial purposes;
- The content is not altered or adapted without written permission from the rights owner/s, unless expressly permitted by licence.

For enquiries about BG Research Online email [bgro@bishopg.ac.uk](mailto:bgro@bishopg.ac.uk).

## **Who are the experts? Why autistic voices should be central to autism training in schools.**

Dr Clare Lawrence

Autism is the most common type of identified need for pupils in English mainstream schools (DfE, 2018) yet despite considerable focus on training, teachers continue to lack confidence in supporting autistic pupils (Vincent and Ralston, 2020). Perhaps one reason for this is that autism training tends to be delivered by neurotypical people to an implied audience of neurotypical teachers. Although some autistic people may sometimes be included at some stages, this training is seldom instigated by the autistic community, and the 'authoritative voice' of the training is seldom that of an autistic person (Bartlett and Carrington, 2021).

The short film *Broken* was created by artist Dr John Rimmer working in close collaboration with young autistic adult Fauxparl to portray a first-person narrative through the eyes of an autistic pupil. The film uses the medium of collage and computer-generated imagery to express events in a mainstream classroom. Fauxparl's reflection on the experience of making *Broken* was recorded in a short article published in 2020 (Fauxparl et al., 2020).

The use of the film to enhance neurotypical teachers' understanding of autism has been explored through its inclusion in the PGCE course at Bishop Grosseteste University. A pilot study exploring use of a draft version of the film was undertaken with the 2019 cohort (Lawrence et al., 2020) and the film revised and modified in response to the feedback. One of the most important impacts of the film (and one missed by many) is that the communication breakdown is caused as much by the teacher's inattention as by the autistic pupil's 'dysfluency'. Nor is the primary issue that disrupts learning caused by autism. The pupil struggles to gain the teacher's attention to indicate that his glasses are broken and that he needs to move closer to the whiteboard. The resulting images, excerpts from computer games, recalled sounds etc. are part of the pupil's rich inner world to which he defaults while disengaged. They are sources of interest and comfort yet are mistaken by many teachers who view the film to indicate 'distress' or 'sensory overload'.

There is a disconnect in experience evident here and, indeed, of perception of what autism 'is'. This may be due to issues of Double Empathy (Milton, 2012). An autistic pupil, this theory suggests, may not have instinctive insight into the thoughts of a neurotypical teacher, but neither does a neurotypical teacher have so into the world of the autistic pupil. If progress is to be made in the mainstream education of our children, the education of neurotypical teachers needs to address this dichotomy.

Of course, not all teachers are neurotypical, and the inclusion of the voice of autistic teachers is of urgent importance if the experience of those who are autistic in our education system is to be better understood. Material for Rimmer's latest film addressing the concept of autistic 'stimming' is drawn from autistic students, autistic adults (including autistic teachers), parents of autistic children and those who span these categories. Responses to the film as it evolves will similarly be sought from teachers and trainee teachers, parents

and students both neurotypical and autistic. These films, and resources made to accompany them, will form part of the teacher education element of the [Autism in Schools Project](#) West Midlands pilot later this year. This project's aim is the better understanding of the lives of autistic people and their families, and, through this understanding, the enabling of real and tangible improvements. It is hoped that collaborative working across the neurological divide as manifested in Rimmer's films may support an environment where differences can be discussed and celebrated rather than hidden. For, as Eve Curie – citing her mother Marie Curie – suggests, it is curiosity that leads to understanding, and it is through understanding that we learn not to fear (Curie, 1938).

#### References:

- Bartlett, T., & Carrington, S. (2021). Autistic voices in autism education research. *Research Approaches to Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum in Inclusive Schools: Outcomes, Challenges and Impact*, 13.
- Curie, E. (1938). *Madame Curie*. Paris: Gallimard
- Department for Education. (2018). Special educational needs in England: January 2018 [Internet]. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2018>
- 'Fauxparl' (Pseudonym), Rimmer, J., Lawrence, C., & Mahon, L. (2020). 'I can't understand a word he says': a personal exploration of autistic dysfluency in film. *Disability & Society*, 36(2), 332-336.
- Lawrence, C., & Rimmer, J. (2020). Pilot study: Can the draft film Broken support trainee teachers' understanding of autism communication issues in mainstream classrooms?. *Teacher Education Advancement Network Journal*, 12(1), 65-74.
- Milton, D. E. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem'. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883-887.
- Vincent, J., & Ralston, K. (2020). Trainee teachers' knowledge of autism: implications for understanding and inclusive practice. *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(2), 202-221.

Clare Lawrence is the English subject lead for the secondary PGCE at Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln. As Head of Participatory Autism Research, her interests include the full involvement of autistic people in all elements of autism research.

