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Lawrence, C. (2022) *“Was it a cat I saw?”: working with autistic English teachers to support understanding of our pupils’ autism perspectives*. Teaching English. ISSN 2051-7971

This is a manuscript accepted for publication in Teaching English

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“Was it a cat I saw?”: working with autistic English teachers to support understanding of our pupils’ autism perspectives

As an Initial Teacher Education lecturer, I am privileged to be able to support autistic trainee teachers on their PGCE journeys. This statement still seems to surprise some people. For them, autism remains something that affects pupils and it is for we the adults to ‘support’ or ‘make adjustments for’ these children. But we know that autistic children grow up into autistic adults, and it really should surprise no one that some of these adults choose to become teachers.

Nor are these teachers constrained within the traditional, stereotyped subjects. Yes, we do have autistic maths and physics trainees, but we also have autistic students learning to be art teachers, music teachers, geography teachers and – most certainly – English teachers.

It has been a huge pleasure for me to work with a number of these autistic English trainees as they have made their successful journey to QTS over the past few years. The insights that they have brought have hugely enriched all of our journeys. Of course, all autistic people are different and autistic teachers can only give one perspective on the world of education. However, I believe this perspective remains hugely important, not least because understanding of autism in schools remains distressingly poor. Again and again when I visit classrooms to observe my trainees teach I am told by the mentor or usual class teacher that the autistic pupil in that class is ‘fine’. In a sense I am happy to believe them – I have known a great many very fine autistic people – but unfortunately that is not what is meant. Too often teachers judge the well-being of autistic pupils through behaviour: if the pupil is quiet and compliant, the assumption is that all is well (or it is suggested that the identification is in error and the pupil is not in fact autistic). Yet we know that autism is not behaviour, and we know also that autism carries with it differences and challenges in communication. I am left to wonder how a neurotypical teacher makes the assessment that an autistic pupil is ‘fine’, if they are judging wholly on their own neurotypical communication criteria.

So how might we begin to understand how autism interacts with the experience of studying English? The autistic English teachers I have known have shared so many nuanced insights into a different way of thinking and interacting with the world and with subject English. The twelve short examples given below give, I believe, a flavour of their perspectives and, as such, some small windows into the experience of our subject from an autistic perspective.

‘I enjoy literature of course, but I can find some imagery overwhelming. For example (and I hate describing this!), the reference to men without boots limping ‘blood-shod’ in *Dulce et Decorum Est* is almost too painful to process. The sensory power of the blood mixing with the mud – the colours, the germs, the pain, the cold, the awful sensitivity of feet - is overwhelming. I have come to dread teaching the poem as I find that image, that one in particular, stays with me and unsettles me for the rest of the day.’

'My passion is for grammar and I can scarcely contain myself when we are analysing a piece of literature. I have to control my urge to deconstruct every sentence, identifying every part of speech and linguistic technique and ruminating on the precise reason the writer chose *that* word or *that* order. The children know this and ask me questions to 'get me started'. But my pupils are always pretty strong on language analysis!'

'Sometimes I find fiction very frustrating. I mean, why doesn't King Lear simply go home? He's divided his kingdom and his residency between his daughters, but his original castle must still be there. All that roaming about on the moor seems a bit rum to me.'

'The word 'spring' was used in a poem that I was sharing with the class, meaning the season that precedes summer. I read it the first time as being a spring as in a coil, and I couldn't get that out of my head. It was like I was looking at two poems simultaneously, one about a season and one about hardware.'

'I really struggle with embarrassment, and cringe-worthy moments. I hate the whole Malvolio thing in *Twelfth Night*. Bullying isn't funny.'

'The trouble is that I see my autistic son in each of my autistic pupils, and I know how upset he gets if I say I'll read him a chapter for his bedtime story and then I can't. I hate it when something happens in class and I can't read the bit of the book that I've said we'll be covering. Most of the kids don't care but I know I'm letting down my autistic pupils, and I should be better than that.'

'I spent a wonderful Saturday afternoon after reading Celia's article (Lawrence et al., 2021), looking at the different uses of 'Sit' and 'Set' in *Of Mice and Men*. I found that 'Sit' (or 'sitting') appears eleven times in the novella, and 'set' – meaning to sit – 23 times. As Celia says, Steinbeck allows the words to imply subtly different conditions. For example, Crooks asks Lennie to 'set down' (p. 69) and join him, yet when he goes on to describe his lonely life he asks Lennie to imagine, 'S'pose you had to sit out here an' read books' (p. 72). To 'set' is to settle, where 'sit' feels uncomfortable. Marvellous!'

‘Books are not real life and we should be careful not to set them out to be. For example, I’m quite like Mr Darcy; I am tall and quiet and socially awkward. Does that make me ‘sexy’? I don’t think so. (Granted, I don’t own a large estate in Derbyshire.)’

‘My sense of humour at school gets me into trouble. I love palindromes (‘Was it a cat I saw?’) and puns. I get hung up on kennings and I can hear myself banging on about them even when I know my pupils haven’t the faintest idea what I’m talking about. Is being ‘funny’ a good thing in a teacher?’

‘I’ve always enjoyed re-reading texts and will read the same books again and again to relax. One of the great things now that I am qualified is that I’m teaching the same texts this year as I did last. I’m finding new things to highlight because of the responses pupils made last time. I can feel my enjoyment growing and my teaching getting richer with each cycle.’

‘I can’t bear injustice. The events in *Atonement* make me feel physically sick. I even struggle with the policeman’s tricks in *An Inspector Calls*. It’s all very clever, but at the end of the day he is lying and is deceiving the family, and that is wrong.’

‘I get enthusiastic about things, and that has always meant a real passion for elements of English. I was taken to a production of *Hamlet* when I was doing my A levels, and it just ‘blew me away’. I went back to see the production again and again. I must have seen it ten times. I could quote great swathes of it. I discovered John Dover Wilson’s 1951 book *What Happens in Hamlet* in the library and read it repeatedly and I even went over to Dublin (of all places) in the Easter holidays before my exams to watch a production of *Hamlet* there.

Sadly, the set text for the exam that year was *The Tempest*!’

What these snippets from autistic English teachers show us is that our autistic pupils may be focussing on elements that are just a little different to those of the rest of the class. They may be hyper focused on one element, may be struggling to maintain an overview of the whole, may be repulsed or distressed by a particular image, event or word use. Conversely, they may be enjoying literature in a way that others have missed or be engrossed in a particular element. The teachers who share these examples have all graduated as ‘good’ at English, so have found ways of decoding the implications of non-verbal cues in texts. Indeed, one told me that he learned to understand back and forth dialogue through reading

examples in novels, and another that she hadn't understood how a look or a gesture could carry meaning until Jane Austin showed her! However, this may not yet be true for some autistic pupils and they – even the brightest of them – my 'trip up' on what may seem quite simple points. The uneven profile of autism has both peaks and troughs, and I believe that it is essential that we are alert as teachers for both, for the variation in our teaching that may be required and for the potential for originality and insight that our autistic pupils may bring.

We also have a responsibility to be aware of what we teach, and in particular of the portrayals of disability and of autism that we share with our pupils. In a later article in *Teaching English* I will be looking at this in more detail and exploring how our English curriculum, and how we deliver it, can support or challenge preconceived notions of 'disability'.

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Reference:

Lawrence, C., *, C., Collyer, E., & Poulson, M. (2021). "Howling at the scrabble-board": exploring classroom literature from an autistic viewpoint. *English in Education*, 55(2), 164-176.