Exploring the experiences and attitudes of primary school boys towards autistic peers in the mainstream school setting: A focus group study

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The primary research question was how do TD pupils relate to autistic peers and does this relate/inform the negative social outcomes documented in the literature on autistic pupils.

The study design was an exploratory focus group approach, where a semi structured interview schedule was employed due to the complexity of the phenomenon, and over representation of questionnaire based approaches. Findings in the literature support that autistic pupils are bullied more than their TD counterparts, and those with other conditions and are poorly integrated into social groups at school. Qualities of social interaction between autistic and TD pupils in the mainstream school setting remain relatively unexplored.

Four themes were identified: negative experiences of engaging/observing peers with autism in school, association of autism with incapacity/low ability, perceived need to ‘be careful’ when developing friendships with autistic peers, and predominantly ‘inclusive’ attitude towards the hypothetical autistic pupil.

Pupils’ responses suggested that some were quite aware of autistic peers’ characteristics, contrary to theory. Participants frequently described these characteristics as disruptive and sometimes as attracting teasing behaviour. In some cases participants seemed to learn from experiences at school and formed predominantly negative views. This investigation sheds light on the qualitative features of bullying and social neglect of autistic pupils and how these hostile interactions seemed to shape the attitudes of some of the participants.