

If I were a teacher... - Cogitations of People on the Autism Spectrum About the Teacher's Vision

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ABSTRACT:

This article is part of a broader study on adults with autism. The main assumption of the series of studies is concerned with listening to and hearing the voices of those most affected - those with a diagnosis of autism. The collected material, which is based on our own experiences of people with autism, allows us to present views on the teacher's role- the educational space's creator. Thus far, we have introduced the experiences and comments of teachers and therapists; now, we can listen to the voices of students, parents, and people with autism. This study employed the netnographic method. The study involved a group of people diagnosed with autism, and a meeting closed online for those who agreed to participate.

Reaching out to a large group made it possible to analyze the results of the statements given by ranking and creating meaning bundles. Furthermore, by differentiating according to age and gender, it became possible to conduct a deeper qualitative analysis concerning specific statements that seem representative of this group of people.

The first conclusion is that the approach to the teaching/learning process differs. This is due to symptoms that are specific to autism, as well as the different educational and therapeutic approaches. The second is related to the use of punishment that, in addition to the forbidden ones (such as physical), often evolve into psychological and social punishments, such as isolation, marginalization, or a lack of interest. It seems equally important to draw attention to the ineffective attempts to impose (often referred to as violating) recognized normative forms of functioning and the treatment of these people as not fully intellectually capable, which is not a condition.

Purpose of the research. The research aims to present the educational reality described by the people who are the most concerned in this study, i.e., those who have been diagnosed with autism at various stages in their lives.

Keywords: education, adolescence, autism, netnography

INTRODUCTION

In previous research and publications, I have dealt with the perception of autism spectrum disorders, trying to present them from the position of a person displaying the disorder (Błeszyński, 2020). Often, as professionals, we are convinced of our knowledge of how to perceive and shape the world of others, including non-normative people. We know from experience that this is not always objective but, in fact most often deceptive. The problem of understanding the other person was addressed in philosophy by Węgrzycki (1992) and many others (see Błeszyński, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to gain insight into the problem of different perceptual states experienced, for example, by people with autism. In this publication, I will present a slice of the study with the aim of making a convincing case for the validity of phenomenological research, especially when we want to gain insight into a closed, separated (or separating), primarily different environment.

Thanks to recent social, economic, and cultural (including religious) changes, society is becoming more open and inclusive. However, this allows for extended analyses, based on netnographic research, drawing on students' experiences and reflections on the educational process.

In the paper based on the earlier research¹ mentioned above, the statements of people with autism on the vision of the teacher in education are presented with reference to *pedeutology*, a branch of pedagogy (sub-discipline) examining issues related to the teaching profession (Okoń, 2007). The related research interests thus include the search for answers to questions about the teaching profession and perceptions and images related to that profession, as well as those actions of teachers and other educational professionals that can improve their educational impact on people with ASD.

Description of the analyzed group and the research method

The study aimed to discover the opinions on education held by people with autism. Respondents were individuals, members of closed online forums verifying them for a diagnosis of autism. I have also cooperated with the following foundations: *Autism Team* from Łódź, *Prodeste* from Opole, and *Alpha* from Lublin, which brings adults with an autism diagnosis together and supports their

functioning in society. Sixty-two people from all over Poland participated in the study (34 women, 26 men, and two people who specified their gender as different). Respondents were aged between 14 and 47 years (the average age of respondents was 28.3). Participation in the research was voluntary and was limited to people who had been diagnosed with autism. Four students were in their final year of primary school, nine were in secondary school, and fourteen were students. Among the respondents, thirty-three graduated from higher education in various fields (mostly humanities and arts). The remaining two people did not indicate education. These people were mainly included in mainstream education at a time when many initiatives to support people with an autism diagnosis were emerging.

It is important to note that the people interviewed present multiple different experiences of approaches to educational support, ranging from segregated to inclusive and mixed education. This occurs as, nowadays, most students with autism are classified as having special educational needs, and arrangements are made to address this. This ongoing transformation of the system was described by Angelika Figiel (2019).

I used the netnographic interview method based on Kozinets's (2012) concept for this study. I have used it before in researching people with autism and their functioning (Błeszyński, 2020; 2021). After confirming that it would be possible to discover the opinions of people with autism using this method, I asked the following questions: 1) How do people with autism perceive the education, care, and therapy system? 2) Does this system meet their expectations and fulfill their educational needs? The study was conducted using an online survey in Polish, accessed on the Google Forms platform. The survey was distributed electronically and was available at a URL address sent to (on Platforms) selected groups of people diagnosed with autism. In the light of reviews and opinions, the material presented previously has served its purpose. Thanks to the cooperation with foundations and the community's interest in changing the perception of autism, it was possible to gather relevant material. The study was conducted utilizing an online survey in Polish using the netnography method, which was placed on the Google Forms platform. The survey was distributed electronically and was available at a distributed URL to selected groups of people with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

The pilot study was conducted from November to December 2019, with the main examination in 2020 and 2021. The survey consisted of twenty closed, choice,

¹ A compact position is being prepared.

open, and evaluation questions divided into four sections. Closed questions: 1. General, 2. Pertaining to education: preference of learning styles, forms of education and therapy used, Open questions: 3. Respondents' presentation of their vision of education, therapy; 4. Scoring institutional and non-institutional support.

The research was voluntary and ensured complete anonymity. The material was collected as part of individual research conducted at the Institute of Pedagogical Sciences of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the Institute of Pedagogy of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw.

Cogitation on the state of the educator, teacher - *If I were a teacher...*

This problematic statement invites reflection as it relates to internal beliefs stemming from experiences at school. These are our perceptions and wishes, which prevent from being a student, a parent of a student, or a teacher. These experiences are differentiated in time, referring to historical and organizational conditions, for example, segregated education. Experiences are also related to the

period of introduction of the integration and inclusion system, which can be described as a mixed and often heterogeneously introduced system, as can be seen in the different approaches to integration systems in European countries, from single team attempts to total integration, as in Scandinavia or Italy (Wyczesany & Gajdzica, 2005).

These conscious or unconscious experiences allow for a probabilistic, often wishful, idea of school. Imaginings do not always focus on idealized schools but often incorporate a rational view of the kind of school it should be by design, the kind of school one could aspire to. My research focuses primarily on analyzing the placement of the child with ASD in the education system.

Respondents' first question was, "If I were a teacher of a child with autism, I would always try...". As mentioned earlier, the respondents formulated their suggestions based on their own childhood experience of being a student with autism, which the education system considers to be a deviation from normal development, a disability, or a disorder. In this attitude, the teacher should be guided by an adaptive, compensatory system aimed at shaping the desired educational outcomes (see Figure 1).

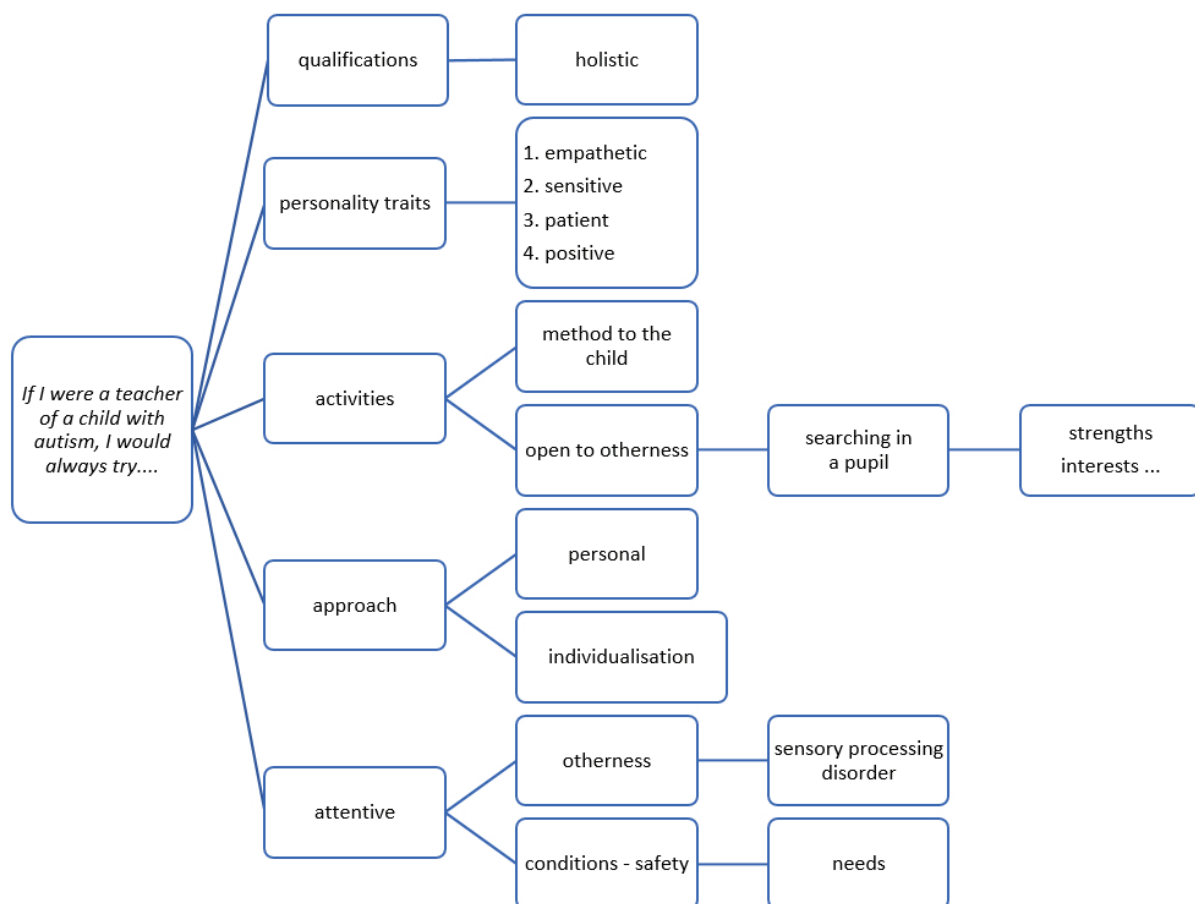


Figure 1. Statements of the respondents to the following question: *If I were a teacher of a child with autism, I would always try...*

The respondents' statements can be divided into activities (duties) resulting from the status of an educator, personality traits that a teacher should have, and what they should pay more attention to in the case of children with ASD (Figure 1). At the forefront of the many qualities teachers require is the ability to sense the mental states of others - subjects, pupils, or parents caring for them. Adopting others' way of thinking includes looking at reality from their perspective. It is also the ability to imagine a mental attitude that belongs to another person - decentration.

This attitude is linked to patience and is based on personalization and individualism. Above all, a positive attitude is linked to sensitivity and empathy. In principle, what is essential is not to cope, reduce, or lower the requirements but to mobilize self-education and self-determination. Respondents highlighted conscious leadership and building on motivation towards self-development through guided, individual interpretation. Examples of this emerge from concepts: *understand the pupil; listen to his/her needs, be patient; look for strengths, follow special interests, learn from this child to see the world through his/her eyes; understand what he/she feels; respond to the child's needs, develop self-awareness; look for teaching methods that suit the needs of the pupil; to find out what the sensory needs are to be able to emphasize some and minimize others.*

The actions taken should be based mainly on adapting the system to meet the needs and abilities of the pupil learning about his/her resources and limitations in order to optimize the actions taken. However, such an approach is not a traditional system that focuses on mastering as much material as possible. Still, it is a progressive system that uses various sources to learn skills. It is a search for opportunities for the student to expand their knowledge and build skills based on their predispositions and aptitudes, which should be a determinant of his/her further development (for example, *try to create a positive relationship with him/her; listen, support and not interpret behavior, give maximum security; be alert to his/her needs and follow them, try to create an ultimate comfortable learning environment*).

The specificity of working with a student with ASD is his/her different way of perception, which is based on perceptual systems (depending on the channels of experience), as well as perceiving (often referred to as *reading*) his/her condition. For example, the following concepts were mentioned by respondents: *being sensitive to the student's needs, taking into account different emotional codes; take into account the needs and the future of the child; following the needs of the pupil, help him/her to develop passions, adapt the forms of delivery of the material to his/her*

cognitive abilities; follow his/her step, interests, and memorizing skills.

These comments orient positive attitudes towards behaviors found in students with ASD, often incorrectly formed approaches (due to our attitudes and negative experiences). This is often the result of the different emotional codes of people with ASD, as well as the environment as pupils with ASD perceive it. This significantly impacts their sense of security and is due to the specific perception of sensations (e.g., thanks to people with ASD, quiet rooms have been created for neuralgic pupils). For example, *be aware of the child's needs and differences; adapt the teaching method to the child (anyone, not just those with ASD); better understand emotions, feelings, and experiences (specifically sensory experiences, smell, hearing, etc.) in different situations.*

The experience does not point to an ideal teacher, but one who focuses primarily on the student, his or her individual development, and integrating him or her into the social system. Attention was drawn to the need for adaptation inducement rather than simple assimilation. The teacher primarily takes these actions to enable the pupil to find his or her place within the (peer) group. The main objective is inclusion, understood here as being in the community rather than transforming any parties (student or system). Creating optimal conditions adapted to the needs and possibilities required to accept otherness, understand/comprehend, and favoritism.

What we should avoid, abandon in our teaching work - If I were a teacher of a child with autism, I would never ...

The education experience also includes envisioning something that one would never want to experience in education. Pupils who deviate from the norm and are considered *non-standard* are significantly affected; this applies both to gifted pupils and those with difficulties and disorders. In the case of autism, their abnormal social behavior and the range and depth of their interests draw attention. The educational system must be modified in such situations, and non-standard, specialized interventions are sought.

After analyzing the collected material, I categorized the answers to this question: *If I were a teacher of a child with autism, I would never...* according to the activities carried out (Figure 2).

In terms of the educators' behavior, the most frequently indicated negative impacts were verbal and physical violence. Despite assurances, the creation of recommendations and regulations such as the *Charter For Persons With*

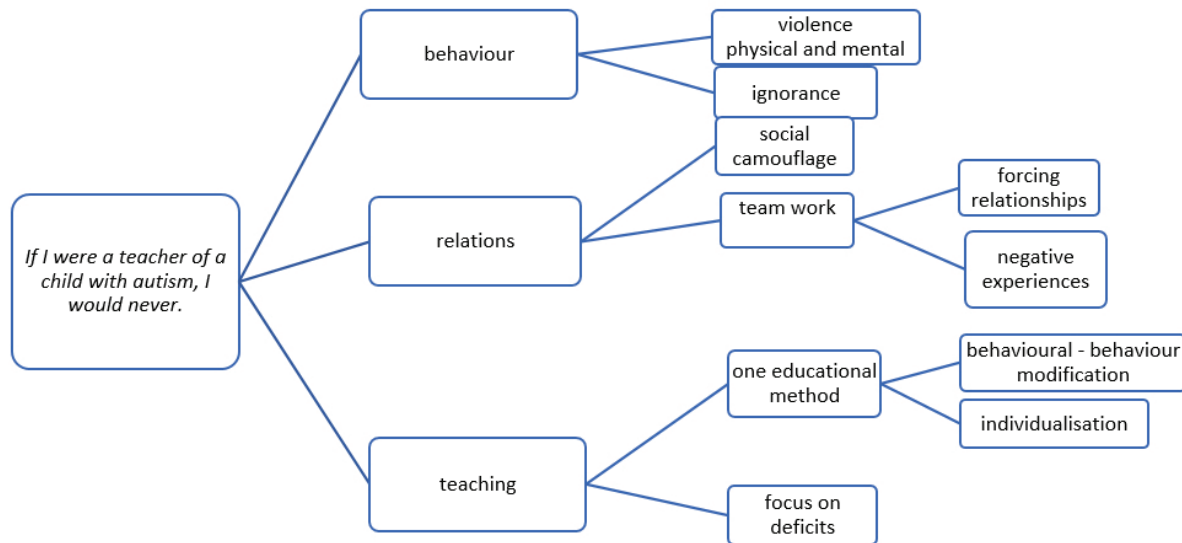


Fig. 1. Statements of the respondents to the following question: *If I were a teacher of a child with autism, I would never ...*
 Source: Author.

Autism (Autism Europe, 1992), the interviews very often included statements about violent behavior. These were arbitrarily regarded to be abnormal or forbidden, and in the case of people with ASD, they did not produce the expected effects (if not the opposite) (see Błeszyński, 2020; Pisula, 2008). These behaviors are often signs of helplessness or professional burnout (Piętka, 2005); such behavior should not be tolerated or allowed. The statements pointed to behaviors such as labeling, which aims to depreciate, but also mentioned ignoring physical needs and emotions, leading to a severe feeling of irrelevance or even applied exclusion. Here, mention is also made of behaviors undertaken that are aimed at judging, often comparing against another person, as well as rushing and applying punishments.

The relationships developed in a school have different dimensions. It is important to shape them but not to force them, as doing so can create artificial relationships that result in violence or that ignore students with ASD. Negative conditioning within groups undermines self-esteem and well-being. As the respondents point out, the difficulty they face is teamwork, which, when imposed and often treated as a limitation of the autism feature, eventually becomes a hindering or prosocial action. The need for friends and peers for pupils with ASD is highly individualistic and often linked to self-determination.

Respondents pointed out the use of schematic approaches that –indicate teachers lack understanding of their situation and social problems. For instance:

Did not teach social masking; did not expect him/her to learn in one particular way, even if this form of learning was convenient for me or worked well with

other students; did not raise my voice at him, would not impose being sociable, talking to peers. I wouldn't instill that everyone can and must have a girlfriend, mate, or colleague. I know from personal experience that mobilizing in these areas in a "Get on with it" way can make you depressed, discouraged, or irritated."

Regarding respondents' evaluations of education systems, a negative attitude is presented to the behavioral influences at the heart of the general and special education systems. Behavior modification is mainly focused on change by creating a different approach. It should be considered deficit-focused (both partial and global), aiming at a predetermined change, such as striving to achieve a specific goal the teacher sets. For example,

I would not use violence; I would not judge, I would not label; I would not force with behavioral methods, shout, ignore his/her needs, messages, use violence; indeed corporal punishment, raising the voice is not an option, neither is holding/restraining in other ways. I also find it unacceptable to ridicule and treat a child like a half-wit because if they have a diagnosis of autism, they probably understand less than their peers, so they require adjustments for a child with NI/strong learning difficulties themselves, not just a comfortable environment at work. In my opinion, it is also bad to be forced to participate in P.E. lessons, the lights shining in your eyes, or the classes that were embarrassing for me, e.g., movement and dance classes, which I remember the worst, and in the latter ones I was lucky not to take part in despite the threat of getting the lowest grade for standing like a pole."

What is also a problem of unjustified extreme individualization makes it inherently impossible to adapt to the needs of the wider society. My previous research (Błaszczak, 2020) has already identified misplaced generalizations about students with autism. Among the perceived generalizations is that students with autism are primarily interested in science subjects or that autism causes secondary intellectual disability or developmental delay. This assumption somehow forces the system to adapt the contents and tasks in the educational system towards people with autism adequately: *She did not force him to do group work and did not make him do something he already knew how to do; she did not force the child to socialize, shout, ridicule or allow peer violence.*

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Concerning the questions formulated above, it is important to highlight both the possibility and necessity of drawing on the lived experiences of autistic people. The observed reflexivity, which is undoubtedly intentional despite many of the respondents working as teachers in both schools and academic centers and being parents themselves, points to ongoing limitations they have faced and continue to meet in the education system as an organized system. Importantly, these responses also lack negation or condemnation; however, the desire to share their own experiences along with ideas for change to improve the education of future *students with autism* prevails. Supporting this creative approach appropriately is, thus, undoubtedly a challenge that people with autism have faced in forming their support groups (Silberman, 2017).

In conclusion, I would like to highlight that the education of people with autism is mainly viewed from the perspective of teachers and parents of students. How to organize forward-looking models is found in many publications, such as the team of May and others (2020). Also, the work by Bolourian and coauthors (2021) is interesting; it outlines teachers' perceptions of autism and demonstrates opportunities for inclusive interactions and the formation of social relationships. McDougal, Riby, and Hanley (2020) outlined the problems teachers face in classrooms with children with autism. Similar analyses were presented by Sciotto and coauthors (1999). Also, it seems essential to address the issue of awareness of autism as a disorder that hampers the educational process among teachers, as mentioned by Arif, Niazy, Hassan, and Ahmed (2013). The observations are consistent with Polish teachers' experi-

ence, such as research conducted by Antonik (2015) and Woźniak (2018), who point out the educational difficulties.

However, the mainstream approach is individualized guidance. This system is based primarily on incentives, punishments, and rewards (for example, in the form of applied assessment). In the case of pupils on the autism spectrum, one of the most effective methods is based on behavioral interactions, which was adopted in the 1990s (Schopler & Schaffer, 2022). At the same time, alternative forms of education and therapy for pupils with an autism diagnosis were emerging (see the Option Method, etc.). This is a response to a non-directive system of pedagogical influence. Anna Prokopiak also notes this issue, offering a suggested response involving a departure from actions based on a behavioral approach and moving towards a pathway based on the autistic person's initiative, interaction, and communication skills (Prokopiak, 2020). The presented statements of the respondents allow us to direct our visions of education mainly away from differentiation and separation towards inclusive education, in which forms of coercion, imposition, and punishment cannot be used. According to the positive vision, the school should be individually oriented to the needs and abilities of the pupils, adapting optimally without abandoning educational requirements. This enables and follows the student with the essentials first and foremost. Respondents indicate that school is not an imposed and enforced educational and upbringing model. Still, allowing the influence of the student's participation in implementing this educational program becomes crucial.

It should be noted that people on the autism spectrum often draw attention to the downplaying, leniency, and abandonment of interventions on the grounds of autism, which they consider to be inappropriate, even derogatory. Particularly from their adulthood perspective, they are critical of the possibility of being ignored because of their diagnoses. Autism, from their point of view, is not a limitation but a different perspective on knowledge and the surrounding reality, which often does not conform to commonly accepted norms. This results in frequent misunderstandings and negative attitudes towards people with autism, who are described as challenging to live with, with limited perceptual capacities (often referred to as handicapped), and not conforming to the assumptions of the educational system as well as the conventions accepted in society.

The analyses presented above draw attention to the need to develop a subjective approach to questions concerning education problems. The proposed approach is

thus based on examining the role of the teacher from an expert perspective – that of the teacher. This perspective is expected to reveal a broader understanding of neurodiversity (Borkowska – in print), with such classification seen as not a division into us and others but a respect for difference. In the paper presented, people with autism are thus called upon to suggest organizational, functional, and personal solutions to experienced issues. As Madalińska-Michalak (2021) points out, the underlying essence of any such work is the need to make changes both in terms of the approaches to the role of the teacher by taking care of their supporting environments, including career development and professional satisfaction while revitalizing the image of teachers by affording them the required autonomy and professional development, and by shaping social perceptions, including building trust in teachers and schools and thus recruiting the best candidates to the profession. As people with ASD have highlighted, this creates a vision of the changes already taking place in education in Poland and across the world and emphasizes the importance of empowerment.

The current state of knowledge, as well as the development of research and analytical techniques, should compel us to continue to gain insights into the experiences of the people described rather than limiting ourselves to our own experiences. This change of perspective focused on the subject, which is a student with a diagnosis of autism in the school system, moving away from the beaten track of education in favor of listening and searching for alternative, innovative solutions starting from the essence of inclusion. To achieve an open and searching society, respecting and enabling those who hitherto have been defined as “Others” is essential. It moves away from the importance of knowledge and its transmission to exploration and formation.

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