



Summary Report of Initial Findings

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Introduction

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition which can affect how people communicate and interact with the world. Autism has often been thought of as a predominantly ‘male condition’, and whilst current data report that it is more common in males than females, the gap between the two has narrowed significantly in recent years. Gender differences in the prevalence of autism have led to a gender bias in research literature, with many previous studies focusing exclusively or predominantly on males. However, recent research has revealed differences in the way autism presents in females.

Autistic girls are often misdiagnosed or diagnosed later than autistic boys, delaying the process of securing support that may be needed. A better understanding of autistic girls is vital in ensuring that they can enjoy and participate in their school years, both academically and socially.

Study aims

To begin to address some of the gaps in knowledge regarding autistic girls in education, we designed a study to explore perceptions and understanding of autistic girls among teaching staff in the UK. To date, there is only one published study (Gray et al., 2021) on SENCo perceptions of autism in girls. The current study aims to extend this knowledge to teaching staff across the education system.

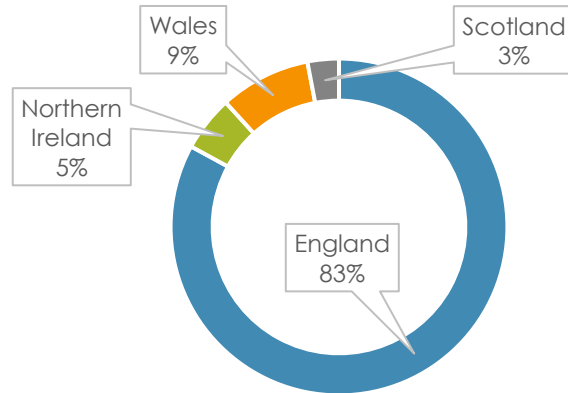
What did we do?

To discover more about teacher experiences and perceptions of autistic girls, we created an online survey. We asked teaching staff to tell us about the type and location of school they worked in, as well as questions about their role and experience. We then explored training, knowledge, and experiences of autism in school, with particular reference to autistic girls. We also invited open-ended responses about participants’ experiences of challenges autistic girls may have, and strategies they have found to be useful.

The survey was open from early June to the end of July 2021. Teaching staff were recruited via snowball sampling methods including social media, networks and contacts, and publicly available school contact details.

Who took part?

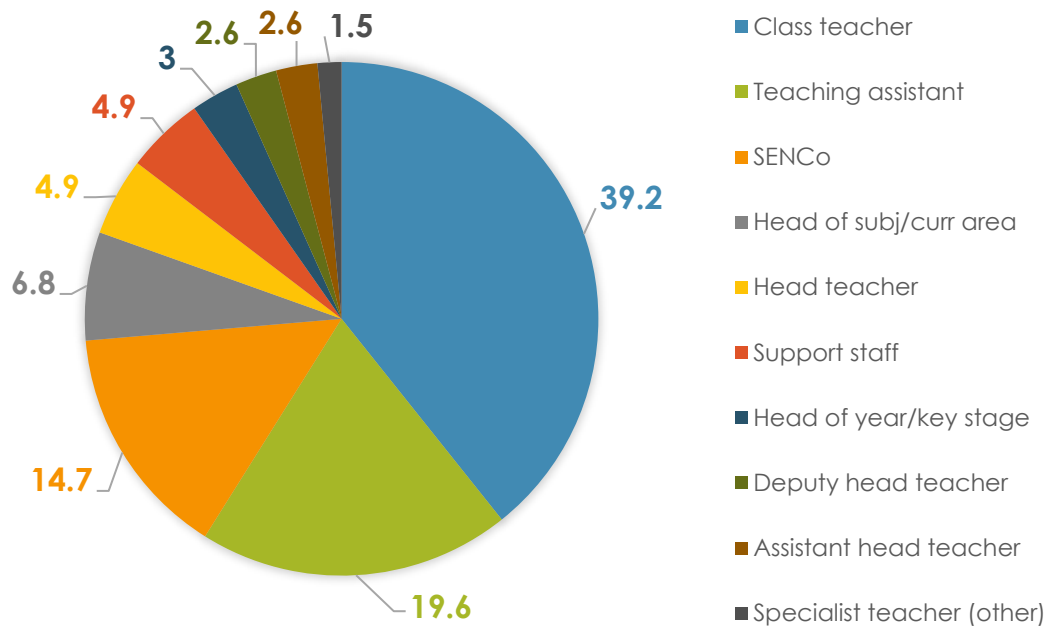
265 school staff responded to the survey from across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.



The respondents had a wide range of experience, from less than a year to over 30 years, with the largest group having 6-10 years' experience.

84% of respondents worked in a mainstream school (including those with Additional Resource Provisions). Just under half worked in a secondary school, with a near even split of classroom teachers from primary and secondary settings. 91% of respondents worked in a state school.

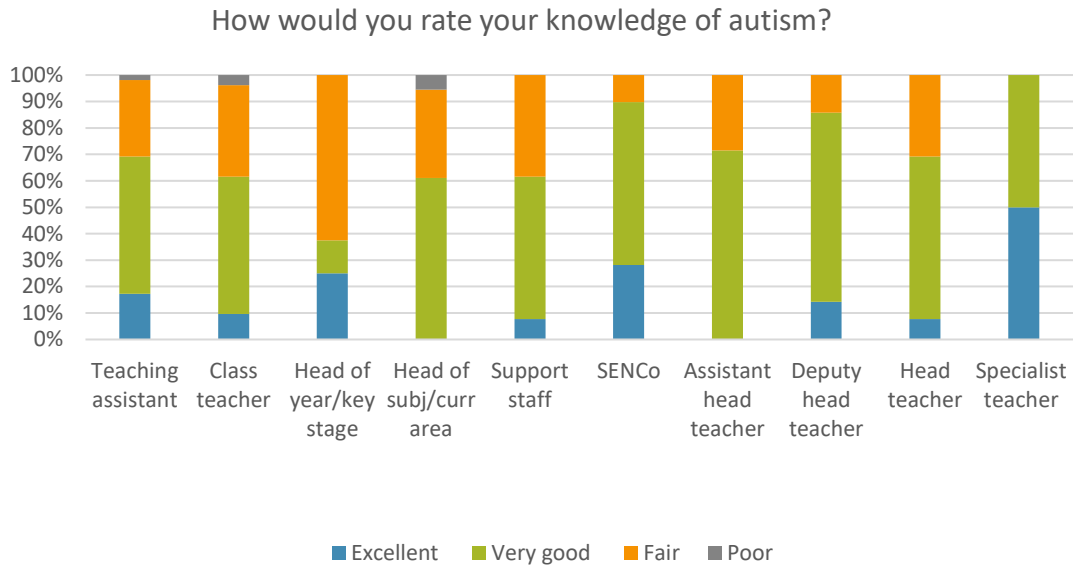
Responses came from a range of staff: the largest group was classroom teachers, followed by teaching assistants and SENCos. Staff in a variety of leadership positions also completed the survey including head teachers, heads of subject or curriculum areas.



Initial findings

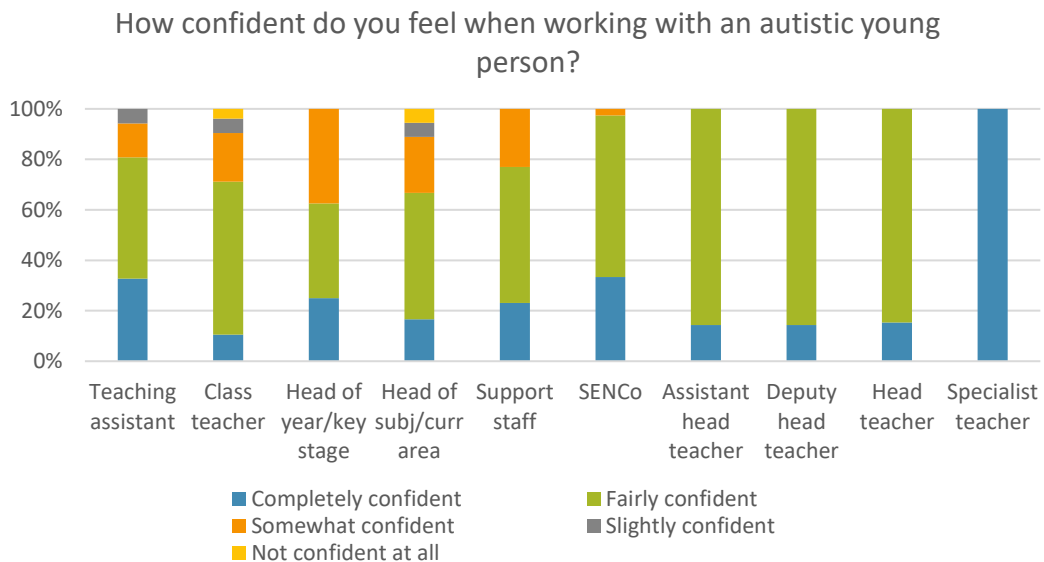
Staff knowledge

Most respondents reported that their knowledge of autism was either 'very good' (54%) or 'fair' (29%), with 14% of respondents indicating that their knowledge was 'excellent' and only 2% as 'poor'. This varied according to staff roles as can be seen in the diagram below:



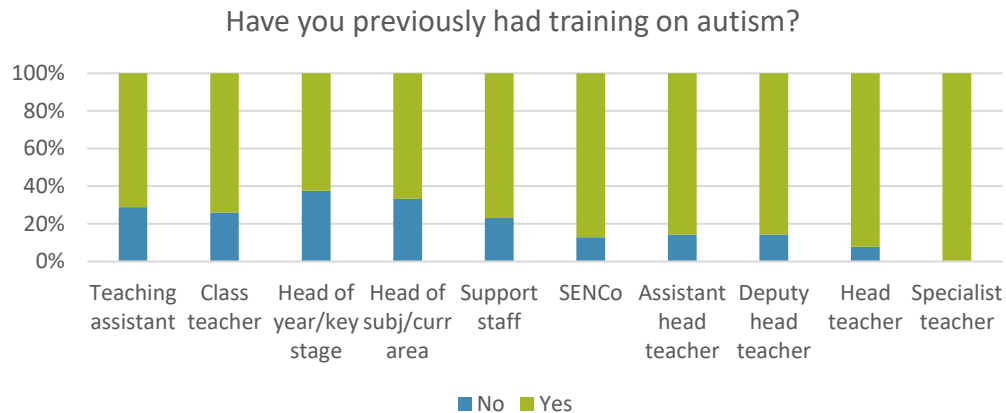
Staff confidence

Most staff had a reasonably high level of confidence when working with a young autistic person (i.e., 22% were 'completely confident' and 59% 'fairly confident'), but again this varied according to role.



Staff training

The majority of teaching staff (77%) had received some form of autism-specific training.



Experience of working with autistic girls

50% of participants felt that autism is more common in boys than girls, although nearly 40% believed that prevalence was likely to be the same, with 10% unsure. However, the overwhelming majority (84.5%) felt that autism presents differently in girls.

Study participants were then asked about observed differences in the presentation of autism, with some notable trends emerging:

Autistic girls were reported to be more likely to have friends than boys, and this may be because their interests are more similar to those of peers than those of autistic boys. In addition, they tended to copy the behaviour of others more and try to hide their autistic traits compared to autistic boys.

However, autistic boys were more likely to be bullied than girls (although the figures are worryingly high for both groups at 64.2% and 54.7% respectively) and were reported to have much higher levels of challenging behaviour. Both groups were observed to have difficulties coping with change and sensory over/under-sensitivity, with this being slightly higher for boys.

Although reported prevalence of mental health difficulties was worryingly high for both groups, it was much higher for autistic girls (83% compared to 63.4% for autistic boys), and girls were reported to have more frequent absence from school than boys.

Qualitative findings

Approximately two-thirds of participants chose to answer the open-ended questions in the second part of the survey. Most respondents felt that autistic girls are often misdiagnosed or diagnosed later than boys due to their ability to mask and camouflage their autistic traits.

One respondent reported that in their experience:

“...girls tend to be much better at copying others to 'fit in' and can be the quiet/shy children that 'fly under the radar' or 'don't make a fuss' in order to stay invisible. They are less likely to be on their own and spend time on the periphery of lots of different friendship groups - not 'fitting in' but not 'sticking out' either. I think there is a lot more 'masking of behaviours' that they think others won't like or want to see. This makes the characteristics harder to spot.”

Respondents were asked about the challenges they felt autistic girls faced at school, with the most common responses around making friends and trying to fit in. It was frequently reported that other diagnoses had been given (e.g., anxiety) prior to recognition of autism. Mental health concerns were frequently mentioned by respondents in relation to masking, sensory overload, and difficulties arising from the school environment. There was consensus that a lack of awareness and understanding among teaching staff could be a challenge. Staff reported that receiving a diagnosis of autism was helpful, as difficulties could arise in providing adequate support without one. One respondent wrote:

“...they could potentially slip under the radar of the teaching staff. Girls are more eager to please and not speak up and would probably sit and attempt the work rather than create a disturbance.”

Another respondent summarised the issues as:

“Autism-blindness ... Just because girls mask so fantastically well, it shouldn't be deemed that they are fine in school. Wider education and understanding of autism in girls are required.”

Strategies for support

Respondents provided details of a wide range of strategies that they found to be helpful in supporting autistic girls, including structure, sensory-specific strategies, consistency and clarity of communication. For example:

- *Visual timetables, with “now and next” timetables helping to ease anxiety surrounding the fast-paced, confusing nature of schools;*
- *Building close relationships between staff and children so they feel they have someone who they can trust, and staff showing attentiveness to their interests;*
- *1:1 support sessions and regular “check-ins” to support with not just the curriculum but with friendships and routines;*
- *Being more flexible with lesson participation, e.g., in PE the choice to be “a performer or an umpire”, choice to get changed “wherever she wants”;*
- *Visual aids to help express emotions e.g., “feelings cards,” or a “worry box”;*
- *Early/extra transition sessions so the girls do not feel overwhelmed by change.*

Summary and next steps

This report has provided a snapshot of insights from the initial analysis of the survey responses. Important themes are emerging regarding staff awareness and confidence, mental health concerns about autistic girls and masking. Respondents have shared a range of valuable strategies and highlighted priorities for staff training and development of a more inclusive school environment. The next stage of this study involves a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the data which will be used to inform a more detailed report and publications. It is hoped that the findings will be used to inform school practice and staff training, and consequently the educational experiences of autistic girls.



We would like to thank everyone for taking the time to participate in the survey and look forward to providing you with further reports (available on request via email) as this research develops.

For further information on the research project, please contact the principal investigator Dr Judith Hebron – j.hebron@leeds.ac.uk

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References and useful resources

Gray, L., Bownas, E., Hicks, L., Hutcheson-Galbraith, E., & Harrison, S. (2021). Towards a Better Understanding of Girls on the Autism Spectrum: Educational Support and Parental Perspectives. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 37(1), 74-93.

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