

'Which psycho-social-environmental factors relate to positive mental well-being for autistic students in mainstream secondary school?' - A Systematic Review

by Marisa McKinlay^{1,2}, Eilidh Cage¹, Catherine Grainger¹, Mary Stewart²

¹ University of Stirling; ² Heriot Watt University

Background

- Issues for autistic students coping in mainstream schools (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008)
- Little research on how young people meet their own needs in school
- Positive relationships & social engagement are associated with student well-being (Danker et al., 2019, Siggers, 2015)
- Social context important in facilitating effective engagement (Milton et al., 2018, Crompton et al., 2020)
- Neurodiversity approach – moving away from the medical, impairment based model

Method – A Systematic Review

- **Literature search:** May – August 2021 electronic databases, search terms – 'autistic+teenager+school' Hand search of citations (retrieved papers) & key journals. Results: 3896 papers, 116 relevant
- Final search June 2022
- **Eligibility criteria:** Qualitative report of mainstream secondary school – factors affecting positive mental well-being
- Self report by 11-18yo autistic students, or staff/ parent/ autistic adult report. Primary studies in English, any year, all countries, peer reviewed journal
- **Study selection:** Title/ Abstract screen results - 76 papers, Full Paper screen results - 36 papers
- Second Reviewer: 100% agreement. Screen of 116 title/abstracts, Screen of 8 full papers
- **Critical appraisal:** Risk of bias quality assessment using CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme)
- **Data extraction:** Key information about study design and methodology, participant demographics, and findings
- **Data analysis & synthesis:** An iterative process - developing (i) key study findings into themes (ii) a set of synthesized findings (iii) final overarching syntheses (meta-aggregation approach)

Key Quotes & Themes

'I have a threshold, a threshold we should not exceed'

(Aubineau & Blicharska, 2020)

'it makes me feel really calm.. And inspired'
(Tomlinson et al., 2020)

'My friends were my rock...They made my high school experience fun'
(Bottema-Beutel et al., 2019)

'She gives people room...To breathe'
(Siggers et al., 2011)

Exam day: 'the best day of my life...Silence is gold. For me, it's perfect'
(Aubineau & Blicharska, 2020)

Theme 1: Acceptance & Agency

Subthemes:

- Authentic connections with peers
- My needs are understood by adults
- Know myself & take agency

Theme 2: An accessible environment

Subthemes:

- Access to activities I enjoy/ with purpose
- Access to respite & 'a place to go' (Myles et al., 2019)
- Accommodations help
- Sensory that suits me

Discussion *A work in Progress...*

The research team identified factors which promoted positive well-being for autistic students in school. There are issues in defining what constitutes well-being (Danker et al., 2019) - well-being was interpreted when the student expressed positive experience.

Key factors that relate to well-being

- Achieving reciprocal connections with peers, in which their authentic selves are valued
- Feeling supported by adults in a positive and flexible way, according to fluctuating needs
- Having a sense of agency in adapting one's daily routine and shaping the sensory environment to reduce pressures
- Having an accessible environment in which the young person feels empowered:
 - To take part in enjoyable/ purposeful activities e.g. favourite lessons or interests
 - Find respite with social/ sensory 'breaks' & have 'a place to go' (Myles et al., 2019) in unstructured times e.g. a club, library, SEN base
 - Employ & receive accommodations e.g. use of technology, time out card
 - To manage the sensory environments – problem solving to minimise negative sensory stimuli & seeking sensory experience that they find more positive

What Next?

The resulting themes will inform a larger interview study on the topic. Ultimately we will develop a school-based intervention which promotes positive social participation.

Please get in touch with comments & feedback: m.c.mckinlay@stir.ac.uk