

The lived experience of autistic children & adolescents in mainstream schools

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Introduction

- According to the Department for Education (2015), 73% of autistic children in the English state school system are educated in mainstream schools.
- However, despite having average or above-average academic ability, autistic children in mainstream schools do not achieve the same levels of academic success as their non-autistic peers with 26% of autistic children achieving five A* - C grades at GCSE in 2014/2015 compared with 57% of the general school population in the same period (Department for Education, 2016).
- Research points to a number of possible causes for this disparity and a large literature exists on the particular challenges autistic children face. However, much of this research comes from standardised testing or from interviews with parents, carers and professionals rather than the young people themselves.
- Very little research has been conducted into how autistic children make sense of the mainstream school experience or what it means to be autistic in this particular environment.

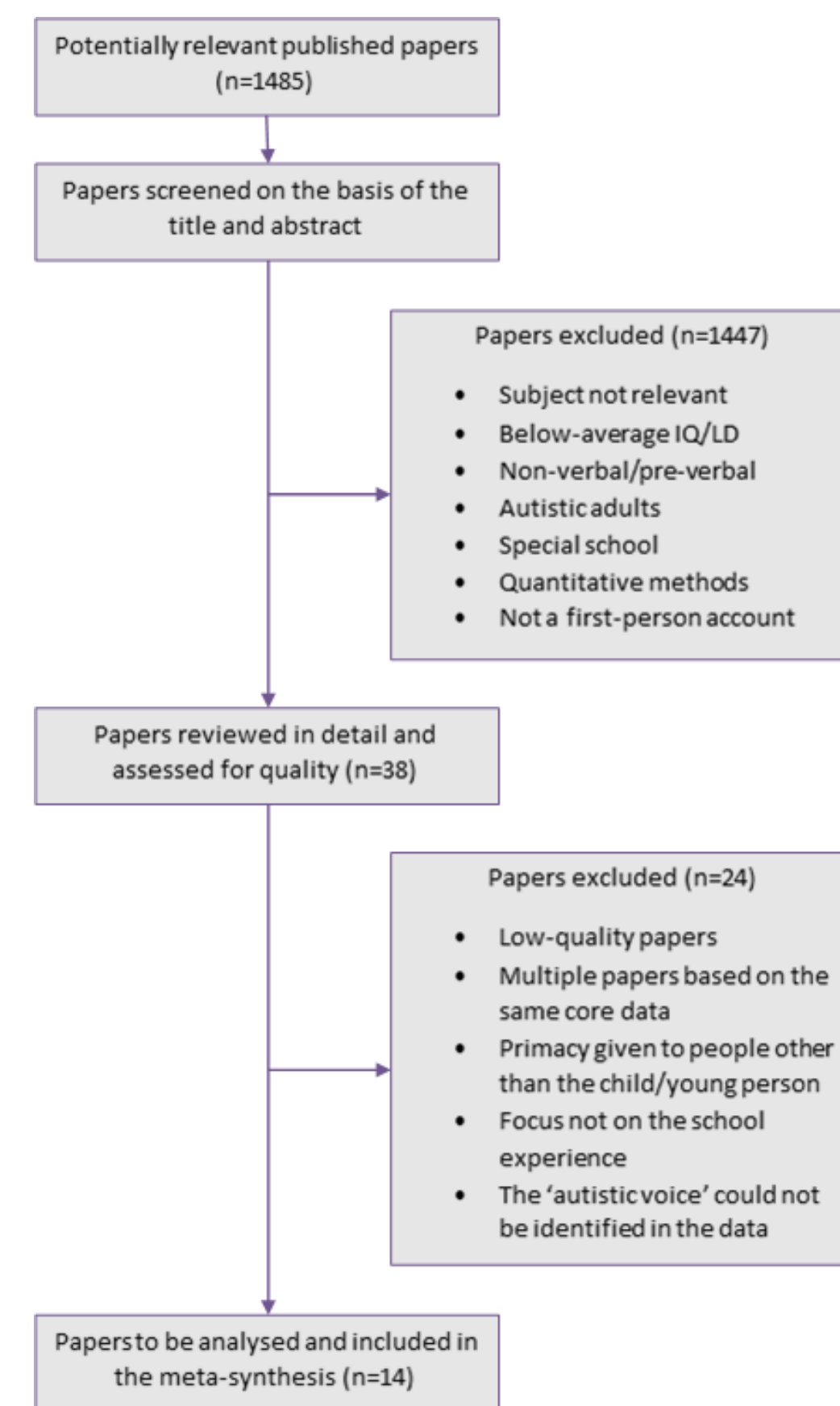
Purpose

- To understand the lived school experiences of autistic children and young people from a first-person perspective.

Method

- A meta-synthesis is currently being conducted. It involves a systematic review of existing qualitative evidence with the purpose of going beyond what is already published in order to develop new understandings.
- Peer-reviewed articles were initially identified through a methodical and systematic search of seven academic electronic databases. Bibliographic and hand-searches were also conducted.
- The results were then filtered according to strict inclusion criteria and were appraised for quality.
- From an initial pool of 1485 papers, fourteen articles met the quality and inclusion criteria (n = 133 individuals).
- These articles are currently being examined and coded by two reviewers. Preliminary themes are emerging but more analysis is required.

The data collection process



Preliminary results

Predictably, the majority of experiences reported relate to difficulties associated with the core characteristics of ASD such as social challenges and sensory difficulties. Also, as reported widely elsewhere, anxiety and stress appear to be at the heart of the school experience for the many autistic children and young people. However, at this early stage in the analysis, two novel concepts are emerging from the data:

- Having close relationships with trusted teachers/TAs is emerging as being possibly more important than peer relationships in terms of emotional wellbeing and educational success.
- The majority of the children report using a wide range of coping strategies. Some of these strategies are viewed positively and are used out of choice. However, many of these strategies centre on self-exclusion as a form of self-protection and come at great personal cost to the young person.

References

1. Department for Education (2015), Special Educational Needs in England: January 2015
2. Department for Education (2016), Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2014 to 2015.

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