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Autism, teaching and me

My school experience

I have a diagnosis of autism and a speech and language disorder. My education was challenging and difficult and I attended various types of schools and was taught by numerous teachers.

My strongest subject was mathematics as it is often right or wrong. English requires more understanding of language and in-depth communication skills, which I didn't have great confidence in.

From 9 -16 years old I went to a boarding school and met some really caring teachers who improved my confidence, firstly by involving me in other activities and sports, for example hockey. I found something that I was quite good at and became captain, boosting my confidence and then becoming more confident overall with my academic subjects.

Choosing teaching

I knew that working in a school environment would help me in terms of having a daily and long-term structure and routine. Also, I couldn't imagine myself with many other jobs. The lack of routine in other careers also concerned me.. In a school, most things would be known well in advance.

Whilst studying for a mathematics degree I did some work experience in two schools for primary age pupils. When I was helping in the classrooms I seemed to have a connection with autistic pupils - I could empathise with their frustrations and difficulties and I also felt that I knew when they were not being stretched enough.

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Due to my difficulties at school I had lots of different teachers who used different strategies, and I began to understand what worked for me and what didn't. I realised early on that not everyone learnt the same way. Some students needed more practical and hands on experiences with lessons whilst other pupils needed confidence building to develop their self-worth. These realisations and experiences drove me to being a teacher.

Teacher training

I wanted to become a mathematics teacher, even though the subject would be more challenging to teach as all pupils have to learn it. Pupil behavior, and whether I could control it, was a concern for me as I sometimes wouldn't know if certain situations were appropriate or not, or when to ignore certain things.

After a few years at the primary schools, I began working at a secondary school as a teaching assistant. A few months later at the same school, a salaried teacher training ([School Direct](#)) position for mathematics came up. I was already in the school and knew the routine and staff etc... so I felt this would help to make the transition easier than attending a postgraduate teacher training course full-time.

I enjoyed the responsibility of teaching the year 7 to 9 pupils, some of whom had special educational needs. My university tutor, who came to observe my teaching, had initial concerns about how I might cope within lessons but was surprised at what I brought to the classroom.

Although my subject knowledge and ideas were fine, I did experience some challenges:

- understanding some behaviours and knowing when to intervene
- timing of activities within lessons, as it is often my belief that everyone should feel the achievement of completing an activity if others have done so
- being consistent.

I worked really hard on these challenges and at the end of my training I passed the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and went on to become a newly qualified teacher (NQT) within a different school.

Working at a new school was quite challenging, and I found that my style of teaching did not really suit the school. My approach, gained from my personal

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experience of school, of listening to the pupils, having lots of patience and explaining things in different ways benefitted the pupils whose scores improved. I worked hard to look at different strategies of behaviour management and resources that suited my style of teaching, which is often more hands on and uses practical mathematical activities. I focused on my strengths as much as possible.

Unfortunately, I didn't feel that the right support was available for me and so I ended up leaving the school. I found this frustrating as I could see that some of the misunderstandings were down to me being autistic and having a speech and language disorder, something which I could not change.

I am still looking to complete my NQT year with the right school and support, and in the meantime I volunteer within a primary and a secondary school. I am also a mathematics tutor to children and adults, many of whom are autistic and/or dyscalculic.

Being an autistic teacher

The benefits of having autistic staff in schools is that it inspires autistic pupils. They can, in a way, connect with you better as you have that automatic gel between them and yourselves. However it can be very difficult and you will have to persevere as lots of neurotypical people won't necessarily see your potential.

As an autistic person it will be more challenging to get people on your side as, firstly, your social skills are different from neurotypical people. For example, should teachers always have eye contact? Maybe, but it doesn't hinder them being a teacher or having empathy/understanding of pastoral issues. Autistic teachers have amazing strengths which outweigh any potential difficulties, and that can be a crucial part in inspiring the next generation.

Find the right school to go and work in, somewhere that you feel you can make a difference with the right support, staff and leadership. Stick to it and don't give up, you will surprise a lot of people along the way.