This presentation is protected by copyright.

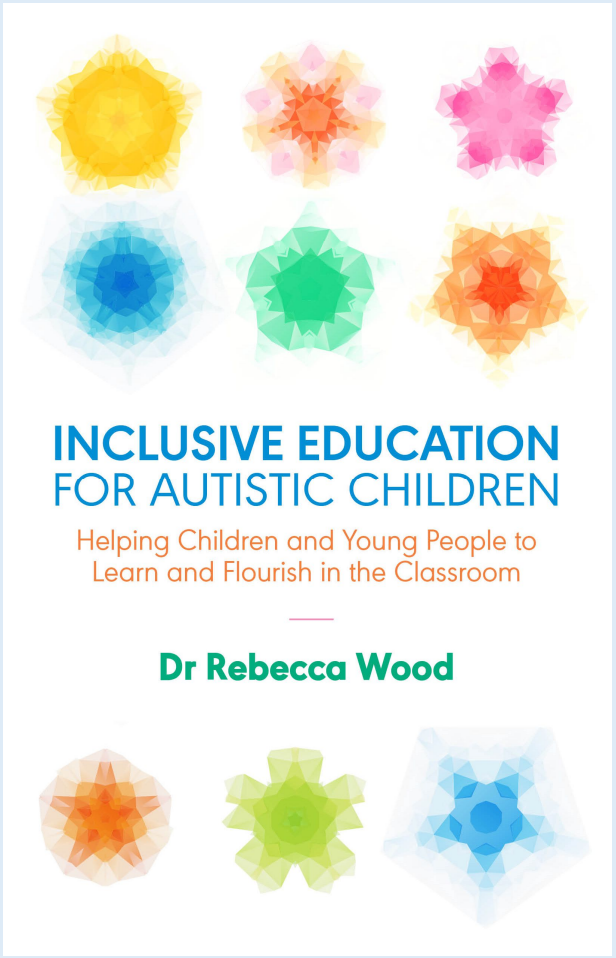
No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Inclusive Education for Autistic Children: Helping Children and Young People to Learn and Flourish in the Classroom

Dr Rebecca Wood
Senior Lecturer in Special Education
University of East London
@thewoodbug
r.wood@uel.ac.uk

University of East London

Pioneering Futures Since 1898

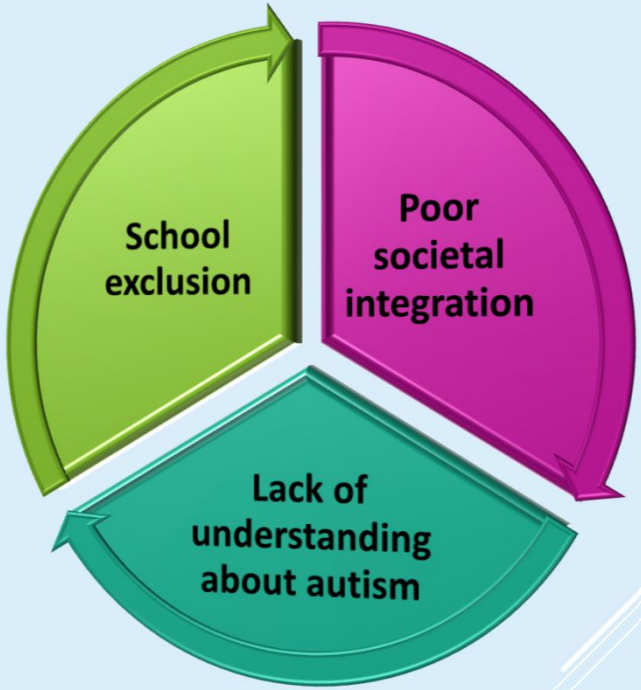


- High levels of exclusion from school
  - Mainstream, special, academies, PRUs
  - Exclusions are increasing
  - Not returning to school post-lockdown
- Within-school exclusion
  - Part-time timetable
  - Limited access to extra-curricular activities
  - Patchy access arrangements for tests/exams: poor results
  - Self-withdrawal: stress/anxiety
- Illegal exclusions/off-rolling

BACKGROUND

CONSEQUENCES

- Leaving school with few or no qualifications
- Under-employed in adult life…
- …or not working at all
- Poor well-being and health outcomes
- Vicious cycle of lack of understanding, educational exclusion etc.
- Society generally loses out



PUPIL DIVERSITY

- Narrow conceptualisation of ‘normality’. Lawson (2008, 26):
- *‘…diversity and difference as part of everyday normal or typical life is being lost rather than cultivated.’*
- Accommodations and adaptations can benefit all pupils
- Diverse school populations carry numerous advantages
- Access to education linked to range of positive longer-term outcomes

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

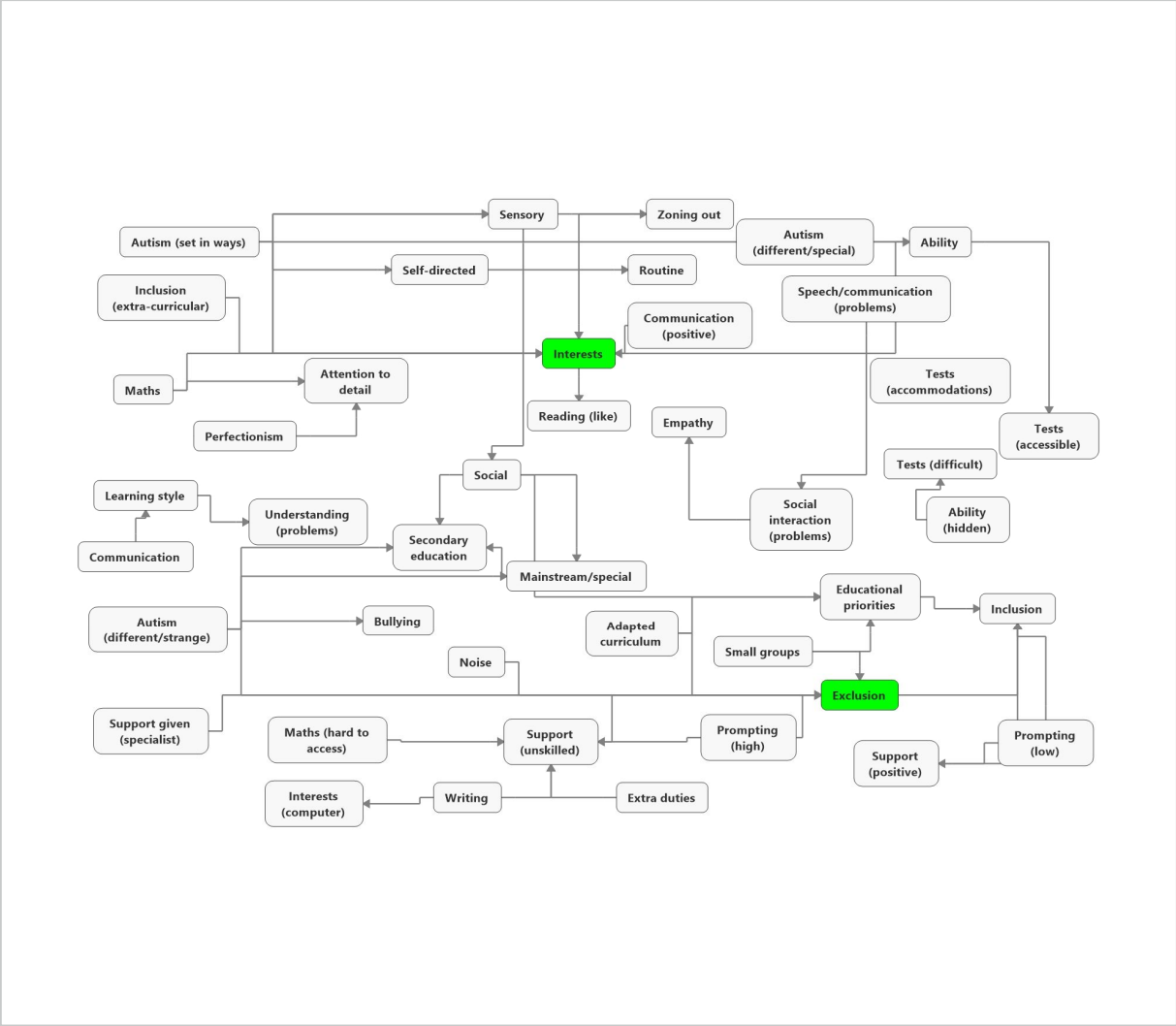
- School staff often support the principle of educational inclusion
- But feel they lack knowledge about autism
- As well as training and support
- Feel under significant pressure in relation to behaviour
- Behaviour guidelines from government follow a behaviourist model
    - Emphasis is more on sanctions than understanding
- Teachers do not set out to exclude pupils

Study

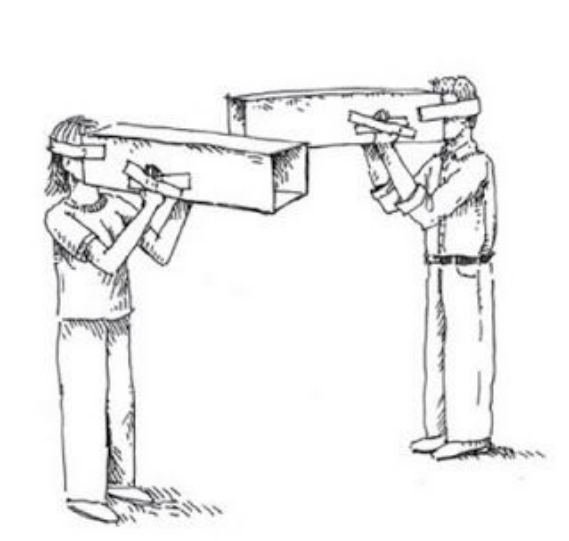
- 5 months in 5 mainstream primary schools in one local authority (LA) in England
- Different aspects of the educational inclusion of the autistic children in those schools
- Support; curriculum access; communication
- Participants: 36 school staff; 10 autistic children; 10 parents; 10 autistic adults
- Multi-perspective study

Themes

- 8 interlinked themes
  - Support for Children
  - School Curriculum
  - Educational Priorities
  - Assessment and Tests
  - Communication
  - **Interests**
  - Inclusion and Exclusion
  - Descriptions of Autism



‘Special’ interests



- DSM-5: ‘severity’ of autism extent to which ‘restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities’ are demonstrated
- ‘Fixations’; ‘obsessions’; ‘unusual’; ‘restricted’; ‘narrow’
- Associated with unwanted repetition, perseveration and Obsessive, Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- More positive framing of this trait: ‘monotropism’; ‘interest model’ of autism
- Within educational contexts: mainly positive effects when interests are supported

Repetition and prompting

- High degree of repetition (tasks, materials, instructions) for 5 of the autistic children
- Associated with high level of verbal and physical prompting
- Piotr (aged 4)
  - Activity lasted 12 minutes
  - TA asked almost identical questions (e.g. "*Where does the bear go?*") and instructions (e.g. "*Find the bear*") 73 and 53 times respectively
  - 10.5 questions or instructions per minute
  - Additional physical prompts
- Low degree of task completion, satisfaction and well-being for child
- Illustration by Sonny Hallett ©(not to be copied or reproduced without permission)

Independence

- Piotr: early hand-writing activity (selected by him)
  - Task duration 15 minutes
  - Places his hand over the hand of the TA to guide her
  - Prompts are more for encouragement: "*good boy*"; "*beautiful*"
  - Greater compliance: wiping board clean; choosing another pen on request
  - Seated willingly next to TA
- Reduction in prompting
- Some children completed tasks with no additional support; more agency
- Also associated with greater skill and sense of self-efficacy for school staff
- Better child-adult rapport

Communication

- Marcus: aged 9
- In interviews: taciturn; hesitant; struggled to find words; frustrated; "*I don't know*"; "*not sure*"; head in hands. Open questions especially difficult
- Coding Club: his favourite activity in school "*epic*"

  Rebecca: *Why is it epic?*

  Marcus: *Because you get to do like coding and make games*

  Rebecca: *Fantastic*

  Marcus: *I made this epic game, it's called Pixel Rush. It's so cool*

  Rebecca: *What's cool about it?*

  Marcus: *Well it means you have to try to get to the diamond and once you fall on like a spike, you've failed the level*
- Marcus only child to attend regular activity out of main school hours

Curriculum Access

- Lucy, aged 7
- Uncertain in Maths and interviews
- Reading activity - book about snakes
- 20 minutes (ended when teacher changed class activity)
- Voluble, enthusiastic: "*wow*"
- Exhibited a variety of aptitudes
  - reading out loud
  - finding synonyms
  - asking questions ("*Does the milk snake drink milk?*")
  - attention to detail
  - commenting spontaneously and on request on text ("*The sunbeam snake is so shiny!*")
  - relate the book to her own experiences watching films about snakes at home
  - independent, silent reading
- Demonstrating a range of high-level reading skills
- Linked to positive education, health & employment outcomes (DfE 2015)

Broader inclusion

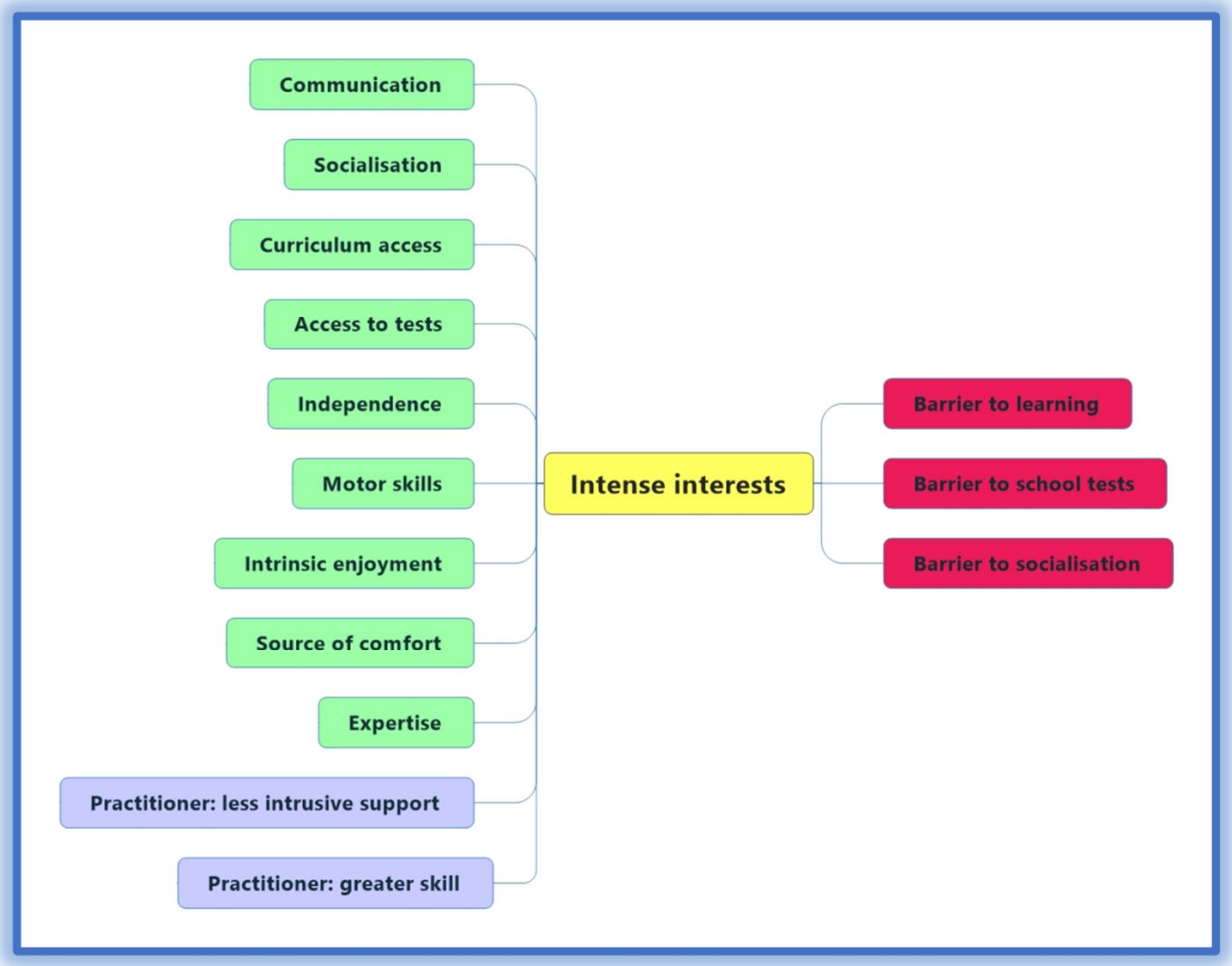
- Staff reported working with child's interests lynchpin to their educational inclusion
- Valentin (aged 8) "*transformed*" when staff did some work on planets: "*a good teacher will know to throw the plan in the bin, and run with this".*
- Acceptance and understanding
  - Teacher "*worried*" by "*an extreme child*"
  - *"He's now my absolute favourite child I have ever taught.* (…) *I can chat to him about The Princess and the Frog. I'm into that sort of thing too. If he comes in singing a song from a Disney film, I know what it is and I start singing with him. In some ways, we're on the same wavelength. I'm very Disneyfied."*
- Set curriculum and assessment activities based on interests

Support needs

- What sort of additional support do the autistic children need & why?
- School staff (n = 36)
  - to keep the children on task (n = 21)
  - to facilitate curriculum access (n = 19)
    - ➢ latter two reasons the most common reasons cited
  - to help promote good behaviour (n = 16)
  - to help independence (n = 12)
  - socialisation (n = 7)
  - emotional support (n = 5)
- Overlap between reasons given for additional support and benefits of enabling autistic children to access their intense interests

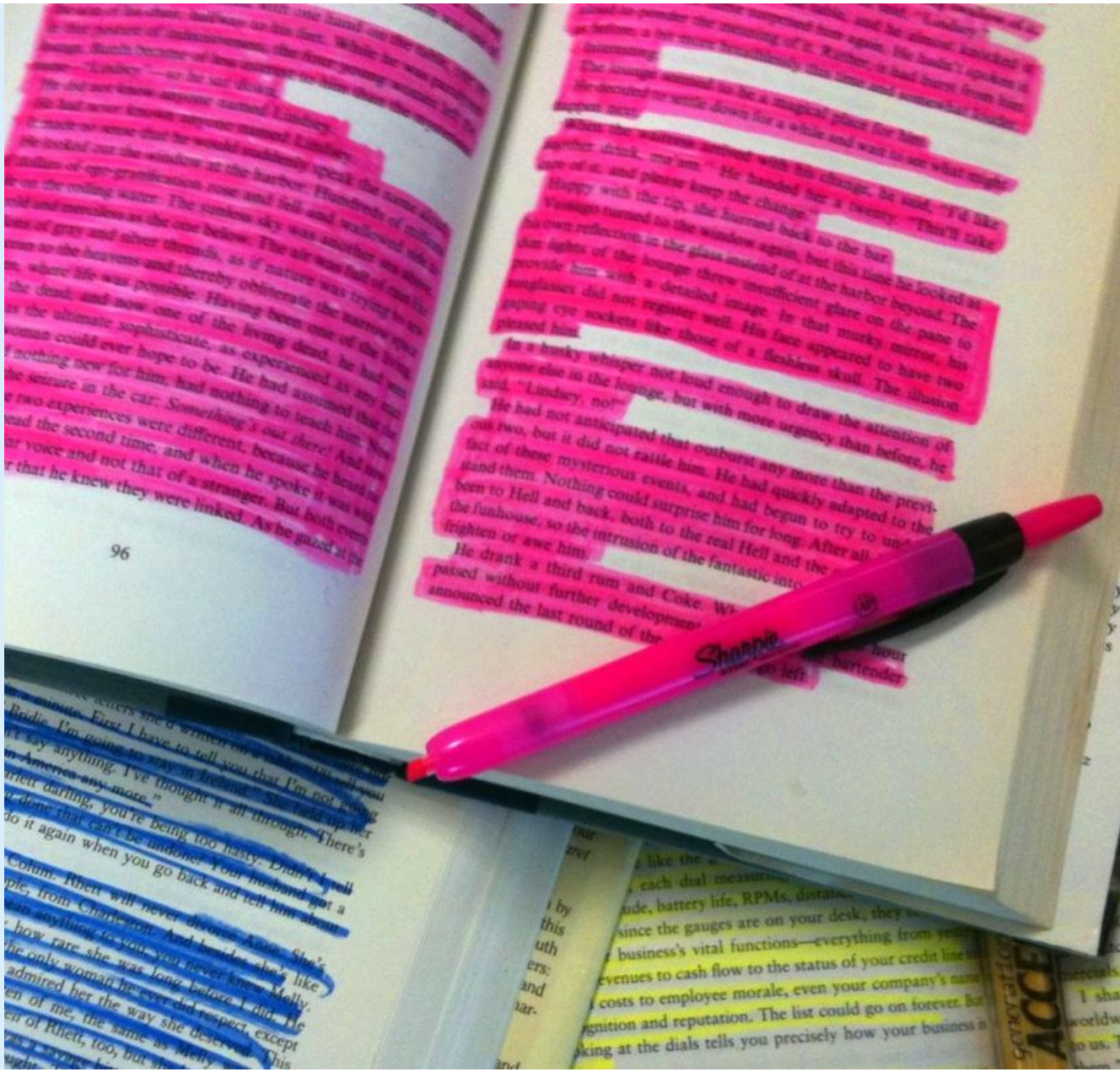
Intense interests

@thewoodbug
rwood@uel.ac.uk



Access to curriculum and tests

- Staff concerned that intense preoccupations meant they could not introduce child to full curriculum
- The writing of an autistic boy had become "*more and more dominated by his preoccupations and obsessions*"
- Parents of Jordan (aged 7): more interested in complex number games of his own invention, rather than requirements of a test

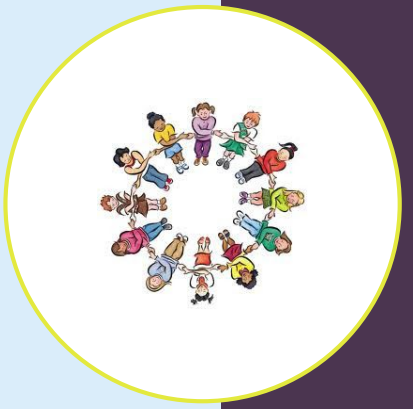


Socialisation

- Parent of Alex (aged 5): friendships lynchpin to son's happiness in school, but

  "I'm hoping he's going to learn that he can't be so selfish. He can't just talk about what he wants to talk about, or play with what he wants to play with."

- TA of Valentin: one reason for need for additional support is because he is "*selfish*"
- Teacher of Piotr: would spend more time with peers if it weren't for his strong interests



Intense interests

- Range of inclusionary benefits
- Associated with ‘flow’ and well-being
- Some links between repetitive tasks, stress & negative aspects of intense interests
- Negative effects could in part be explained by the stresses of school environment

Longer-term impacts

- Associated with expertise and longer-term positive outcomes
- A sense of well-being, opportunities for personal growth, social learning and development
- Interests not as narrow or ‘fixed’ as previously thought
- High level of skill and even savant abilities
- Can be damaging to try to extinguish strong interests

10b
Transport Sparks

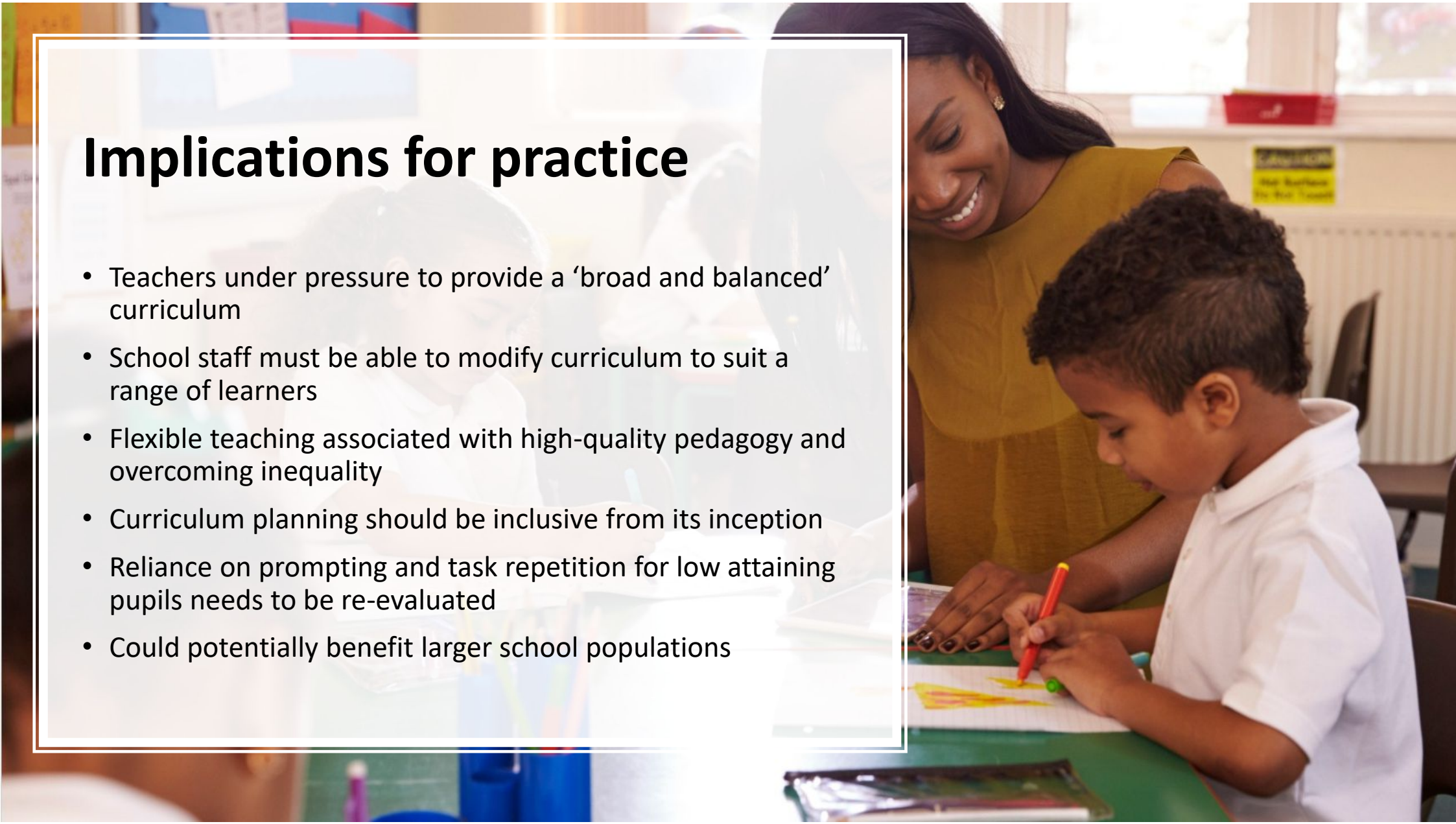
All Aboard Club

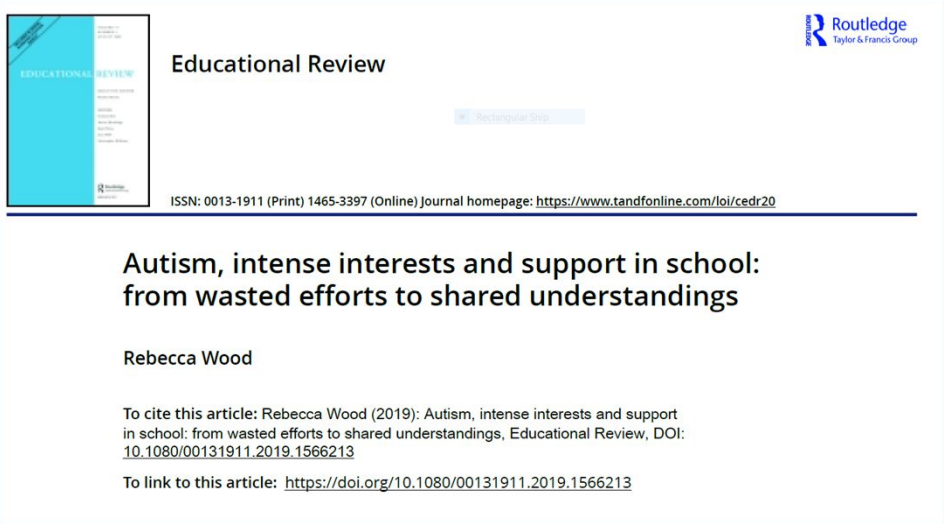
Benefits in general education

- Being motivated benefits all pupils
  - Pupils feel more positive about their abilities
  - Creates shift from external to internal support
  - Linked with persistence
  - Linked with equality of opportunity
- Fear of academic failure can mean that pupils' motivations are ignored
- Alternative targets: 'life skills', socialisation
- Pupils with SEND might have less access to their strong interests

Implications for practice

- Teachers under pressure to provide a ‘broad and balanced’ curriculum
- School staff must be able to modify curriculum to suit a range of learners
- Flexible teaching associated with high-quality pedagogy and overcoming inequality
- Curriculum planning should be inclusive from its inception
- Reliance on prompting and task repetition for low attaining pupils needs to be re-evaluated
- Could potentially benefit larger school populations





Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Educational Review

ISSN: 0013-1911 (Print) 1465-3397 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cedr20

Autism, intense interests and support in school: from wasted efforts to shared understandings

Rebecca Wood

To cite this article: Rebecca Wood (2019): Autism, intense interests and support in school: from wasted efforts to shared understandings, Educational Review, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2019.1566213

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1566213

woodbugblog

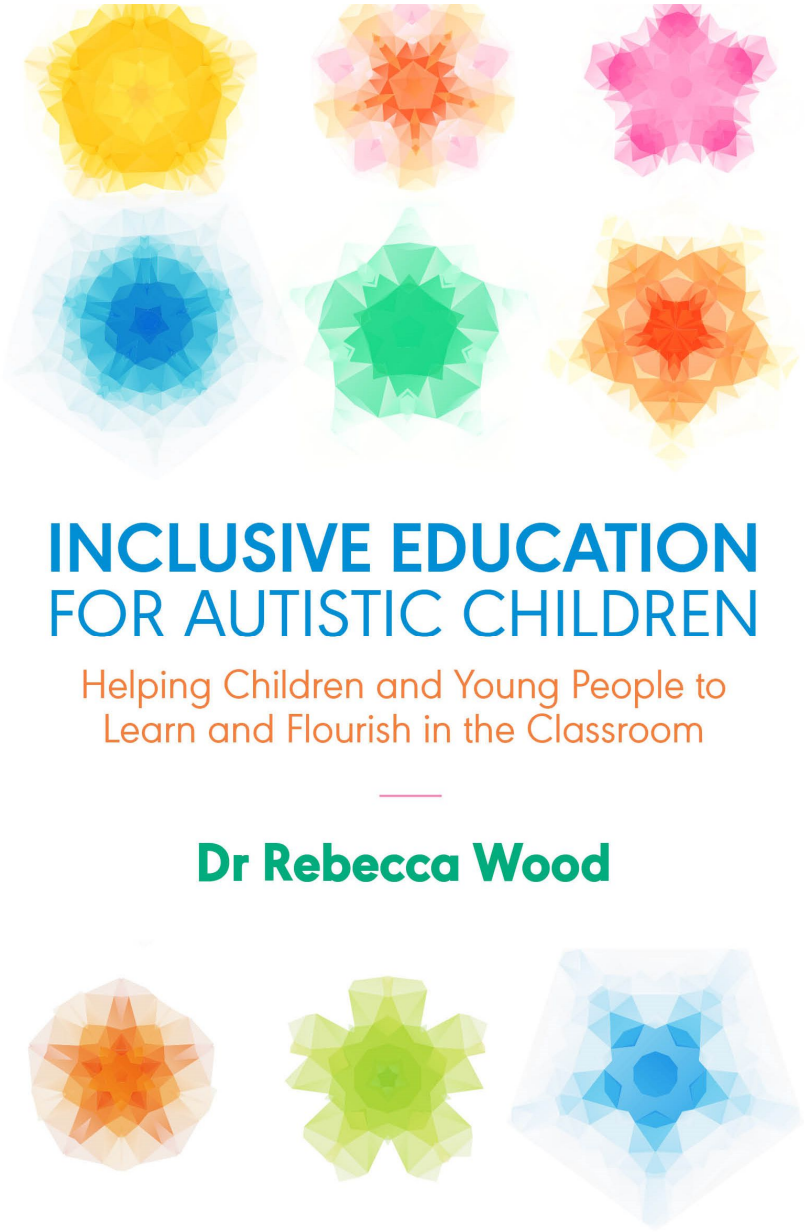
Home
About
Publications

AUTISM, INCLUSION & EDUCATION

Autistic children and intense interests: the key to their educational inclusion?

Implications for research

- More research needed to distinguish 'flow states' from obsessions/compulsions
- Very intense interests linked negatively with well-being
- Research exploring jointly interests of autistic and non-autistic children
- 'Interest model' of communication support/inclusion
- Better understanding of the implications for real life classroom situations
- How this can be managed and supported within a typical school curriculum



Shameless book plug

- Contributors: 4 autistic children and 4 autistic adults, Jon Adams, Michael Barton, Kabie Brook, George Whitney
- Foreword by Dr Wenn B. Lawson
- Illustrations by Sonny Hallett
- Chapter available as free download on JKP blog
- Available from all good book shops…