

**Could a focus on ethics of care within teacher education have the potential to reduce the exclusion of autistic learners?**

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**Abstract**

Current figures suggest one in every hundred UK children and adults are autistic. The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (2015) places a statutory duty on local authorities to incorporate learners with SEND, including autism, in mainstream educational settings. This thought piece explores how although policy reforms suggest inclusive education for all, there is evidence of an increasing number of young people on the autism spectrum being excluded from mainstream educational settings. Exclusions from school can have a devastating impact on self-esteem, mental health and future prospects of the learners. In addition to caring for learners, it is important for educational establishments to extend the care to the staff team in order to support their emotional and physical well-being. Care has a fundamental role to play in educational settings. Ethics of Care is a normative ethical theory. Central to this theory is reciprocal, interpersonal relationships. Starting with an overview of ethics of care, I will then examine the exclusion of autistic learners and consider whether a focus on this philosophy within teacher education has the potential to reduce the exclusion of autistic learners.

**Keywords**

Ethics of care; teacher education; autism; exclusion; behaviour.

**Introduction**

This thought piece explores how the recent Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reform in England through the introduction of the Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND Code of Practice (2015) places a statutory duty on local authorities to incorporate learners with SEND, including autism, in mainstream educational settings (DfE & DoH, 2015:25). This means that all teachers in England are now teachers of SEND (Carter, 2015). However, recent research from national charity for autistic people, Ambitious about Autism (2018), who acquired data on exclusions from the Department for Education via a Freedom of Information request, show that since 2011 there has been a 60% increase of autistic learners being excluded from school. Within my context as a teacher educator specialising in learning difficulties and disabilities this is a key concern. Starting with an overview of Noddings' ethics of care, I will then examine the exclusion of autistic learners and consider whether a focus on Noddings' philosophy within teacher education has the potential to reduce the exclusion of autistic learners.

**Caring ethics**

Categorised as a feminist approach, Noddings' (2002a) Ethics of Care is a normative ethical theory. Noddings argues that as women have traditionally provided the role of care, this responsibility will be likely to support a moral orientation that she describes as an ethic of care. Care can be difficult to define and is often context dependent but it is generally portrayed as related concepts of value, disposition and virtue, guiding normative judgment and action (Sander-Staudt, 2018). As care may be interpreted in different ways by different people it is necessary to define what Noddings means when she discusses an ethic of care. Central to this theory is reciprocal, interpersonal relationships. Emerging in the 1980s with work by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984), the ethics of care is a distinctive ethical theory in moral philosophy (Noddings, 2012: 771). Writing to address the criticism

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that care theory has little to offer policy making, Noddings (2002a) asserts that caring should be studied philosophically in order to explore and guide social policy. Noddings (2002a) suggests that rather than starting with the state, if we begin to address morals in the domain of the home this will infiltrate policy-making at the societal level. Describing her ethics of care as 'fundamentally relational' Noddings (2002a:xiii) rejects both the 'Kantian principle-based ethics' which reasons that to act in the morally right way, people must act from duty and also 'utilitarian forms of consequentialism', which asserts that an act is morally right if that act maximises the good. In addition, she proclaims that although similarities have been drawn between care and virtue ethics, which emphasises moral character, care ethics is quite distinct from virtue ethics. In virtue ethics it is possible to care about an individual and yet not connect with the recipient of care, however, care theory 'makes its special contribution through the relational sense' (Noddings, 2002a:87) and 'will always depend on the connections between carer and cared-for' (Noddings, 2002a: 20).

Noddings (1999:19) asserts that care theorists 'seek ends compatible with justice' but highlights the importance of creating an environment in which people can thrive. Noddings (2002a:86) states that 'caring about' others may be 'the foundation of justice'. She emphasises that it is 'physically impossible for anyone of us to "care for" all of humanity' and uses the example of contributing to charity as 'caring about'; we can give from a distance but do not develop reciprocal interactions. Whereas 'caring-for', she declares, involves relationships with those close to us. Although she is clear that there should be a balance between the two, Noddings (2002a:86) claims that 'theoretically, it is vital to place "caring for" over "caring about"'. We are driven to 'care about' humanity and this informs a sense of justice which then becomes morally important, driving us to 'care for' those who we are acquainted with. This sense of duty to care for others is split into two categories which she calls 'natural caring' and 'ethical caring', concluding that 'natural caring is the condition of possibility for ethical caring' (Tong & Williams, 2016).

Noddings (2002a:27) highlights the need for care as an essential aspect of education and as an aim of education, stating 'if we want children to learn how to be cared for, so that eventually they will have the capacity to care for others, we must make it a primary goal of schools to care for them'. Her view is humanistic and person-centred, in that the teacher as carer is not only interested in delivering the curriculum, but is interested in the individual as a person with needs and desires which teachers must listen to (Noddings, 2012: 772). She draws attention to the lack of care experienced in schools, emphasising feelings expressed by high school students that their teachers 'don't care' (Noddings, 2002a:25) stating 'many young people not only fail to develop the capacity to care, but also seem not to know what it means to be cared for' (Noddings, 2002a:25). To demonstrate care for each learner, and in line with the Salamanca Declaration which recognised the need to work towards 'schools for all' and 'the right to education of every individual' (UNESCO, 1994: viii), it is important to accommodate all learners, regardless of their differences (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Inclusion in educational settings is conceptualised 'as located in the capacity of teachers to recognise and respond effectively to the differences between learners, adapting everyday practice in ways that show respect for pupil diversity' (Conn, 2018: 595). Part of the broad human rights agenda, the move towards inclusion in education seeks equality and empowerment, and according to Jordan (2008: 11) 'is the gateway to full social inclusion', so it is crucial that recent research, which uncovers the rise in school exclusions, and results in inequality and disempowerment (Ambitious about Autism, 2018) is examined.

Although policy reforms suggest inclusive education for all, there is evidence of an increasing number of young people with SEND being excluded from mainstream educational settings. This may be due to the perceived negative impact on achievement data (Norwich, 2014 and Slee, 2013; cited in Armstrong, 2017:231), increased reliance on label-specific funding, reduced tolerance for behaviour which challenges, and reduced capacity by professionals due to added pressures of 'administrative

workloads generated by neo-liberal educational policies' (Valle, *et al.*, 2011; cited in Armstrong, 2017:231) which accompany the teaching role. I will explore these issues, starting with behaviour which challenges and followed by the pressure on teachers, concluding that a focus on ethics of caring within teacher education could have the potential to reduce the exclusion of autistic learners. First, I will provide a brief overview of autism before examining the literature around the exclusion of autistic learners from mainstream schools.

### **Autism and Exclusion**

It is important to consider the language used to describe autism as words may shape how we perceive people. Recent research undertaken by Kenny *et al* (2016) discovered that the adult autism community prefer identity-first language (i.e. autistic person), as opposed to person-first language (i.e. person with autism). To respect the viewpoints of the autistic community, identity-first language will be used throughout this paper.

Current figures suggest one in every hundred UK children and adults are autistic (Brugha *et al.*, 2011; NAS, 2018). Autism is one of a number of neurological conditions which can be described as neurodiverse, meaning that neurological differences are 'naturally occurring cognitive variations' which should not be viewed as a dysfunction or a deficit (Silberman, 2015: 16). Autism is a lifelong condition characterised by difficulties in social communication, social interaction and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behaviour (WHO, 1993: 147; WHO 2018). Atypical sensory responses, including hypersensitivity (excessive sensitivity) and hyposensitivity (low sensitivity) in relation to sound, vision, touch, taste and smell, as well as in kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sensation, are prevalent in the majority of the autistic population (Crane, *et al.* 2009; O'Neill and Jones, 1997). 'Multichannel receptivity and processing difficulties' are also described as fundamental to the autistic experience (O'Neill & Jones, 1997). Grandin (2009; Grandin and Scariano, 1986,) discusses how debilitating these sensory differences can be, highlighting florescent lights and crowds as overwhelming the senses. Often described as a hidden disability, autistic learners are more vulnerable to exclusion due to misunderstandings of behaviour (Young, 2012) which may be a result of the inability to cope with an overpowering environment due to sensory processing differences leading to enhanced anxiety (Davidson, 2007).

Trimmer *et al* (2017: 2326) discuss how human beings' need to belong compels them to conform and 'alter their behaviour in order to be included or accepted'. However, autistic people may find such modification of behaviour difficult. This difficulty could be attributed to the idea that autistic people lack a 'theory of mind', a theory which has become a dominant discourse in autism literature (Frith, 2003). Sometimes referred to as putting 'oneself in another's shoes' (Lawson, 2001:47), theory of mind 'refers to the ability to attribute mental states to others' (Richman & Bidshahri, 2018: 45) and to predict the behaviour of others (Warrier & Baron-Cohen, 2018).

Noddings (2002a:4) asserts that 'there is at least one guide to moral practice: never inflict unnecessary pain'. Through ignorance of the neurological differences of an autistic learner, the teacher may unknowingly inflict pain through the environment created. Difficulties with expressive and receptive communication, rigid thought patterns, and sensory differences impact on an ability to understand the social rules of the setting which may result in 'tantrums and aggression' (Chiang, 2008), behaviour which is interpreted as 'challenging'. The term 'challenging behaviour' is defined as:

Culturally abnormal behaviour(s) of such an intensity, frequency or duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy, or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit use of, or result in the person being denied access to, ordinary community facilities (Emerson, 2001:3).

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The inability to conform to school policy and the resultant harm to either peers or staff through behaviour displayed may result in temporary or permanent exclusion from school (DfE, 2012). The choice of the words 'inability to' in this description is deliberate. If an absence of theory of mind is prevalent in autistic people, then it is not justified to judge the behaviour of the autistic individual as if they comprehend the impact of their behaviour on others. It is often assumed that the individual is choosing to act in such a manner, it appears that little thought is given to the idea that the person may not know any other way to communicate their distress. Lawson (2011:166) writes of her own experiences as an 'often misunderstood' autistic person, describing being 'overloaded and unable to cope' with 'the school curriculum' and having to 'socially interact with peers'. She explains that this 'inability to cope might show itself via our behaviour, which may become agitated, aggressive, frustrated, scared and manipulative'. If we interpret behaviour as someone having difficulty with a situation we are more likely to react with support, if we view it as defiant behaviour we are more likely to react in a negative, punitive manner. However, aggressive behaviour is often an externalisation of anxiety (Sproston *et al*, 2017) which could be misinterpreted as behavioural problems (Helverschou *et al*, 2011) resulting in both legal and illegal exclusions from classrooms and schools. In England, legal exclusions can include fixed-term exclusions for a short length of time before returning to the school, or permanent exclusion from the school because of their behaviour. Following a permanent exclusion, it is the responsibility of the local education authority to ensure that the learner receives full-time education within some alternative, short-term provision (e.g. pupil referral units [PRUs]) (Brede *et al*. 2017: 2). Indeed, the Department for Education (2016) state autistic children are frequently educated in PRUs.

Informal exclusions, for example sending a student home following a behavioural incident for a 'cooling off' period is unlawful if not formally recorded and yet continues to happen as schools do not have the skills or resources to manage the behaviour displayed by some autistic learners (Brede *et al*, 2017) and some are not aware that this practice is illegal (Ambitious About Autism, 2018). Data from the UK charity, the National Autistic Society, report that almost one in five autistic children had been given at least one fixed-term school exclusion, and one in twenty had been permanently excluded (Moore, 2016). Worryingly Brede *et al* (2017:2) state that 'one-third of parents reported that their child had been informally excluded at least once, that is missing school without it being recorded as a fixed term or permanent exclusion'. In one of the few studies to have specifically examined the school exclusion experiences of young autistic people, Sproston *et al*. (2017) found that they perceived staffs' lack of understanding of the condition, tensions in relationships, and difficult sensory environments, as the main themes impacting on their removal from mainstream schools.

Howlin (2013:897) highlights the insufficient educational attainments of autistic individuals and the 'very poor social status of adults with autism'. Lack of understanding of neurodiversity within society impacts on the life chances a person has, resulting in unfair and unequal opportunities despite legislation, such as the Equality Act 2010. Indeed, a test case was won by a Derbyshire family of a thirteen year old autistic boy who was excluded because of behaviour displayed. The family claimed that the Equality Act (Office for Disability Issues, 2010) does not provide adequate protection to prevent autistic learners who present challenging behaviour from being excluded. Because of a legal loophole, schools are able to exclude learners who have a 'tendency to physical abuse' (Mulholland, 2018). Schools are not required to justify their actions or explain the reasonable adjustments they have taken to reduce or prevent the behaviour from occurring even when the behaviour is directly linked to their condition. This allows the schools to resort to exclusion before making every effort to make reasonable adjustments.

Exclusions from school can have a devastating impact on self-esteem, mental health and future prospects. Nussbaum (2006:199) explains how learners with impairments are often 'relegated to institutions that make no effort to develop their potential. And they are persistently treated as if they

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have no right to occupy public space'. This poor educational service results in social disadvantage and exclusion from communities, leading to feelings of low self-esteem and helplessness. Sebastian & Blakemore (2011) discuss how individuals who experience rejection from peers report feelings of social distress and anxiety and research by Crane *et al* (2019) revealed that 70%-80% of young autistic people had experienced mental health problems due to feeling misunderstood and under pressure to act 'normal'. A focus on care ethics would go some way to supporting teaching staff to understand the function of behaviour presented by individual learners and respond accordingly to their needs.

However, the structure of the school system also impacts on developing caring relationships. In England, primary school children spend one year with a teacher and move on to another. In secondary schools this time spent with students is even less as they go from class to class for subject specialist input, teachers may barely know names let alone have the opportunity to cultivate caring relationships. However, if 'every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges' (Noddings, 2012: 771) it is imperative that teachers are given time to develop relationships with their students. This may be more difficult to do when the learner is autistic as it requires an understanding of the condition and the impact this may have on communication.

Williams (1996:130) talks about her own experiences as an autistic woman of the difficulties with social interaction. One of the drawbacks she highlights is 'appearing to be egocentric purely because of a processing problem that restricts the ability to take account of 'other' at the same time as 'self''. McPartland *et al* (2011) highlight the reduced reciprocity in social interaction for autistic individuals and explore how the difficulties in navigating interpersonal interactions impacts on transition to adulthood. The difficulties an autistic person has with processing and responding to communication may cause tension with Noddings' idea that reciprocity or 'the response of the cared-for completes the caring relation' (Noddings, 2012: 773). Noddings (2002b: 19) tells us that 'A cares for B--that is, A's consciousness is characterized by attention and motivational displacement, A performs some act in accordance with [care], and B recognizes that A cares for B'. However, recognising that the carer needs this reciprocity requires an understanding of empathy which may be lacking in the autistic person. Asserting that 'the consciousness of being cared for shows up somehow in the recipient of care – in overt recognition, an attitude of response' (Noddings, 2002a:28) she highlights 'responsive children, the students glowing with new learning' (Noddings, 2002a:89) as appreciation of the interaction, stating that without the response from the cared-for 'there is no caring relation—no matter how hard the carer has tried to care' (Noddings, 2012: 773). Although it is important to acknowledge that 'the one-caring does not care in order to be 'rewarded'' (Stone, 2018:102), this lack of reciprocity experienced by the teacher when working with autistic learners may negatively impact on the relationship between the teacher and the learner. According to Noddings (2006: 341) caring teachers are present for the cared-for; they 'listen to their students and plan to work with their expressed needs'. Noddings describes this as 'engrossment' and stresses the requirement for empathy and effort in the interactions (Noddings, 2002b:17). However, if the teacher does not understand that the observable behaviour is an expression of needs, an avenue to communicate, the teacher will fail on listening and on meeting the needs of the individual learner. Noddings (2002b: 166) emphasises the importance of 'cultivating the ability to respond appropriately' to those we endeavour to care for (2002:37) asserting that care 'requires attention to individuals, and individuals have different needs'. Therefore, it is important that the person caring does not assume how to care for the other as their actions might not be received as care (Burke *et al*, 2012: 2). Understanding the communication needs of the learners is crucial in order for autistic learners to be included and not excluded. However, this can be worrisome and puts extra pressure on teachers who do not feel equipped for what they see as 'additional' to their current workload (Hellawell, 2015:15). The next section will discuss how this stress on teachers is impacting on exclusions from classrooms.

### **Pressure on teachers**

As the severity and complexity of needs within mainstream provisions increases (Ellis & Tod, 2014) this places extra burdens of care and labour on teachers to respond to the needs of others. Noddings (2002b) suggests that the caring person must be consistently present; she identified this as attentive love. However, Hedge & McKenzie (2012: 196) highlight Noddings' omission of the 'emotional labour good care requires'. Indeed, Jordan (2008:13) emphasises that 'teaching students with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) is hard'. Consistent attentiveness could be very difficult for teachers who may feel that it is harder to care for a learner when the behaviour they display impacts on the care giver both emotionally and physically. Noddings (2002a:18) declares that following conflict the carer will 'make an effort to restore a caring relation' if the cared for wants or needs it, this can be emotionally demanding for the teacher.

Boujut *et al* (2016:2874) discuss how the inclusion of autistic students in schools is a 'source of stress for teachers' and Meer *et al* (2017) draw attention to the high level of stress and burnout for staff working with people who display behaviour which challenges. These difficulties can lead to feelings of failure when teachers are not succeeding in establishing productive interactions with those they are caring for and this has the potential to cause distress, depression, and feelings of helplessness, which may lead 'to dysfunctional coping, such as resorting to alcohol' (Butrimaviciute & Grieve, 2014:887). Noddings (2002a:19) asserts that without the intrinsic reward of the response in the caring encounter teachers will 'suffer disillusionment, fatigue, and eventually burnout'. Indeed, Brunsting (2014) highlights how special educators are at high risk of burnout due to their working conditions. High levels of stress and emotional exhaustion are key factors associated with teacher attrition. Such negative outcomes are a sign that it is important for educational establishments to extend the care to the staff team in order to support their emotional and physical well-being. If burnout is the outcome for those teachers who specialised in SEND then it cannot be surprising that the inclusion of autistic learners, and the resulting increase in workload that arises from this, will have a detrimental impact on the emotional state of the mainstream teacher.

Hastings and Brown (2002) highlight that staff with higher levels of behavioural knowledge are less likely to report negative emotional reactions. This brings to light the need for more understanding of autism within the education system as the extra duties placed on school teachers to include both neuro-typical (the term commonly used in the autistic community as a label for people who are not on the autism spectrum) and neuro-diverse learners within the same setting will impact on the amount of planning and time and administration duties that a teacher is expected to undertake.

Noddings (1999:16) asserts that excluding children from school because they belong to a minority group would be 'forbidden by both care and justice advocates', with justice theorists basing their assertion on fairness and care theorists basing their objection to exclusion that the pain and rejection caused by such an action is wrong. However, Noddings (1999:17) claims in certain circumstances there may be grounds for exclusion under the care perspective, and that inclusion of learners with 'special needs' may not always be the most appropriate option. She clarifies that the justification of those who make the decision to exclude learners because of their differences would have to be based on the argument that the inclusion of these learners would exhaust the teacher and make it too difficult for the teacher to do their job, resulting in none of the learners receiving the care they need. However, Noddings (1999) acknowledges that excluding learners rarely helps to create relations of care for the person excluded.

### **Conclusion**

Care has a fundamental role to play in educational settings. Without care, the individual needs of learners will be ignored, behaviour will be misunderstood, and those from an already oppressed group will continue to experience exclusion. However, Nussbaum (2006:203) asserts that the main

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requirements within ITE 'are changes in attitude and in teacher training, all of which would not be unduly costly once introduced and entrenched in the curriculum'. Instead of seeing inclusion as an additional expectation which places extra duties on teaching staff, Nind (2002) suggests that this barrier to inclusion could be removed if teachers view difference as ordinary. When considering care within an educational context it is important to decipher what this really means and how it is realised within practice. It is also crucial to consider how to care for teachers who are potentially at risk of burnout if they are not provided with the support they need.

As a result of the Carter Review (2015), there is now a requirement in England to ensure training around autism is embedded within all ITE curricula from September 2018 (DfE, 2016). The introduction of these guidelines will hopefully reduce the number of exclusions from schools and have a positive impact on the life of both teachers and learners through the reduction of stress and anxiety arising from misunderstandings of the condition. Given the high prevalence of autism, it is imperative that this area is addressed to improve inclusion for all. Jordan (2008:13) asks us to 'imagine if we were able to exclude fear from school, rather than excluding children'. To answer my initial question, I would recommend that given the qualifications spelt out above, a focus on the ethics of care in teacher education could support the moral development of ITE students, help to facilitate caring relationships, and have the potential to reduce the number of autistic learners who are excluded from school. Although the primary purpose of the current study was a conceptual piece, future research could extend to empirical enquiry with pre-service teachers to explore whether a focus on ethics of care within teacher education could have the potential to reduce the exclusion of autistic learners and support the development of positive attitudes towards inclusion.

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