

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Birmingham		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 23, Education		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Transforming How Autistic Children and Young People are Understood, Taught and Treated in Mainstream Education Settings		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2008-2017		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Karen Guldberg	Professor	2001-present
Rita Jordan	Professor	1992-2010
Glenys Jones	Lecturer	1996-2013
Andrea MacLeod	Lecturer	2004-present
Sarah Parsons	Senior Research Fellow	2006-2011
Kerstin Wittemeyer	Lecturer	2009-2019
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No</b>		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The Autism Centre Education and Research (ACER) has <b>challenged the prevalent misconception that autism is a disorder, rather than a different way of being.</b> In so doing, we have empowered teachers to see autistic children and young people (CYP) as having different and distinct learning needs, rather than being 'faulty', 'problematic' and in need of 'fixing' (as the 'deficit' view assumes). We have impacted education practitioners in a way that protects the education rights and interests of autistic children and young people. Together with the Autism Education Trust (AET), we have:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>(1) Transformed how education stakeholders nationally and internationally understand and value autistic pupils;</b></li> <li><b>(2) Systematically enabled teachers to adopt improved, pupil-centred approaches</b> which transform the educational experience of autistic pupils;</li> <li><b>(3) Enabled the AET to position themselves as a key authority on best practice for national Autism Education;</b></li> <li><b>(4) Transformed the infrastructure and organisation of autism support and provision in England.</b></li> </ol>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>There are over 120,000 autistic pupils in England's schools, of which over 70% are educated in mainstream provision. In England, autistic children and young people (CYP) are three times more likely to be regularly and unlawfully excluded from school for a fixed period than children who do not have special educational needs. Autism is a complex condition that impacts daily functioning. Therefore, autistic CYP require distinctive support to be successful at school (R1, R2). But without research-based knowledge of autism, staff in education settings often apply generalist understandings of 'good' education to autistic learners, without making adjustments (R2, R3). This problem is compounded by gaps between research evidence on autism, education and teachers' everyday practices (R4). There is a significant and pressing need for educators to access and use the best evidence and guidance available to support autistic CYP to succeed. In short, education staff need support to develop better understandings, attitudes towards and classroom practice for autistic pupils (R3). ACER's research has contributed conceptually and empirically to informing practice and policy on 'good autism education'. This has included the development of a distinctive pedagogy for autistic pupils (R1–R6). Findings that shaped this distinctive pedagogy include, but are not limited to:</p>		

**F1. Strengths:** Good autism practice shifts the focus on to autistic people's strengths, rather than emphasising their deficits. This includes viewing autism as a different, rather than disordered, way of being (R5).

**F2. Differences:** There are four key areas of difference that inform how autistic CYP learn. These are: interacting and developing relationships; processing information; taking in and perceiving sensory information; and communicating, understanding and using language (R6).

**F3. Inclusion:** Instead of adapting an existing curriculum to accommodate autistic pupils, the curriculum needs to be inclusive of all at its root. Teachers must accommodate autistic CYP's distinctive needs into the curriculum by making changes to the physical, sensory and social environment, and by prioritising the above four areas of learning difference (R1, R6).

**F4. Participation:** Autistic CYP must be engaged in decisions affecting them, and good education outcomes will engage each individual's needs and aspirations (R2, R4, R3).

**F5. Pupil-centredness:** Knowledge of each individual pupil is vital to developing good autism education practice (R3, R4).

### 3. References to the research

**R1.** Jordan, R. (2008). "The Gulliford Lecture - Autism spectrum disorders: a challenge and a model for inclusion in education". *British Journal of Special Education*, 35 (1): 11–15. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8578.2008.00364.x

**R2.** Wittemeyer, K., Charman, T., Cusack, J., Guldberg, K., Hastings, R., Howlin, P., Macnab, N., Parson, S., Pellicano, L. and Slonims, V. (2011). *Educational provision and outcomes for people on the autism spectrum*. London: Autism Education Trust. Available on [Autism Education Trust website](#).

**R3.** Guldberg, K. (2010). "Educating children on the autism spectrum: preconditions for inclusion and notions of 'best autism practice' in the early years". *British Journal of Special Education*, 37 (4): 168–174. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8578.2010.00482.x

**R4.** Guldberg, K. (2017). "Evidence Based Practice in autism educational research: can we bridge the research and practice gap?" *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 43 (2): 149–161. DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2016.1248818

**R5.** Jones, G., English, A., Guldberg, K., Jordan, R., Richardson, P. and Waltz, M. (2008). *Educational Provision for children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders living in England: a review of current practice, issues and challenges*. Autism Education Trust. Available on [Autism Education Trust website](#).

**R6.** Parsons, S., Guldberg, K., MacLeod, A., Jones, G., Prunty, A. and Balfe, T. (2011). "International review of the evidence on best practice in educational provision for children on the autism spectrum". *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 26 (1): 47–63. DOI: 10.1080/08856257.2011.543532

### 4. Details of the impact

**ACER has developed a distinctive conceptual framework and pedagogy (F1–F5).** The framework is a key component of the **Autism Education Trust's (AET) continuing professional development programme (CPD)**, co-created by ACER and the AET (S1). This partnership has to date **trained 275,000 education staff** across England (S1). The CPD programme consists of (1) a **set of autism standards** (for educational settings to assess autism practice in education); (2) an **autism competency framework** (guidance on the knowledge, skills and competencies needed by practitioners) and (3) **autism training for educators**. The roll-out of this programme has produced a step-change in autism education practice demonstrated in the following four impacts. We have:

#### **(1) Transformed how education stakeholders nationally and internationally understand and value autistic Children and Young People**

The AET programme **champions a strengths-based approach**, rather than a deficit-based approach, to meeting the needs of children and young people in their education (F2). This is attested to by a trainer who confirmed the programme has "changed the way we conduct training for staff. We now focus on the differences and strengths of pupils with autism rather than their deficits" (S2 p.30; F3).

This programme is not simply changing how *individual* educators understand and value autistic CYP. It is also **setting the standard for best practice nationally**. As described by Pam Simpson, AET Lead in Birmingham City Council: “we now have a structured and consistent response, based on research principles and aligned to key legislation, supported by the DFE” (S2, p.16). The programme is the only CPD programme referenced in the 2014 Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (S3 p.276) and signposted as key training (S2). It is now the largest national training programme on autism in England for education-based staff (S1).

The most recent intervention is the **development of eight principles of good autism practice** and detailed case studies of good autism practice in eight schools. These were produced by ACER and funded by the AET (2018–2019) (S1). These principles have been endorsed by the AET Young Persons Panel, feature as a framework for a large postgraduate professional development programme for autism practitioners and are used in the AET’s bite-size messages regarding good autism practice. They are currently being used as a framework for a re-development and update of the AET professional development programme (S4).

**ACER has also challenged conventional medical conceptions of autism in Italy and Greece**, again shifting narratives from ‘disorder’ to a ‘different way of being’. That understandings were effectively changed is confirmed by a Greek participant, who stated “I was impressed by the different approach towards autism and autistic people: the approach was very different compared to the Greek medical model of understanding autism. It changed the way I understood autism [...] I felt very excited thinking that autism needn’t be considered a tragedy (as it commonly is perceived in Greece)” (S5 p.10). We achieved this impact through work with 110 Schools in Greece and 200 staff in Italy, funded by the EU (2014–2017) (S6). The **Greek Ministry of Education have endorsed the provision of the (translated and adapted) professional development programme** throughout Piraeus and Athens (S6 p.17).

**(2) Systematically enabled educators to adopt improved, pupil-centred approaches which transform the educational experience of autistic pupils**

Leadership in schools is **better informed about autism, more able to address the professional development needs of staff and have a framework for auditing existing practice, as well as providing a good local offer for pupils with autism** (S2 pp.15-26, S7; F1–F6). This research-informed professional leadership has been highly effective in raising the capacity of schools to meet the needs of CYP on the autism spectrum (S7, S8; F1). One participant reported that they “now used visual prompts and provided simple instructions. She felt she could adapt her teaching to individual student needs now, could prevent crisis and manage difficult situations and that the child had reduced meltdowns and collaborated more with others as a result of her improved practices” (S6 p.53).

**We have established a shared baseline of knowledge which changed planning at school-wide level** using a strategic and collaborative approach (S2 pp.15-26, S5). For example, in one nursery, where all staff had been trained, the head teacher said: ‘the standards were just amazing for us and we audited not just the resource base but the entire school. [...] During that first year what we also did was use the standards to set performance management objectives for the staff who were then based in the resource base. That gave a very clear indication of where we needed to go as a school’ (S8 p.68). Targeted and specialist support within their settings is reported by staff across four training hubs (networks of schools, local authorities and the voluntary sector), thereby meeting the needs of all children (S7; F1–F6) and facilitating educators in acting on their new understanding of pupil-centred approaches. Improved knowledge and understanding have allowed assessments that accurately reflect the child’s needs, gain the views of CYP and use these to make reasonable adjustments in schools (S8 pp. 81-129; F2, F4). In 2018, two thirds of those who had received the AET training stated they were still using practical ideas and guidance from the training (S1). Case studies of two schools in Greece and Italy, undertaken two years after the CPD had taken place, show teachers continuing to take account of the distinctive learning needs of autistic pupils in developing enabling environments (S5).

### **(3) Enabled the AET to position themselves as a key authority on best practice for national Autism Education**

ACER's collaboration has enabled the AET to position themselves as a **trusted national leader and valued government lobbyist** for matters concerning Autism Education. That AET is so regarded is evidenced by its receipt of £1.5 million funding from the UK's Department of Education (DfE) between 2011 and 2013. The funding supported the development and delivery of the AET professional development programme to staff in mainstream Early Years settings and schools. The AET has secured over £2 million of subsequent funding from the DfE every two years to date. Further evidence of the AET's standing comes from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA) report, which described the AET as having a "strong track record in developing training materials and delivering good quality training to schools. The AET has also published a set of national standards on good autism practice. This should have a key role in contributing to the delivery of the new ITT framework and to ongoing training for teachers and other school staff" (S9). In addition, the AET won Corporate Vision magazine, Private Education and Development Awards Best Autism Education Training Company in the UK in 2019. The AET Director described ACER as being "instrumental in the development of the AET programme. The content of the AET programme, developed by ACER, is of high standard. ACER embedded their research and distinctive pedagogy in the AET programme and were a leading organisation in the development of the AET partnership" (S1).

### **(4) Transformed the infrastructure and organisation of autism support and provision in England**

Local authority (LA) provision to support autistic CYP has undergone a step-change in both the organisation and cost-effectiveness. **The training now reaches 50% of the 24,821 schools in England** due to the strategic changes in organisation outlined below. **Cost-effectiveness has also been improved**, as the reduction in exclusions of autistic CYP in one Local Authority has also led to a reduction in the cost of their education (S10). Given that the Institute for Public Policy Research (2017) estimates the costs of exclusions at around £370,000 per young person, economic modelling indicates that the Communication and Autism team in Birmingham alone potentially saves the public purse approximately £169 million by embedding the AET programme and reducing exclusions (S10). In addition, Communication and Autism team data shows that the number of pupils that have remained in mainstream education has risen as a result of the implementation of the training across the LA. Between 2016 and 2019, 4% more pupils were educated in mainstream rather than specialist provisions. As the average cost of specialist provision in the LA is £67,000 per year per child, a 4% increase equates to a saving of £11 million (S10). Examples of infrastructure change to improve autism provision include:

- **Training 'hubs' have been introduced in which training providers work together** on delivery (S1). Hubs consist of a range of organisations, including local authorities, the voluntary sector and schools. When the AET programme was launched, seven hubs were involved in delivering training between 2011–2013. As of 2019, **73 out of a total of 150 LAs across all of the nine regions of England** are involved in the AET programme. Staff across four training hubs surveyed by the AET stated that the programme framework has enabled staff to develop their knowledge and skills to deliver universal, targeted and specialist support within their settings, thereby meeting the needs of all children (S6 p.39; F1–F6).
- **The AET programme is now core LA training.** Case studies of four of the LAs that deliver the programme found that 82% of schools in Leicestershire have undertaken the training (S6).

## **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

**S1.** Testimonial from the of AET Director on the link between the ACER research and the AET programme, figures on funding generated from the DfE as a result of the underpinning research, verification of total numbers trained and the numbers of hubs involved in the programme. [Available as PDF]

- S2.** Guldberg, K., Bradley, R., Baskerville, K., Simpson, P. and Butler, M. (2019). *The impact of the AET programme at strategic level: Case Studies of four Local Authorities*. London: Autism Education Trust. [Available as PDF]
- S3.** [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice](#) (2014) [Available as PDF]
- S4.** Autism Education Trust: [The Eight Principles of Good Autism Practice](#). [Available as PDF]
- S5.** Guldberg, K., Achtypi, A., D'Alonzo, L., Laskaridou, K., Milton, D., Molteni, P. and Wood, R. (2019). "Using the value-creation framework to capture knowledge co-creation and pathways to impact in a transnational community of practice in autism education", *International Journal of Research and Methods in Education*. [Available as PDF]
- S6.** Guldberg, K., Achtypi, A., Angelidi, E., Baker, L., Bradley, R., Colombo, M., Critchley, S-J., Cumino, R., D'Alonzo, L., Folci, I., Giouroukou, E., Hadjipateras-Giannoulis, K., Huggett, S., Kerem, M., Kokounaras-Liagkis, M., Kossyvaki, A, Laskaridou, K., Milton, D., Molteni, P., Sala, R., Simpson, P., Sofianopolou, K., Wood, R., Zanfroni, E. (2014). [Transform Autism Education: Final Report](#). London: Genium. [Available as PDF]
- S7.** Simpson, P., Vining, Y., Cropley, R. and Horton, D. (2015) [A guide to the use of the AET programme materials by local authorities, support services and schools](#). London: Autism Education Trust. [Available as PDF]
- S8.** Cullen, Stephen Michael, Cullen, Mairi Ann and Lindsay, Geoff (2015) [Evaluation of Autism Education Trust Training Hubs Programme, 2013–15](#): Final report. Coventry: University of Warwick. Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research. University of Warwick. [Available as PDF]
- S9.** [The All-Party Parliamentary Group Report on Autism \(APPGA\) report](#) (2017). [Available as PDF]
- S10.** Director of AET, The economic case for investing in the AET programme (2019). [Available as PDF]