

Educating autistic girls: an interview with Sarah Wild

Q: Can you tell us how you first became interested in autism?

A: A long time ago I trained as a teacher [...] and before that I was an English teacher so I've always been really interested in communication and help people communicate with each other and what communication is for. About 7 years ago I worked in a school in Lewisham that had a broad range of children and young people in it, but quite a lot of autistic teenagers in it, and quite a lot of girls actually, looking back, and I was absolutely fascinated about – was intrigued by the differences between the ways that the boys presented with autism and the ways that the girls presented with autism 'cause in school actually they looked quite – they didn't look very affected by their autism and because I didn't know very much about autism at the time, I just thought oh, maybe they're not placed correctly or maybe they're not having very much difficulty but the more I got to know these girls in Lewisham the more I could see that actually there were gaps and I could see how hard they were working. So when the job came up in Limsfield Grange, I just went straight away and had what I can only describe as an epiphany and just thought "Wow, I really need to – think I need to be here". So that's kind of my journey to the Grange.

Q: Can you tell us about your current work?

A: My current job is... it's the best job in the world! And also quite terrifying at the same time. So, I'm head teacher at Limsfield Grange School. It's a Surrey county council school for girls with communication interaction difficulties. 70% of the girls have autism. We're a residential special school, so about 60% of the girls that are with us board over the week and we work on their independence and communication skills and their wellbeing kind of throughout the week. I think really what we're trying to do, is we're just trying to make sure that the girls get the best start that they possibly can, a lot of them have come from primary mainstream schools where they've had a really difficult time, they quite often come to us already feeling quite depressed and socially isolated, very aware of their differences to their neurotypical peers and what we've got to try and do in five years, which isn't very long, is we've got to try and get them the best suite of qualifications that they can get and also to make sure that they are happy with who they are and they can explain who they are to other people and they can talk about the things that they find difficult and they can talk about the things they're really good at and that they can go out there and make a difference in society.

Q: What are the advantages of single-sex schools for autistic girls?

A: I've never been in favour of single-sex education before I came to the Grange, I've never been in a single-sex environment, but it really works. And I think that's partly because actually because the girls are really busy trying to hold it all together and also please the people around them, I think if you stick them in with some boys who are maybe a bit less minded to please other people and let people know when they're having a difficult time, which they certainly do more than the girls do, I think the girls can quite easily get overlooked in those situations and I think the best thing about the Grange is there's a community of girls who feel like the people there understand them, their peers understand them and are like them so they are looking around and they are seeing other versions of themselves which I think for their self-esteem is an incredible thing. And I think it just takes the pressure off, so between 11 – 16, they can really be their best version of their autistic self, they can really learn to like themselves, they can learn to understand about their strengths and things that they find difficult, they form amazing friendships which then take them into their – the next stage of their life. Yeah, I think it's a really powerful thing, and we can also talk about things in a really explicit way that you probably couldn't do in a more mixed environment around puberty and sex and relationships and life generally, and I think in society expectations for women are very different from men so actually we have to teach them what those expectations are. They may choose not to go with those expectations but actually, I think not knowing what those expectations are would be quite dangerous for them so we have to have some really frank conversations about everything.

Q: How can staff in mainstream schools help support female autistic students?

A: I think they need to make them feel accepted, they need to tell them that they 'get it'. I think they need to provide a safe space and a lot of time so that autistic girls can go and speak to them if they wish to. I think they need to talk to them about how they need to be supported and I think they need to really listen and go with their wishes. I think there's really specific things they need to do around careers, education, guidance in terms of getting girls ready for the next step of their lives and also with sex and relationships, so I think if you're working in a mainstream school you really need to start with that young autistic girl, and you need to find out what she knows about sex and relationships and go from there, and create an incredibly personalized and bespoke SRE curriculum because these are young women who are massively at risk.

Q: What practical advice do you have for supporting autistic girls in the classroom?

A: I think the girls really benefit from concrete learning, lots and lots and lots of examples. They benefit from lots of visuals, lots of overlearning, explaining language to them, I think you need to check back with them all the time about what it is they

understand, because quite often if they're really anxious in a mainstream classroom and they're camouflaging, they're masking and they're trying to fit in, they probably won't want to stand out by asking too many questions and they might not really understand the context of what's going on. And I think also lots of opportunities for you to kind of model interaction and also for you to kind of deconstruct in real-time what social interaction around them means because actually for the girls that's probably the thing they're thinking about the most, they're trying to work out where other people are coming from all the time, and so I think people that are working mainstream environments need to be able to run a commentary almost in real-time about "this is why that person did this, and this is why that person reacted in that way" to help develop that understanding for the girls.

Q: Can you tell us what the main challenges are for autistic girls when accessing education?

A: Oh, I think there are lots and lots of different challenges, but I think when you speak to them and you listen to them talking about their experiences, it's mainly this feeling that they're not the same as everybody else and so they... people talk about masking or some people started referring to it as camouflaging which I prefer actually, where they are aware of their differences to other people, they desperately want friends and they feel that they haven't got any authentic friendships and so they go into social situations, they socially scan an environment, they look at whoever's socially quite successful and then they replicate quite a lot of their behaviours. They suppress all their natural instincts and then they start effectively behaving like somebody else. I think in terms of the effect that has on them, it's exhausting, it's incredibly isolating, and even when they're going in and they're replicating other people's behaviours, that doesn't feel like authentic behaviour to the people that are around them because ultimately the girls don't understand where the communication is coming from or what purpose it serves so even though they're making all this effort to fit in, it's still not quite right. And I think that leads them to feeling really depressed, really isolated and if they haven't had the right levels of support by the time they're teenagers it can go really, really wrong. And I think also the other challenge that they have is managing their incredibly, often very debilitating levels of anxiety which they are facing all day every day which obviously takes up a lot of time and energy for them.

Q: Can you tell us what the main challenges are for autistic girls when preparing to transition out of school?

A: Autistic girls and women have relationships at the centre of everything that they do so I think when they're transitioning out of a place where they've built really good relationships and they feel very comfortable, sometimes the anxieties that they

have are around building those new relationships in the places that they're going to, so I think it's really important that they start to develop a relationship with one or two key people from, I don't know, probably even a year before they go somewhere just so that they feel like they've got like an anchor-point in their new place and that really helps. I think really close liaison between the two settings so that everybody's got a really good idea of this young person and what their strengths and their areas of difficulty are, and I think also talking to them about managing their anxiety around that time of change because what usually happens is a service is involved, there's normally a summer break and then a new service picks them up and actually I think during that period of the break can be really difficult for that young person to contain their an