

HOW TEACHERS SUPPORT SENSORY DIFFERENCES IN PUPILS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: AN INVESTIGATION

Sensory differences can impact children of all ages, in all educational settings, but are more prominent in those diagnosed with ASD. The research outlined in this poster investigates how teachers are able to support sensory differences for children with ASD in an Irish context.

AUTHOR

Liana Quigley Araujo is a recent graduate of St. Nicholas Montessori, having studied Montessori Education for children from 0-12 years. Liana has worked in special education, specifically with children with ASD, for over 6 years and aims to spread awareness and information regarding the importance of supporting sensory differences to teachers of all educational settings.

FINDINGS

Finding 1

Teachers' awareness of sensory differences is there, but support for teachers is limited.

Without opportunities for education and training, teachers are relying on their experience and the occasional support from other professionals to be able to support their students.

Finding 2

Sensory differences have various effects on daily school life, at an individual level, a whole class level, and at a staff level.

Sensory differences can have an effect on the following:

- Communication, attention and participation
- Health and safety concerns
- Behavioural challenges
- Wellbeing

Finding 3

Interventions for sensory differences appear to work, but the system needs improvement.

A combination of approaches used with positive impacts were reported by participants. However, methods of identifying and monitoring sensory differences need improvement.

What do the findings mean?

It is evident from this study that **sensory differences are frequently observed** in children with ASD and that they can **present in many ways**. and. This study also brings to light the despite teachers efforts to support those differences, there is a clear **lack of support for teachers and pupils** within the education system where sensory differences are concerned.

INTRODUCTION

What is a sensory difference?

- The term "**sensory differences**" has been used frequently in literature to describe **unusual sensory responses** by those with ASD (Steeley, 2018; Murray-Slutsky & Paris, 2000)
- Research estimates **up to 94% of children with ASD experience sensory differences** (Greenspan and Wieder, 1998) and that these differences **impact on the learning experience** of children including potential disruptions to their routine, inability to focus, anxiety or nervousness, and low participation in activities (McDougal et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020).

Why should we care about supporting sensory differences?

- Supporting sensory differences **leads to self-regulation**, which has benefits for the child such as increased **task initiation, attending behaviours, working memory and planning** (Yack et al., 2015).
- Despite the literature to support these interventions, there is a **gap in the education and training** of teachers in relation to sensory differences. With **no specific method of training or educating teachers on sensory differences**, information on the current practice of supporting sensory differences is **virtually non-existent in the Irish context**.

ANALYSIS

How was the data analysed?

Thematic analysis was the method used for analysis, which relies on the emergence of themes within the data on which to base the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

- Steps for **trustworthy thematic analysis** were followed (Nowell et al., 2017)
- Series of **codes** were gathered in order to organise the data
- Codes analysed and organised into **six themes**:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Teacher's knowledge & awareness of sensory differences | 4. Teacher education and training |
| 2. Types of sensory differences observed | 5. Approaches and interventions used by teachers |
| 3. Impact of sensory differences within the classroom | 6. Teachers' attitudes to current practice |

CONCLUSION

How can we do better?

Increasing teacher education opportunities would allow teachers to be able to identify sensory differences in their pupils; recognise what is/is not behaviour; understand the impact of sensory differences; be aware of when to seek support from other professionals; know how to maintain a sensory friendly environment. **Greater collaboration between teachers and other professionals** such as OT, SLT and psychologists would also help.

Support for our educators means support for our students

In conclusion, **sensory differences are a part of autistic children's lives**, influencing how they interact with the world around them. Teachers **need awareness** of sensory differences, **education** on how to support sensory differences, **understanding** of intervention methods, and **collaboration** with other professionals. Without these, teachers cannot truly support the sensory differences of children with ASD.

OBJECTIVE

How do teachers provide support?

With little information available on supporting sensory differences in classroom and limited opportunities for teacher education and training in Ireland, how can we begin to support our pupils? This research aimed to investigate just how teachers do this.

Research aims and objectives

- To investigate **what teachers know** about sensory differences in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder
- To identify **if teachers have received training** on sensory differences in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder
- To ascertain **what strategies teachers use** to support sensory differences in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

METHODOLOGY

How was the research carried out?

- Research was undertaken using **qualitative research methods** and a **combination of the case-study approach and semi-structured interviews were used**.
- Qualitative methods, associated with the **interpretivist worldview**, aim to uncover the how or the why of a particular phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2007)
- Qualitative approaches are **incredibly diverse and offer flexibility to researchers in terms of what field they may apply it to** (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is an advantage to the current study, in that despite limited research within the literature on the area of sensory differences on which to base this study, qualitative approaches can still be applied.

Data collection and tools

- Informed consent provided to all participants
- Semi-structured interviews via GoogleMeets
- Audio recorded and safely stored for confidentiality
- Interviews transcribed using pseudonyms for anonymity

Participants

- Early Intervention teachers whose pupils have primary diagnosis of ASD
- Minimum of 1 year teaching experience to reflect current practice
- Total of 5 Participants



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