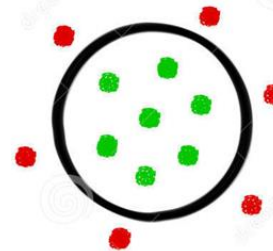


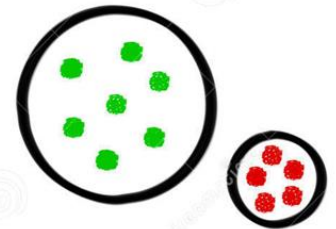
Educational ideology and the autistic learner

Dr. Damian E M Milton

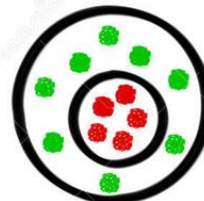
EXCLUSION



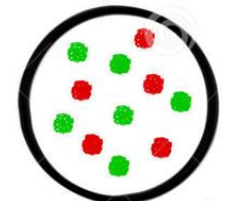
SEPARATION



INTEGRATION



INCLUSION



- “Some of us aren’t meant to belong. Some of us have to turn the world upside down and shake the hell out of it until we make our own place in it.” (Lowell, 1999).



A bit about me

- I'm autistic (diagnosed 2009) – as is my son (diagnosed 2005) and one (possibly both?) of my daughters (diagnosed 2023).
- A background in Social Science (initially Sociology).
- Senior Lecturer in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Tizard Centre, University of Kent.
- Visiting Lecturer, LSBU, UCL and other Universities.
- Director, National Autistic Taskforce.
- Chair of the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC).



Introduction

- This presentation reflects upon how autism can be reframed using theories such as the double empathy problem and monotropism and the relevance these have for the inclusion of autistic learners in educational settings.
- Drawing upon numerous studies, this presentation will also explore how differences in educational ideology between stakeholders can influence the inclusion and progression of autistic learners.

Idealised normalcy

- “Another way to decide what to teach a child with autism is to understand typical child development. We should ask what key developmental skills the child has already developed, and what they need to learn next. The statutory curriculum in the countries of the UK also tells us what children should learn. Then there are pivotal behaviours that would help further development: teaching communication, social skills, daily living or academic skills that can support longer-term independence and choices.” (Prof. Richard Hastings, 2013: <http://theconversation.com/behavioural-method-is-not-an-attempt-to-cure-autism-19782>).

Normalisation and stigma

- To be defined as abnormal in society, is often conflated with being perceived as 'pathological' in some way and/or to be socially stigmatised, shunned, and sanctioned.
- The denigration of difference.



Empowerment

- What is meant by ‘socially appropriate’, a ‘social rule’, ‘social skill’, ‘functional’?
- By whose standards?
- What it means to be ‘person-centred’ – mutual respect and understanding?

Unintended consequences

- “I had virtually no socially-shared nor consciously, intentionally expressed, personhood beyond this performance of a non-autistic ‘normality’ with which I had neither comprehension, connection, nor identification. This disconnected constructed facade was accepted by the world around me when my true and connected self was not. Each spoonful of its acceptance was a shovel full of dirt on the coffin in which my real self was being buried alive...” (Williams, 1996: 243).

Mutual incomprehension

- “95% of people don’t understand me”.
- “Friends are overwhelming”.
- “Adults never leave me alone”.
- “Adults don’t stop bullying me”.
- Quotes taken from Jones et al. (2012).

The 'double empathy problem'

- A case of mutual incomprehension?
- Breakdown in interaction between autistic and non-autistic people as not solely located in the mind of the autistic person (Milton, 2012).
- Theory of autistic mind can often leave a great deal to be desired.



Misattunement and dealignment

- Garfinkel and the breaching experiment.
- “Priorities (interests) differ widely. An exchange of wrong predictions – NT autism ‘priors’ and autistic NT ‘priors’ both go wrong.” (Dinah Murray – personal exchange 2019).
- The dialectical misattunement hypothesis: “...views psychopathology not merely as disordered function within single brains but also as a dynamic interpersonal mismatch that encompasses various levels of description.” (Bolis et al., 2018).

An 'interest model'

- Autism and monotropism (Murray, 1992; Murray et al. 2005; Lawson, 2010).
- Attention as a scarce resource.
- Monotropic attention strategies and the 'attention tunnel'.
- Monotropism, repetitive behaviour and interests, and 'flow states'.
- Wider relevance? Links with neurocognitive theory.

“Filling in the gaps” – a crossover

- “We suggest specifically that attenuated Bayesian priors - 'hypo-priors' - may be responsible for the unique perceptual experience of autistic people, leading to a tendency to perceive the world more accurately rather than modulated by prior experience.” (Pellicano and Burr, 2012)
- “Due to differences in the way autistic people process information, this filling of gaps tends not to occur (at least to the same extent). Autistic people have a tendency to be more literal, and work upon what is tangible and present, thus conclusions are reached through available information (without filling in the gaps).” (Milton, 2013)
- We now think it is not as simple as this...

- *“We suggest that the uneven skills profile in autism depends on which interests have been fired into monotropic superdrive and which have been left unstimulated by any felt experience.”* (Murray et al. 2005: 143).

Monotropism and social context

- Experiences of 'failure' or the condemnation and mocking of others, can be devastating.
- This can be highly influential on which interests are followed through, and which are stopped through feelings of fear and anxiety.
- Autism and the 'spiky profile'.

Theories of autism

- The triad of impairments: social communication, social interaction and restricted interests/behaviours.
- Executive functioning
- Weak central coherence
- Theory of mind
- Context blindness
- An alternative view: monotropism, interests and the 'double empathy problem'

Theories of learning

	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social / Situational
Theorists	Watson, Skinner	Piaget, Bruner	Maslow, Rogers	Bandura, Salomon
View of the learning process	A change in behaviour	Internal mental processes (such as insights and information processing)	Actions toward fulfilling potential	Interaction within social contexts, inclusion in a community of practice
Primary locus of learning	External stimuli*	Internal cognition	Affective and cognitive needs	Learning seen as a relationship between people and their environment
Purpose of education	Produce behavioural change in a desired direction	Develop capacity to learn new skills	Exercising autonomy and becoming a self-actualised learner	Full participation and inclusion in communities of practice
Role of educator	To arrange the environment to elicit a desired response	Structures the content of a learning activity	Facilitates personal development (holistically)	Establishing participatory communities of practice
Practical examples	Competency-based education	Comparisons made to stages of development	Self-directed learning	Participatory activities

- It should be noted that Skinner also looked at ‘internal stimuli’ or ‘private behaviours’.
- Table adapted from: Merriam et al. (1991: 138)

Relationship and developmental approaches

- Alternatives to Behavioural approaches are often categorised as Relationship-based or Developmental approaches.
- This is a very broad category however which encompasses a number of differing approaches.
- Most with a strong cognitivist or functionalist basis (looking at levels of psychological and social functioning, often compared to normative averages).
- Yet some, also utilising Humanist and/or Social or Situational ideas.
- One can also see elements of a functionalist perspective in some Behaviourist narratives, particularly PBS.

Cognitivist-Functionalist perspectives

- One firmly established cognitivist approach is that of TEACCH or Structured Teaching.
- This approach places emphasis on the structure and predictable sequencing of activities, as well as visual schedules and prompts.
- More recently the SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support) approach has been formulated that looks to be a family-centred approach, and highlights the development of 'Functional' social communication, regulating emotions, and mutual transactional support.

Intensive Interaction

- A relationship-based model which seeks to make functional gains in communication.
- However, the focus here is primarily building trust and rapport on the child's own terms.
- Following a child's interests and learning their 'language'.
- Phoebe Caldwell (2014) – moving beyond initial model in her practice.

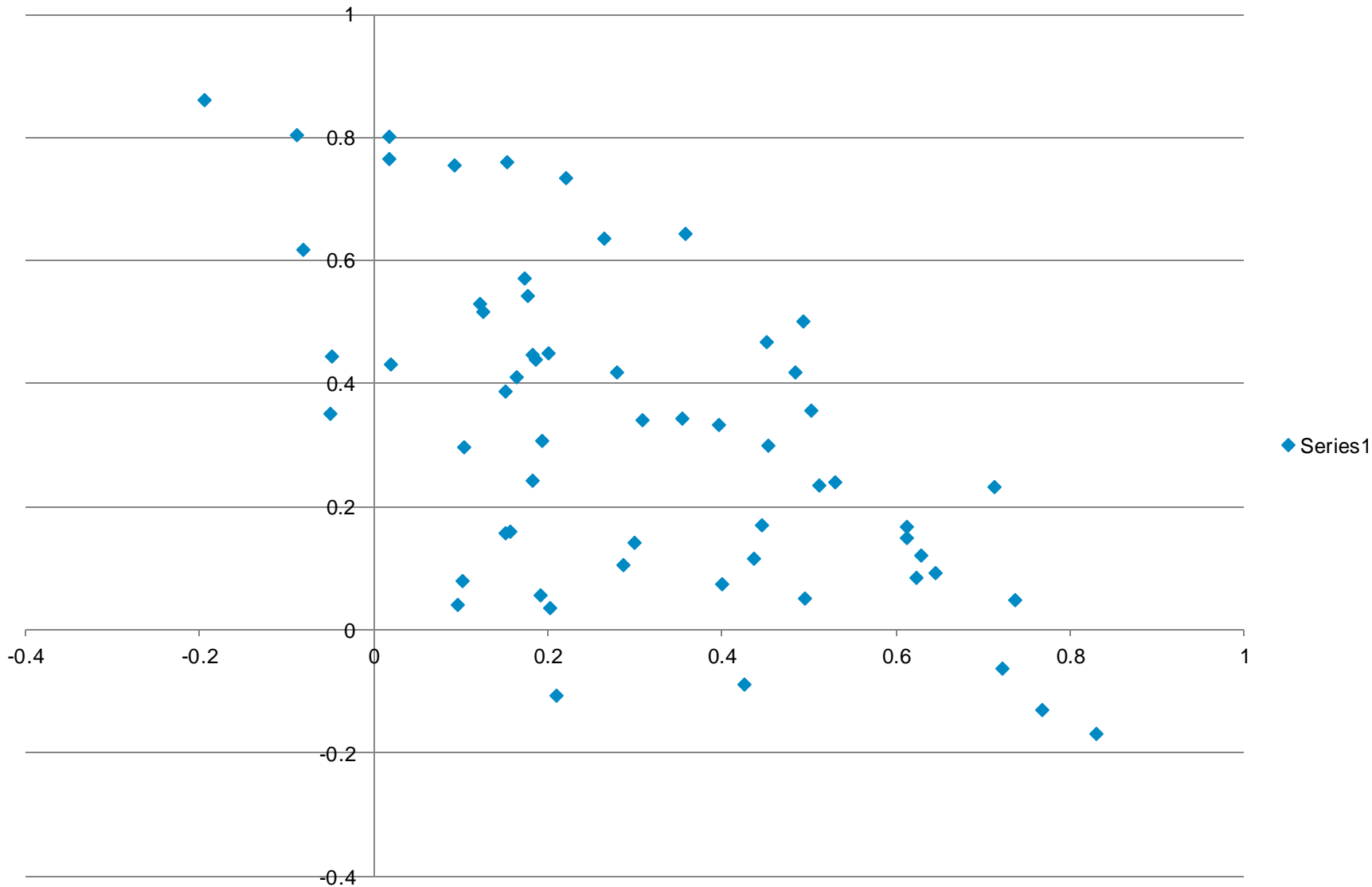
AET consultation data

Stakeholder group	Understanding the individual pupil	Building relationships	Curriculum and learning	Enabling environments
Practitioners	<u>Staff training</u>	Involving and supporting parents	Differentiated curriculum (social skills)	Quiet and safe spaces
Parents	Staff training and understanding the individual	<u>Communication between staff and parents</u>	Individually tailored curriculum	Structure and routine
Children and young people	Understanding from staff	<u>Bullying (including 'friends')</u>	Subject content and delivery	Crowds and personal space
Common ground	Staff training needed	Better communication needed and understanding	Differentiation / tailored curriculum	Structured break times and safety
Tensions	Potentially what staff are trained in	Communication not being good enough and a lack of understanding	Social skills training	Differences in view regarding how environments should be managed

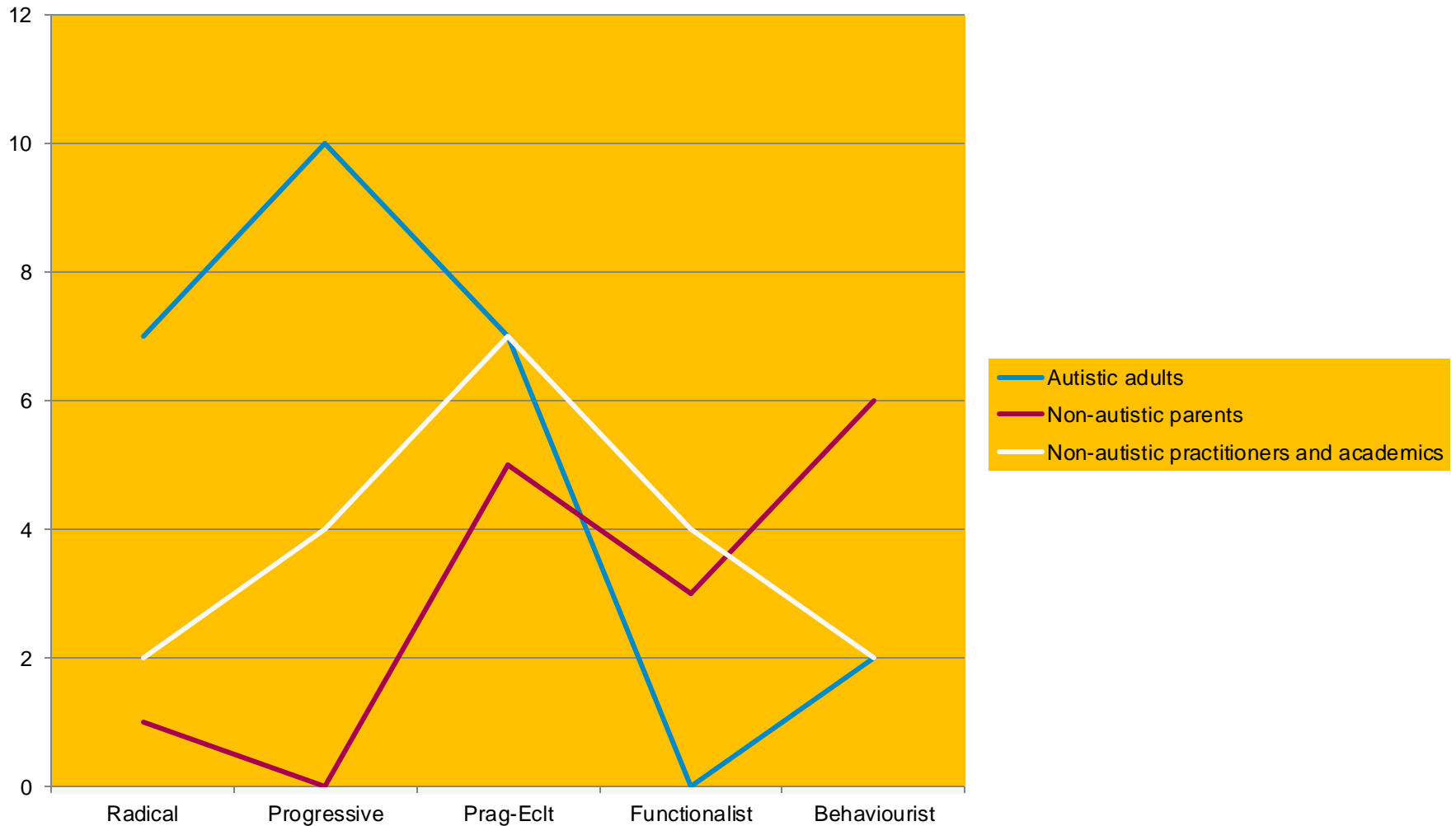
Stakeholder perceptions

- Findings from PhD research.
- Significant tensions over a number of issues:
- Celebrating the diversity of learners and not trying to 'normalise' them.
- Radical change in society.
- Pupil-led vs. teacher-led activities.
- Social skills training and the appropriateness of behaviour.

- *“Because otherwise he is trapped in a world where he cannot communicate his hopes and fears, particularly when I am dead and cannot look out for him.”*
- *“Difference should be accommodated, accepted and celebrated.”*



A spectrum of educational views



Common ground?

- Not a great deal!
- Against extreme normalisation?
- Enabling environments?
- Building relationships, communication and mutual understanding.

Lynam et al. (2024)

- A scoping review was conducted to identify studies exploring first-person accounts of autistic pupils' school experiences (primary and secondary; aged 4–18 years) published between 2005 and 2023. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify overarching thematic categories across the included studies.
- Thirty-six studies were included in the review and six themes were identified: Experiences of feeling misunderstood, of bullying and masking, of feeling excluded, of anxiety, of sensory needs in school, and of being overwhelmed during transitions.
- Missing positive experiences in the literature.

- “We need to see the world from the autistic perspective and apply approaches based on a mutuality of understanding that are rational and ethical – which respect the right of the individual to be different – yet recognises and deals with distress and offers practical help. We should encourage and motivate the person to develop strengths rather than focus on 'deficits'. This will mean offering opportunity for development while supporting emotional stability.” (Mills, 2013).

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