

## Reimagining education

### Autistic learners and education: Multiple 'maskings'

Vijaya Dharan



For this 2022 edition, **Vijaya Dharan** reimagines an education system for autistic learners.

### Multiple 'maskings'

The word 'masking' is synonymous with autism, particularly in relation to autistic girls (Carpenter et al., 2019; Hebron & Bond, 2019) who work to hide their autistic traits to fit into peer groups and communities that they *want* to belong to. However, there are multiple layers of systemic masking within the education system. These systemic masks require at least as much scrutiny as they prevent access to quality learning and social experiences at school for autistic students.

A New Zealand Herald article, *Autistic students in NZ three times more likely to be stood down, suspended* (17 May, 2022), reported that autistic students not verified under the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) scheme were suspended from school three times more frequently than those who had the ongoing resources. In particular, the study noted that the ORS funding "usually meant paying for a teacher aide who *may* help the child *cope* at school" (emphasis added), implying that those students who had teacher aides would less likely be excluded, an unmasking of which is long overdue. The unmasking is not about belittling teacher aides or what they do. It is a well-known fact that teacher aides sometimes become loco parentis of children to whom they are 'attached'. How can we peel back each layer of the 'mask', and examine the underlying cause of the *resource equals teacher aide* mindset?

The first layer to be unmasked is the entrenched belief that teacher aides are a panacea: supporting autistic students, or any child or young person with learning difficulties, so that they can 'cope'. Schools' welcome mats are often wider when students come with tagged funding resulting in immediate access to teacher aides. While literally and intentionally, the resource is meant to be *teachers'* aides, it has long morphed into being *students'* aides – a pairing game that in many instances creates dependency and reduces peer interactions (Giangreco et al., 2010; Roberts & Simpson, 2016). Some argue this is because ORS funding is tagged to a child, and not to schools or a teacher. However, demands for financial support will often exceed available resources; therefore, systematic and principled planning is critical. If the argument is that financial resources are tagged to students, then it is even more imperative that they be used for life-long positive outcomes for

autistic learners. The pervasive belief that families want the funding to be invested in teacher aide support begs the question as to why they may hold this view? It is not uncommon for parents of autistic children to say that teacher aides have the most knowledge about their child and their learning. This is because Individual Education Plans (IEP) are sometimes a deflection exercise, whereby the implementation of learning goals falls on teacher aides. Seldom are parents' concerns about the untrained nature of teacher aides taken into account (Dharan, 2020).

So, what is this practice *masking*? One does not have to dig deep. It masks the fact that teachers often hand over the responsibility of day-to-day 'teaching' of autistic students to the well-meaning, but often untrained/less trained teacher aides (Kearney, 2011). This action (or inaction) of teachers clearly *masks* a few important things that have long needed attention and has almost reached crisis point.

Firstly, it masks the fact that teachers may be lacking the confidence and self-efficacy to support the learning of autistic children within a class of 28-30 other children. This is not about finger pointing at teachers, but a clarion call to better understand teachers' readiness to relinquish their primary role of teaching autistic students. What leads them to question their own accountability for the learning of the autistic child and believe that less qualified teacher aides can better support autistic learners?

Secondly the refrain that *parents are happy when their children have teacher aides, or parents want teacher aides*, masks the fact that parents are grateful that they are not called in to pick up their child every now and then. For parents, a teacher aide offers something of a guarantee that their children will remain at school, as outlined in the reported research.

The third interconnected masking is that of the quality of learning experienced by autistic students. Is 'working' in isolation with a teacher aide and mostly away from the classroom (for instance, citing their sensory sensitivities) an authentic learning experience? When do we stop and listen to autistic students about their preferences, which may include learning with peers (Busch & Dharan, 2021), having friendships, and not being seen as different (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008)?

## Reimagining education without 'masks'

Let us envisage a scenario in which an autistic child with no teacher aide exhibits behaviours that can be challenging. What would enable teachers to include this student within their teaching gambit, recognising that suspension is no longer an option? Critically, teachers' professional self-efficacy and agency are connected to their professional confidence. Aotearoa has amazing teachers who want to do the best for their students. However, if they feel lacking in expertise, for example in supporting autistic learners, they may shy away from their responsibilities. Exclusionary practices may only reduce when teachers feel competent and agentic, and this is most likely when they are given time for professional growth beyond just content knowledge. Their learning must be situated, ongoing, and allow for opportunities to practice supporting autistic learners within inclusive classrooms.

This type of teacher learning requires a mind shift in how professional learning and development is conceptualised. There are wide-ranging resources online for teachers, but being able to embed learnings into practice can only be achieved by building teacher confidence and self-efficacy. This requires systemic rethink and time investment. Simply enabling autistic children to *cope* (and by extension for teachers to cope) must give way to a focus on ensuring teachers feel that their pedagogy can accommodate the needs of every child in their classroom. If we stand true to the goals of the National Education Learning Priority (NELP) (Ministry of Education, 2020), of having a ‘world class inclusive public education’, how can we reimagine the ways we currently support teachers to become agentic?

The relentless focus on teacher aides is indeed masking deeper and necessary issues of building teacher capability and capacity. The NELP objective of ‘Quality teaching and Leadership’ calls for more systemic scrutiny in terms of meeting the needs of autistic learners. Children with autism have every right to thrive in our education system and have access to quality learning and social experiences, and for parents to stop feeling grateful for their children to just survive and ‘cope’ on a day-to-day basis. We can and must do better.

***Tungia te ururoa kia tupu whakaritorito te tupu o te harakeke***

*Clear away the overgrown bushes, so that the new flax shoots will spring forth*

## References

- Busch, R., & Dharan, V. (2021). The impact of innovative learning environments on sensory processing difficulties: Students’ perspectives. *International Journal of Student Voice*, 7(1). <https://ijsv.psu.edu/article/the-impact-of-innovative-learning-environments/>
- Carpenter, B., Happé, F., & Egerton, J. (Eds.). (2019). *Girls and autism: Educational, family, and personal perspectives*. Routledge.
- Dharan, V. (2020). It is not THEM and US: Sustainable outcomes for children and young people on the autism spectrum. *Kairaranga*, 21(1), 17-28. <https://doi.org/10.54322/kairaranga.v21i1.319>
- Giangreco, M. F., Suter, J. C., & Doyle, M. B. (2010). Paraprofessionals in inclusive schools: A review of recent research. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 20, 41-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410903535356>
- Hebron, J., & Bond, C. (2019). *Education and girls on the autism spectrum: Developing an integrated approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Humphrey, N., & Lewis, S. (2008). ‘Make me normal’: The views and experiences of pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools. *Autism*, 12, 23-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361307085267>
- Kearney, A. (2011). *Exclusion from and within school*. Sense Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-499-7>

Ministry of Education. (2020). *The national education learning plan*.

<https://assets.education.govt.nz/public/Documents/NELP-TES-documents/FULL-NELP-2020.pdf>

Roberts, J., & Simpson, K. (2016). A review of research into stakeholder perspectives on inclusion of students with autism in mainstream schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(10), 1084-1096. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145267>

#### AUTHOR PROFILE



##### **Vijaya Dharan**

Dr. Vijaya Dharan is a Senior Lecturer at Massey University, Institute of Education. She is involved in the Masters in Educational and Developmental Psychology programme, and is the coordinator of the undergraduate BA programme with an endorsement in Educational Psychology. Her research interests are in the field of inclusive education, autism and student (dis)engagement. The experiences gained in working with children and families, schools and early childhood settings as psychologist have reinforced to her that understanding lived experiences and restoring and re-storying lives of some children is pivotal for their long-term wellbeing. As a passionate advocate for social justice, she is deeply interested in “learning for all” and the various beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of educators that can enhance or hinder this process.

Email: [v.m.dharan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:v.m.dharan@massey.ac.nz)