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Learning from autistic teachers: lessons about change in an era of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in major upheavals in the school education sector, particularly during periods of "lockdown" and remote working. While the impact of these changes on pupils, parents and school staff, both nationally and internationally, has been well-documented, there has been scant consideration of the effects on disabled educators. In addition, the mixed nature of the existing research findings in the special education context – revealing positives, as well as negatives from Covid-related adjustments – suggests the need to learn broader lessons from the impact of these measures. In this article, we report on findings from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 autistic school staff working in a range of roles in schools in the UK. Using thematic analysis, participants' experiences of lockdown were analysed. Importantly, these were also compared with participants' experiences outside of the pandemic. The resulting five themes – sensory issues and the working environment; communication and social barriers and freedoms; stresses and strengths associated with technology; navigating home/school boundaries; and modalities of change – revealed some of the significant difficulties autistic school staff typically experience in their work, as well as the factors that intersect with these. Although periods of Covid-related measures created additional stresses for participants, they also provided a respite from the usual pressures, and indeed enabled their strengths – including an ability to manage change – to be more manifest. Valuable insights, which could benefit autistic school staff, pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, and the whole school community in the UK and beyond, are discussed.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges to the school education sector both nationally and internationally, not least because of the uncertainty created, the frequent changes of policy and practice implemented at governmental level, and

the need to adapt rapidly to new pedagogical and technological practices (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Prado-Gascó et al., 2020; Rabaglietti et al., 2021). These changes included the requirement to work from home and to teach pupils remotely, which teachers report can result in significant anxiety and stress, and an increase in workload (Aperribai et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). Pressures on school leaders have been marked, particularly due to the requirement to "recalibrate provision at pace" (Hulme et al., 2021, p. 1), and are further exacerbated by poor "top-down communication" from state entities (Fotheringham et al., 2022, p. 221).

Within this "crisis-management" scenario (Fotheringham et al., 2022), the special education sector was overlooked (Crane, Adu, et al., 2021; Viner et al., 2020), and yet the impact of these upheavals on all stakeholders in the disability context has been significant. These include particular complexities for parents of children who attend special schools (O'Connor Bones et al., 2021), and an increased risk of mental health issues for children with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) (Nonweiler et al., 2020) and their parents (Asbury et al., 2020). This is in part due to the loss of the home environment as a safe space for children and young people with SEND; a "blurring of boundaries" which is difficult to navigate (Canning & Robinson, 2021, p. 65). Materials for home-learning were not always adapted for children with disabilities (Baten et al., 2022; Canning & Robinson, 2021), who were at risk of being even further marginalised and disadvantaged during lockdown (Page et al., 2021). Studies also show that the pandemic has resulted in an increased attainment gap for pupils with SEND, both within the UK (Hunt et al., 2022) and beyond (Maelan et al., 2021), as existing educational inequalities, such as limited access to technology, have been exacerbated across the world (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Tadesse & Muluye, 2020).

Nevertheless, Page et al. (2021) and other studies, often derived from parental report, provide some positive findings on the effects of lockdown, including that children with SEND are more relaxed with home-learning (Shepherd & Hancock, 2020). Other reported benefits are that despite experiencing difficulties (Tokatly Latzer et al., 2021), parents of children with SEND discovered unexpected improvements and previously hidden capabilities in their children (Mantovani et al., 2021). Such findings underscore the complex nature of Covid-related impacts in the disability context, and the importance of factoring in circumstances outside of times of crisis in order to learn lessons for the future (Heyworth et al., 2021; Pavlopoulou et al., 2020).

Studies focused on the viewpoints of children in relation to lockdown show similarly mixed results (e.g. Idoiaga et al., 2020; Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021), although few are concerned with the perspectives of children with SEND. Couper-Kenney and Riddell (2021), in a small-scale study in Scotland with children with SEND and their parents, found that despite a lack of support, families enjoyed the lessening of school-based pressures. Heyworth et al. (2021), in an Australian study with autistic young people and autistic and non-autistic parents, report similarly that notwithstanding difficulties during an initial, transitional period, autistic young people flourished at home. This may be in part due to the alleviation of the "hidden curriculum" and the social complexities of mainstream school (Reicher, 2020).

However, notwithstanding the attention paid to the effects of Covid-related measures on education professionals, parents, and children with and without SEND (Marchant et al., 2021), there has been scant focus on disabled educators, or even disabled employees

generally. Indeed, all disabled people have been disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of health and social outcomes (Goggin & Ellis, 2020; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2020; Shakespeare et al., 2021). Disabled employees have been even more disadvantaged in relation to work and financial security than usual (Emerson et al., 2021), as have workers from other marginalised communities (Kantamneni, 2020), particularly in countries hardest hit by the pandemic, such as the UK (Fana et al., 2020). According to Brown et al. (2021), UK policy in relation to disabled staff during lockdown and beyond has been "silent", unless presenting a regressive and "narrow, medicalised view" (p. 263), bordering on "a soft eugenics approach" (p. 264). Add to this, in the education context, the typical difficulties and prejudices disabled teachers experienced in pre-Covid times such as disablism (Aldakhil, 2020), a lack of resources and support (Neca et al., 2020), fear of stigma (Oberholzer, 2017), and limited representation and accommodations (Ware et al., 2021; Wood & Happé, 2021), the need to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the working practices of disabled teachers is reinforced. Importantly, consideration of issues outside of times of crisis can provide essential contextual comparisons in this endeavour.

For autistic people more specifically, Covid safety measures led to reported difficulties in terms of access to healthcare and services (Maljaars et al., 2022; Oakley et al., 2021; Pellicano et al., 2022; Spain et al., 2021), but also for some a reduction in stress (Lugo-Marín et al., 2021). Studies comparing experiences of lockdown with non-autistic adults report a greater increase in anxiety for autistic adults, but a relative decrease in social and sensory overload (Oomen et al., 2021), and a lower negative impact on social life (Maljaars et al., 2022). Indeed, the requirement to socially isolate can bring both benefits and drawbacks for autistic adults (Pellicano et al., 2022), as well as the opportunity to leverage home-working strategies already developed in pre-Covid times (Pais & Knapp, 2021). Moreover, Simmons (2020) argues that Covid-related restrictions highlight the lack of control over social contact that autistic people usually experience, underscoring the importance of factoring in circumstances from the pre-Covid era when considering the impact of such measures.

Autistic expertise

In autism research, the viewpoints and lived realities of autistic people are traditionally insufficiently considered (Grant & Kara, 2021; Milton, 2014). Knowledge about autism tends to be derived from the views of non-autistic, or "neurotypical" professionals (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017), who may have been trained to think about autism from deficit-focused perspectives that ignore autistic strengths and capabilities (Nicolaidis, 2012). According to Jaswal and Akhtar (2019), we need to start "taking autistic testimony seriously" (p. 1), and there has been a growing body of qualitative research that prioritises autistic people's lived experiences and amplifies autistic insights (Crane, Sesterka, et al., 2021). In the education context, these understandings can be of benefit to the whole school community (StEvens, 2022; Wood, 2020, 2021), and qualitative explorations of autistic experience have been particularly valuable in areas in which there has been a paucity of existing scholarly work (van Schalkwyk & Dewinter, 2020). One such area of under-investigation regards the experiences of autistic school staff during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this article, we tackle this gap via the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of autistic school staff during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What additional insights can be gained from comparing these experiences with those prior to the pandemic?

Methodology

The Autistic School Staff Project (ASSP) is a predominantly qualitative, iterative project, underpinned by principles of social justice, disability rights and inclusion (Della Fina & Cera, 2015; Lim, 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2010). Informed by a neurodiversity and social model of disability framework, our study proceeds on the basis that autism is a natural part of human diversity (Kapp, 2020), and that disability is at least in part socially constructed (Shakespeare, 2014).

Two phases of the project are of relevance here. The first phase (Phase 1), consisted of an anonymous online survey in the UK, co-developed with a committee of autistic teachers. This resulted in n = 149 participants who were either working or had worked in a school in the UK in an education role: findings and analysis are reported in Wood and Happé (2021). The findings in this paper are drawn from n = 21 Phase 1 participants who opted to take part in an in-depth, semi-structured interview (as part of Phase 2), and who were still working in a school at the time of the interview (even if disrupted because of Covid-related measures). Ethical review was conducted via the Ethical Review Committee of King's College London in which issues of confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and sensitivity of approach were incorporated. All participants were provided with a 15 pound thank you voucher.

Participants had the option of taking part in the interview, which included questions on the impact of Covid-19 on working practices, by email or on a one-to-one basis with an autistic member of the ASSP team (and co-author), via phone or Microsoft Teams. This resulted in n = 11 one-to-one interviews and n = 10 by email (total n = 21). Interview questions (Appendix) were provided to one-to-one interviewees in advance: interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

The interviews took place between July and December 2020. This was after the first lockdown in the UK (approximately March–June 2020), and before or at the start of the second lockdown (which began in mid-November 2020). During the first lockdown, schools were open to a select group of children only (e.g. children classed as "vulnerable"), with a phased return for all other children over the subsequent months. Although not all nations in the UK took the same steps at the same time, broadly schools remained open for all pupils for the start of the second lockdown.

Participant characteristics

In our sample of 21 participants, we collected information on sex assigned at birth (19 females and 2 males), as well as gender identity (13 identified as female, 1 as male, 2 as non-binary, and 5 did not specify). 17 had received a clinical diagnosis of autism, 1 self-identified as autistic, 3 were seeking or awaiting diagnosis. Participants had been working in schools from 1 to 28 years and ranged in age from 25 to 56 years (median age = 41 years). They worked in mainstream schools (n = 14, of which 8 were primary

schools), special schools (n = 2), both (n = 2) or mainstream schools with an autism or disability base (n = 3). There were 9 teachers, 3 teaching assistants (TAs), 1 SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator), 4 visiting professionals, 1 deputy Headteacher and SENCO (dual role) and 3 participants who were either deputy Headteachers or in another senior role.

In this article, in order to respect participants' gender identity (where expressed), we have used the pronouns "they" and "their" for those whose stated identity was non-binary.

Data analysis

Data were analysed through thematic analysis, a method "free of theory and epistemology" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). We employed an approach to thematic analysis suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003), whereby themes can be developed from the data through the process of analysis (an inductive approach), as well as from researchers' previous understanding of the phenomena under study (an *a priori,* deductive approach, resulting from the iterative nature of our study). The overall analytical method was influenced by "values" coding, apposite for data that reflect participants' "values, attitudes, and beliefs", as well as their "perspectives or worldview" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 131). Thus, themes were "emic"; those derived from insiders (i.e. autistic school staff), rather than outsiders (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Here, meaning is perceived as being "socially produced and reproduced" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 85), and so the broader context in which experiences occur is considered.

Our emphasis here is on the impact of Covid-related changes (and the lessons that can be drawn from these) on working practices for the participants working in a school, either on-site or remotely, at the time of the interview. Therefore, for the first phase of analysis, the researcher who conducted the interviews and the first author (both of whom are former teachers) drew out responses in relation to Covid-19 specifically. These data were coded initially by them and then used to identify essential contextualising data from other parts of the interviews. Further phases of coding took place by the first author through constant comparison in order to identify patterns and connections, in which findings specific to Covid-19 impacts were compared with relevant reflections about typical work experiences (see Appendix). Initial themes were then presented to the broader study team, including the project's autistic consultant (also a teacher), for further discussion and reflection, before reaching agreement on the final themes. Both individually and via discussion with the broader team, our process was reflective throughout, informed by a bracketing approach (Fischer, 2009), involving regular re-reading of the data and consideration of our own positionalities.

Results

The process of data analysis resulted in five themes which stemmed from an overarching standpoint of learning from Covid-19-related changes. These are: (1) Sensory issues and the working environment; (2) Communication and social barriers and freedoms; (3) Stresses and strengths associated with technology; (4) Navigating home/school boundaries and (5) Modalities of change. Each of these themes begins with a discussion of the

issues participants reflected on in pre-Covid or "usual" times with how they were impacted once Covid-related measures, such as lockdown, remote working and smaller group sizes, were implemented.

Sensory issues and the working environment

All participants asserted that they experienced sensory difficulties in pre-Covid times, which impacted negatively on their work. Noise was reported as the most impactful sensory issue for nearly all participants, with background noise from "many different rooms and voices", hubbub created by transitional times of the school day, and "kids screeching", resulting in "a big blur of noise", and proving highly distracting and even "overwhelming". Similarly, the school bell and the hum of technology could be distressing, induce anxiety and add to a sense of fatigue. Moreover, the staffroom can be "noisy if not noisier than a classroom", a circumstance that could be further exacerbated by the sound of colleagues eating. Participants might therefore withdraw from the staffroom, and seek quiet places ("I just slink off"), such as empty classrooms, during break times.

Participants also mentioned indoor lights, particularly fluorescent or strip lights, which are "too bright" and sometimes "flickering". Odours such as food and perfume were found to be repulsive to the point of making participants "feel ill", as were busy corridors, particularly if this led to people "brushing past".

Sensory issues intersected directly with the issue of change, as having to change classrooms frequently, for example, made sensory impacts more difficult to deal with. For a visiting professional, there was no "decompression time", and "nowhere to have a break (…) only the toilet", leaving her feeling "exhausted". These issues could result in a difficulty in processing information across modalities, such as not being able to "hear properly because the lights are too bright". For some, sensory distress was the most difficult aspect of their work, which made full-time working impossible.

Participants appeared to lack agency in relation to their sensory environment, as having the heating centrally controlled, for example, was "an enormous sensory challenge". Moreover, although a small number of participants reported that their managers had made necessary adjustments, such as providing classrooms which have good natural light or allowing occasional home-working to enable sensory recovery, most were seemingly working in environments that had not been adapted to their needs. Therefore, nearly all of our participants considered that the sensory impacts of the school environment in pre-Covid times were very significant.

In contrast to this, the adjustments to working practices as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic created a number of sensory respites and benefits both for many participants, as well as their pupils. For example, smaller group sizes, children being placed in "bubbles", the requirement for social distancing and part-time attendance meant that the general atmosphere in school was calmer and there was less "corridor crush". The fact that large group gatherings, such as school assemblies, were no longer taking place, was a relief for some of our participants. Children were described as being more settled, with the busiest times of the school day described as "very, very smooth". Classrooms being stripped of their wall displays and other materials, in order to support Covid-related hygiene measures, also made them "so much calmer", as did the removal of school

bells. Participants might have more control over their own sensory environment, as this teacher explained:

> So sensory wise, we're not moving around the building, I can set my lighting as I like it, you know, I'm in my own classroom, my own space, we don't have to go anywhere else (…), it's been a quite positive change for me.

Classrooms were better ventilated, and some participants considered that the greater emphasis on outdoor learning was beneficial for staff and pupils. Children being allowed to wear their P.E. kits all day, rather than having to change in and out of their uniform, was also thought to benefit the children from a sensory perspective.

Similarly, working from home meant that participants were more at ease due to wearing comfortable clothes – "I could throw a vest top on over my pyjama bottoms and teach like this all day" – which in turn made them "more productive". Indeed, although home-working was experienced as a complex phenomenon with, as will be seen, negative as well as positive impacts, being at home was "calming" due to the removal of "sensory triggers". As a result, spare time was not taken up simply recovering from the usual sensory onslaught of the school day. More time could be spent engaged in activities of interest or those focused on well-being, and home-working also enabled greater flexibility and agency, as it can be easier "to take strategic disengagement breaks from work".

Nevertheless, there was a small number of negative effects, from a sensory point of view, of Covid measures reported by some of our participants. Sometimes, rather than staff staying in the same classroom and pupils moving around the school to join them, the reverse process was in place, meaning that the sensory environment was less predictable and controllable. When home-working, the presence of participants' own children made concentration difficult at times, and "domesticity" could be experienced as "distracting".

Overall, however, participants experienced a number of sensory benefits as a result of Covid-19 measures. Some participants considered that autistic pupils also gained from these arrangements, due to no longer having to deal with "all of the sensory rubbish" that comes with a typical school day. This led to the recommendation of "the option of more flexible timetables and some home-learning" in the future. Similarly, it was hoped that everyone would "stick with no bells" in school, as this would "really benefit students", as would more outdoor learning.

Communication and social barriers and freedoms

Participants reported that their working lives in pre-Covid times could be marred by communication difficulties in relation to senior management, colleagues and parents. These difficulties concerned both the way others engaged with them and their own approaches to communication and, by extension, the adult social environment of schools.

Even before the pandemic, changes communicated from school leaders "at the last minute" could be the hardest part of the job, while unexpected changes announced by the government education department were experienced as "terrifyingly unprofessional" by one participant. In addition, the aspect of their role participants disliked the most could be "difficult conversations with staff", as participants feared being misunderstood by

colleagues, especially when fatigue or sensory overload made it harder to process information or talk. For example, a visiting professional was "unable to communicate effectively" or "talk things through constructively" when feeling "overloaded". Participants might fear "coming across as not being supportive or empathetic to others", or appearing "unfriendly and uncaring" by not asking about "personal issues". Small talk with colleagues was found to take "a heck of a lot of effort" and planning, particularly as non-autistic people were deemed to not like "direct communications", meaning the autistic staff member had to "think about fluffy ways to speak".

Discussions with parents were particularly disliked by some participants, due to frustrations "when the parents think one way and (…) I think another way", and the sense that talking to parents equated to "confrontation". Communication with parents via the phone was especially dreaded, with five of the total (n = 21) participants specifically detailing this in their interviews. This was due to a lack of visual information, meaning the autistic staff member "can't guess what (the parents) are feeling", or a tendency to be direct which, it was feared, could be interpreted as rudeness. These issues sometimes necessitated the mental preparation of a "script" and consideration of "tone of voice" in advance of calling parents on the phone, thus adding to the workload and feelings of anxiety.

The staffroom could constitute the nexus of communication and social difficulties for participants in pre-Covid times, with one participant stating starkly that "feeling like an alien in the staffroom" was the hardest part of the job. This was in contrast to a general pleasure in engagement with children in the classroom, and the "special relationship" participants found "mutually rewarding" with autistic pupils in particular. One participant enjoyed "staff camaraderie", but also feared "being ostracised and committing faux-pas", while another participant did not know if joining in with staffroom conversations was "allowed". "Social politics" were "difficult to navigate" and, as we have already seen, sometimes the sensory environment of the staffroom made it a challenging space, meaning that "it's not a break" to be there. Some participants withdrew from the staffroom at lunch-time, or avoided it altogether in order to "have that breather" and not "feel obliged to talk".

When in a specific work-related role, communication with colleagues could be manageable, but social events might be experienced as "a nightmare": "I'm hiding in the toilets or going home early". Some participants rued the fact that it was they who had to adapt to the communication and social norms of colleagues – "I'm always the one doing the changing and adapting to fit it with other people" – with little consideration of their own communication and social preferences. Instead, being "chatty and networking", "quickfire communication" or school politics fuelled by "gossiping, bitching" could be the dominant approach. The effort involved in making communication and social adaptations was experienced as exhausting, necessitating "masking" natural autistic expression, meaning the autistic staff member might "collapse by the end of the day". Nevertheless, one participant reported that their boss "works very hard" to accommodate autistic communication differences, and another that their "very supportive" line manager will clarify information if it has not been understood.

During periods of lockdown, the intense and repeated nature of work changes implemented was challenging for some participants, exacerbated by a failure to consider the broader impacts of the pandemic on disabled staff members. In these circumstances, "the lack of communication" and the "radio silence" from managers could lead to a feeling

of being "stranded", "disconnected" or "cut adrift". A teacher complained that instructions appeared "at the very last minute", making the job "almost impossible" and yet "there was an expectation to carry on, even if you could not do so". In other words, insufficient communication from others made adapting to lockdown measures more difficult for some of the participants.

Remote working also necessitated greater use of the phone which, as we have seen, was disliked by some. One teacher, who described herself as "shocking at phone calls", was worried about conducting a parents' evening via the phone, and said that her partner would need to be present to check that her "tone" and approach were "acceptable". The increased use of email could be experienced as problematic, as was "coaching from a doorway" (in order to maintain social distancing), or teaching from the front of the class, rather than intermingling with the pupils.

However, one participant felt the increased use of email as a result of lockdown to be beneficial to her mental health, as there was less need "to worry about interpreting (pupil) conversations the wrong way". Another participant appreciated being able to interact with pupils and parents outdoors, while a visiting professional valued the "alternative ways" to have "informal chats" that schools had put in place. Indeed, it was felt that Covid-related measures could provide the space to enhance pedagogical skills, "as they have resulted in less communication with others and more time to do a good job teaching". Teaching from the front of the class might be problematic in some respects, but it also meant there was a reduced need to worry "about the physical cues of body language".

Moreover, the reduction in social expectations necessitated by Covid-secure measures, were appreciated by some participants, with "less mixing with other people" described as "wonderful" and "great" by one teacher. Some participants welcomed the opportunity to spend quiet time alone, or to have more time with family or engaged in "animal interaction", which lockdown enabled. One participant, an agency teacher, recognised during lockdown that "just being in one place" and "regularly meeting up with a very good friend" was much more beneficial to her emotional well-being than multiple interactions in different settings. Pupils' behaviour was considered to have improved too "as a result of that social distancing" and being placed in "bubbles".

In addition, a deputy Headteacher saw herself as "the link person" during lockdown, ensuring staff and pupils did not feel "disconnected" or "isolated": "my role (…) is always I try to help the others feel connected". Therefore, some aspects of Covid measures not only permitted participants to engage and communicate in ways that suited them, but enabled their own communication and interaction strengths to be deployed, and also led to the hope that the increased understanding of different "styles of communication" could be maintained in post-Covid times.

Stresses and strengths associated with technology

Some participants considered that even in non-Covid times, the education field is subject to "constant changes in IT", often "imposed from above", which can make working life "difficult". These changes might be software or information management systems, sometimes experienced as unmanageable, "clunky" and time-consuming. One participant feared not being "very computer savvy", while another asserted that "the increasing

demands of IT and rapid changes in modern technology" resulted in her considering leaving the teaching profession altogether. For a visiting professional, there are frequent "issues with logging onto computers (or) finding the remote control" and, as we have seen, different forms of technology can also create sensory issues, such as "the electronic buzzing of the whiteboard". Nevertheless, a senior teacher asserted that they "like working electronically", and considers that technology, such as a smart watch to provide timetable reminders, "is probably the solution to a lot of executive functioning things".

Home-working during the pandemic necessitated a raft of alternative ways of teaching, engaging with students, colleagues and parents, predominantly mediated through technology. Getting to grips with these technological changes was difficult for some participants, with one commenting that she was "a stressed out mess for at least a month" once lockdown started, in part due to "learning all the new technology". Some participants did not enjoy teaching remotely, "because of time lag, connection and sound issues and not being able to see the whole person", and one email interviewee wrote simply "online teaching – grrrr!!!". Moreover, while teachers were at least able to continue their work remotely, even if this was difficult, this was more problematic for teaching assistants and visiting professionals, who found that components of their usual work could simply not be transposed online. This was especially the case if their work often necessitated close physical contact with children.

However, it was particularly online meetings that some participants found to be a struggle during lockdown. This could be because they seemed to be more frequent than before, were "twice as long as usual", consisting of "people talking at me with PowerPoint slides". The professional and social rules of remote meetings were unclear, concerning issues of confidentiality, for example, or knowing "when I can talk and when I can't". Remote meetings could make it hard to gauge the reactions of others, and might necessitate "extended eye contact", experienced as "more intense".

Nevertheless, even participants who found remote working difficult also acknowledged there were some benefits to the technology that facilitated this. One participant had found creating e-learning videos "nerve-wracking" at first, but ultimately "enjoyed planning and filming them". Remote working created opportunities to learn more tech-related skills:

> I can now conduct little sessions using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet, and I have been experimenting with narrated PowerPoints! We have all had to go up a gear on the tech front.

Some considered that the reduction in travelling meant that more time could be devoted to learning about technology, even staff "who previously declared themselves technophobes". In addition, being able to attend school assemblies remotely was found to be beneficial from a sensory perspective, and online meetings were thought to be more efficient by some, as time is not spent on social niceties, or "having a cup of tea".

A number of participants reflected on the benefits these technological advances brought for pupils, as they found "exciting ways for doing the teaching and creating learning", as well as enabling the development of "a good life skill" for children. Some participants considered that technology could increase accessibility both for pupils and staff, and it was hoped that children who are not "comfortable in a classroom situation"

should be allowed to continue to "zoom in" post-lockdown, especially if this is their "preferred way of communicating".

However, these positive reflections were tempered by frustration that, for some, these sorts of technologically-facilitated access arrangements were requested during pre-Covid times, but rejected then as impossible. These included video meetings, preferable to "everyone wasting time" travelling, and flexible arrangements for children, that became the norm in the Covid era:

> Now I think the things that people with disabilities have been asking for, for years, those accommodations are suddenly the norm. And it's like well hang on a minute, why haven't you been doing this (…)? (…) Why haven't they been doing anything for these children? They've been doing them a total disservice.

Navigating home/school boundaries

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, home-working was not a feature of the working lives of most of our participants. One participant already carried out some online teaching as doing so suited her "personality and teaching skills"; another had been allowed occasional home-working from a previous line manager to enable recovery from the sensory and social impacts of school. A visiting professional worked at home when possible to avoid "hot-desking", even if this meant she "wasn't part of the community".

The changes to working practices that ensued as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic included the requirement to work either entirely or partially from home during certain periods of time. As we have seen, home-working was broadly advantageous from a sensory point of view for many, enabling them to feel more relaxed in their work, even if the increased use of technology was a complicating factor. For some participants, transferring to remote working due to lockdown measures was initially greeted with a feeling of relief, as anxiety had been growing due to "a sense of danger" that the coronavirus pandemic was increasing in severity, a perception of a "constant threat" that Covid-19 was "closing in", leading to "extreme anxiety". Therefore, once lockdown was imposed, some participants were relieved that they and their families "were all safe at home".

In addition, work pressures could initially be reduced as projects not possible to complete remotely disappeared from the "to do list". Being at home was "really good" for some, "the least anxious" participants had felt for a while, providing the opportunity to step away from the usual busyness of school, work at their own pace, and "go back to the basics" in terms of teaching. Some participants also noted that pupils with sensory issues benefitted from home-learning, and so returned to school post-lockdown "happier and a bit more confident". Indeed, one participant commented that autistic pupils should have the option "of more flexible timetables and some home-learning" in the future, as they "had actually done better" during lockdown.

However, not all participants appreciated working from home, as the sudden changes to work practices led to a significant increase in anxiety for some, and a confusion between home/school boundaries, as "home is not where I do work". It was "a massive shift", involving fundamental changes to routine that disrupted the usual academic calendar, because "everything is blurred, the terms have not been properly demarcated". This lack of clear boundaries also impacted on self-identity, as one participant said that she adopted a different persona at work, assuming a formal, strict "teacher face" in school,

being "a bit of a bitch in the classroom", as opposed to the "weird, hyper, bubbly squirrel person" she was at home. Therefore, negotiating these identities was difficult when working from home, where usually "I'm a totally different person, I've got a totally different persona entirely".

For some, the initial sense of relief from working at home started to pall after a while, due to "constant interruptions" from their own children and other distractions. Home-working became increasingly "difficult" as it became harder to maintain "focus", keep track of time and the new routine "spiralled out of control".

Therefore, even though anxieties about the Covid-19 virus were still felt, some participants returned to school to work:

> I felt a lot better at work. (…) I just needed that routine of like going somewhere, doing your thing, then coming home.

Being able to do work "uninterrupted" was a relief for some participants, particularly as, during this time, there were fewer pupils in school. However, here too participants were presented with additional changes which could be "confusing". One participant commented that the sheer number of in-school changes "made the job really stressful" and so she had "gone home completely exhausted and frustrated". Even so, for another participant "the in-school adaptations were a lot easier than the out of school adaptations".

Modalities of change

According to some of our participants, the education sector and work in schools are typified by change, as "generally nothing in education stays the same" and "every year there are big changes that you can't embed", even without those implemented as a result of Covid-19. Devising plans "seconds before" can be the norm, and "Plan B" is "the most used plan", according to one participant. Changes can include "the curriculum, the SEND Code of Practice, assessments and recording, changes to school, changes to classrooms, changes to staff" which can be "difficult to adapt to". This aspect of the profession was found to be difficult, as "managing changes to routines", changes to "working plan" and "workflow", amongst other issues, could be "stressful and draining". For one TA, "changes in people" are "tricky", while her need for routine makes her feel like "a burden". Another TA becomes "very unsettled" when there are "loads of things up in the air", requiring the use of "a lot of strategies" to avoid developing health issues. These changes can lead to a sense that there is "no end, no stability", and spark further changes, such as changing jobs, a desire to "seek out change in the hope that things will be different/better elsewhere".

However, it was clear that some of our participants did not dislike change *per se,* but rather how this was communicated (as discussed in Theme two), the speed of implementation and the extent to which those changes could be predicted. For some participants, last minute change was one of the most difficult aspects of the job, as work could be "unpredictable", "chaotic", experienced as "stressful" and making one TA "less efficient". For a teacher, if changes are "sprung" on her without much notice, she then has "an awful day teaching". Even participants who typically, can cope with change, found that "last minute, drop everything, this is happening, it's an emergency" changes, those that are "abrupt and unpredictable", are difficult to manage. These quick, seemingly

unpredictable changes were perceived as being imposed "from above", leaving participants feeling anxious, disempowered and devoid of agency.

It was also important for some participants to understand and agree with the reasons for requested changes, rather than being expected to carry them out unthinkingly. One TA finds it "tiring" and "emotional" not to have more agency in relation to the children she supports, and for one teacher, decisions that do not "always make sense" are "hard" to accept, leading to "a sense of anger". By contrast, being given "a logical reason" behind decisions can make changes much more manageable.

Therefore, changes introduced "quite gradually over time" and learning about planned changes well in advance, makes them much more manageable and are less likely to incur anxiety. Similarly, "having the freedom to do things differently" and being involved in the decision-making process means change is easier to cope with. A TA asserted that her managers check with her about new policies being introduced, an approach that is "brilliant" and "empowering". As one teacher stated: "I can cope with change so long as I am the one making the decisions!".

Moreover, not all participants problematised change in relation to their work. A teacher asserted that although he likes routine, he can "get easily bored" and needs "variety", and so likes the "fast-changing" nature of the job. According to another teacher, the fact that "every day is different" is "fantastic", because "I work best with spontaneity", while another felt that the "opportunity for surprises" was an enjoyable aspect of the job. Similarly, a visiting professional asserted that she can "thrive in chaos".

Some participants had managed to develop strategies to cope with change. A teacher stated that although the "many different modes of working" he had had to develop were "anxiety inducing", he had learned to adapt, and now feels "positive about it", and a visiting professional felt she was "learning to adapt to change". For another teacher, assuming that "if there is no plan things can't go off plan" was a strategy he had developed to be able to manage the perceived unpredictability of school. Furthermore, some participants saw themselves as change-makers, with one deputy Headteacher stating that "it's lovely being an agent of change". Another senior member of staff felt that achieving "culture change" was an important professional aim. Indeed, "finding gaps in things and making changes and making them happen" was the most enjoyable aspect of the job for this participant.

Unsurprisingly, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, work practices were perceived as having changed "massively" and brought into relief the different modalities of change for participants. Here too, the ability to manage these changes could be dependent on how quickly they were implemented and how involved participants felt with decisions. For example, a teacher asserted that they "understand the reasons" for Covid-related changes, and so are "just getting on". In contrast, new rules that came "from up on high", but which were interpreted variably, were not felt to be "safe". For one participant, the "lack of clarity in the rules", the quick nature of changes and the fact that they were "not always making sense" was difficult. For a TA, "the new normal" was a source of anxiety, as "I'd only just got used to the old normal, I was just clinging on in there before", and a visiting professional was concerned about the "unpredictability" of returning to school after lockdown. Another TA, who was coping with the Covid-related changes in school as they were "gradual", nevertheless "felt really, really out of sorts" when changes were made unexpectedly: "that was something I really struggled with". For a

senior teacher, Covid-19-related changes could be "manageable", but sudden changes to her diary could have "quite an impact".

Nevertheless, this same participant considered that the Covid-related measures also enabled a focus on approaches that "mattered the most", such as the Recovery Curriculum (Carpenter & Carpenter, 2020) which was "kind of music to me". Similarly, a deputy Headteacher used to have "a very clear mindset" that "nothing" should be changed, but has nevertheless "done a bit of a flip", and so now helps others to cope with change:

> I've learned to give off calm to other people (…), I then watch them cope much better with the change which then helps them to help their children cope with the change.

As a result, in response to Covid-19 measures, this deputy Headteacher was able to support colleagues and parents, "because of (…) being able to tap into my developed strategies myself". One such strategy includes going "all the way through the alphabet six times", she explained. Another deputy Headteacher, who disliked change, has nevertheless "got so much better accepting and dealing with it", and so was able to take Covid-19-related changes in her stride. A senior teacher had devised a colour-coded timetable to be able to manage the in-school changes during lockdown, which was then shared with colleagues: "everyone's been really grateful and find it really helpful as well". Therefore, it would appear that for some participants, most notably senior staff, the significant efforts they had had to make to be able to deal with change prior to the Covid-19 pandemic equipped them with the skills to be able to manage lockdown related measures and indeed support others to do so.

Discussion

These findings, drawn from autistic insider accounts, reveal some of the challenges autistic school educators experience, especially in connection with change, even before the significant disruptions resulting from Covid-19. By providing a comparison of participants' experiences before and during Covid-19 lockdown measures of sensory issues and the working environment, communication and social barriers and freedoms, stresses and strengths associated with technology and the need to navigate home/school boundaries, and through exploring the subtle nuances and modalities of change, important lessons are offered that could benefit autistic school staff, pupils with SEND and the broader school community, in the future.

For example, we found that the negative sensory impacts of the school environment could be significantly mitigated by Covid-related measures, even though this was not their primary aim. Indeed, sensory hypersensitivity in the workplace is "a largely invisible and unknown disability" (de Vries, 2021, p. 284) that can create a barrier to well-being and self-efficacy without reasonable adjustments (Petty et al., 2022). Some adaptations, such as remote-working, although not available to all, meant that participants were more able to manage their own sensory environment, showing an instructive intersection between sensory well-being and agency in our study. However, home-working also creates a disruption to the typical school routine on which all school staff can rely (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Prado-Gascó et al., 2020), but can be especially unsettling for those who need a clear home/work divide and consider it necessary to "mask" autistic identity at work (Wood & Happé, 2021). Moreover, our study suggests that in the Covid-19

crisis scenario, autistic school staff were having to adapt within a context in which tackling unexpected or difficult changes was already their necessary custom. Thus the importance of contextualising changes in education, in typical times and in times of turbulence, is underscored (Gross, 2020).

The changes to communication and social interaction norms resulting from pandemic-related work practices brought into relief the difficulties autistic school staff typically experience in these areas, and the toll these can take on mental health, but also provided insights into how they can be remediated. The staffroom, which ought to be a place of rest and respite, can be the nexus of the sensory, communication and social interaction complexities experienced by autistic school staff, effectively forcing them to withdraw from this community space. However, the frequent and rapid changes to work practices resulting from Covid-19 revealed that a sense of anxiety and disempowerment felt by autistic staff can be mitigated by clear and timely communication from others and the provision of a cogent rationale for requested changes, thus negating the sense that they come from "on high".

Moreover, notwithstanding the difficulties expressed by participants in response to Covid-19-related measures, including increased use of the telephone which was disliked (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021), their communication and social interaction norms and strengths were more able to be manifest in these circumstances. In these ways, under-standings are provided into how to address and learn from the social and communication restrictions autistic people usually undergo (Simmons, 2020), as the bi-directional nature of communication is emphasised (Wood, 2020). In addition, given that school leaders themselves felt a lack of agency during periods of Covid-related mitigations (Hulme et al., 2021), and that "top-down communication was the most significant challenge" they faced (Fotheringham et al., 2022, p. 221), the necessity of considering the whole workforce during periods of crisis is emphasised. These findings are reflected in broader research into the impact of Covid-19 in the employment sector, such as that an atmosphere of open dialogue must be fostered if the well-being of all is to be main-tained (Sigahi et al., 2021).

While technological changes were considered to increase accessibility for staff and stu-dents, it was evident that such innovations do not work for all (Pellicano et al., 2022). These circumstances can be exacerbated by a lack of training and unequal access to tech-nology by stakeholders (Börnert-Ringleb et al., 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Stenhoff et al., 2020). They also raise questions about why similar adaptations were not implemented when requested in pre-Covid times. These reflections include consider-ations for pupils, especially those with SEND, who could benefit from technological inno-vations and flexible arrangements, such as blended learning, as part of their usual curriculum (Fotheringham et al., 2022; Heyworth et al., 2021). Moreover, Covid-19 adap-tations sometimes resulted in a greater emphasis on well-being in school, suggesting that notwithstanding the terrible impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, an opportunity is provided to re-evaluate the role and function of school for all pupils (Colao et al., 2020). In this endeavour, it is essential to consult with all stakeholders, including staff with disabilities, whose insights can prove vital for pupils with SEND (Wood et al., 2022). Indeed, schools that are inclusive for all of their members can be a model for an inclusive society (Vogel & Sharoni, 2011), although it is essential to bear in mind that sol-utions for disabled children cannot simply be transposed to disabled adults.

Moreover, not all participants problematised change in relation to their work, and even enjoyed the element of unpredictability that their job entailed. We also found an important intersection between the ability to manage change and a sense of agency for the autistic school staff. Some participants had developed coping strategies to be able to deal with change, and some senior staff even perceived themselves as change-makers, whose ability to adapt to and facilitate change in education came to the fore during Covid-19 measures. It is therefore important to recognise that while the teaching profession already carries "much unpredictability" (Beabout, 2012, p. 16), periods of "severe turbulence" in education (Gross, 2020) can be mitigated when a culture of collaboration and agency for all stakeholders is the norm. Crucially, our study suggests that autistic school staff are already making significant adaptations outside of times of crisis, but that manageable approaches that could have benefitted staff and students were only adopted when the "neurotypical" majority decided they must be so. Thus, the marginalisation and lack of value placed on the insights of disabled employees is underscored (Cope & Remington, 2022; Ferri et al., 2001; Neca et al., 2020; Ware et al., 2021). However, in this article, we have demonstrated the value of autistic expertise (StEvens, 2022), not only to understand the lived experiences of autistic people, but to provide vital lessons for the benefit of all in the school sector.

Conclusion

While the impact of Covid-19-related measures on non-disabled school staff, such as mental health issues and stress (Maitland & Glazzard, 2022), are well-documented, there has been scant consideration of the effects on disabled professionals. More broadly in the employment sector, there has been a particular focus on frontline healthcare workers, restricting useful comparisons with other professional groups (Sigahi et al., 2021). Similarly, although there is a plethora of reports on the effects of lockdown on children both with and without SEND, many are mediated predominantly through parental reports, and fail to include the potential insights of disabled education staff. Further, there is a sense that the pandemic resulted in a retreat from hard-fought rights for disabled people, to return instead to unhelpful medicalised stereotypes (Brown et al., 2021), in which disabled employees must negotiate for the most basic considerations (Baird, 2020; Goggin & Ellis, 2020). However, our study suggests not only that the insights and skills of autistic school staff could be fruitfully leveraged in periods of crisis, as well as those of other autistic professional groups (Shaw et al., 2022), but that an opportunity is provided to address the unnecessary limitations they, and children with disabilities, usually endure.

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Disclosure statement

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Appendix. Interview schedule

1. * (compulsory question)

Do you have a diagnosis of autism? Please tick one box.
   Yes (professional/medical diagnosis)
   Yes (self-diagnosis)
   No (but actively seeking diagnosis)

2. * (compulsory question)

   What is your biological sex? Please tick one box.
   Female.
   Male.
   Intersex.

3. How do you identify in terms of gender? (non-compulsory question). Write your answer in the box below.

4. *(compulsory question)

   What is your age? Write your answer in the box below.

5. *(compulsory question)

   What type of school do you work in now? (e.g. mainstream primary, special school, mainstream secondary, PRU etc.). Write your answer in the box below.

6. *(compulsory question)

   How long have you worked in your current job? Write your answer in the box below.

7. *(compulsory question)

   If you have worked in other schools in the past, what sorts of schools were they? How long did you do those jobs for? Write your answer in the box below.
   All remaining questions are optional/non-compulsory.

8. What are the main responsibilities of your current role?
9. What aspects of your job do you enjoy and why?
10. What aspects of your job do you not enjoy and why?
11. To what extent, if at all, is being autistic an advantage in your work? If so, in what ways?
12. To what extent, if at all, is being autistic a disadvantage in your work? If so, in what ways?

13. Do you feel able to be open about being autistic in the school workplace? If so, how do colleagues, pupils and parents respond to this information?
14. If you do not feel able to be open about being autistic in the school workplace, what sort of impact does this have on you?
15. Do you experience any sensory difficulties in the school workplace? If so, what are they? Do you consider that the physical environment of your workplace helps or hinders you in your work? What could be changed to make it better?
16. Do you experience any social difficulties in the workplace? If so, what are they? What could be changed to make this situation better?
17. Do you feel supported by your line manager or employer in relation to being autistic at work (whether they are aware of this or not)? If so, in what ways? If not, in what ways? What sort of support would you like to receive?
18. Do you feel that you have been able to progress in your career in the ways you would have liked? If not, why not?
19. Have you ever considered, or are you considering, leaving the education profession? If so, for what reasons?
20. What sorts of changes do you have to deal with both in your current job and in your professional education career? Do you find these changes easy or difficult to manage?
21. Have/did your work practices change as a result of the coronavirus outbreak and the subsequent lockdown? If so, how?
22. How well have you been/were you able to manage these changes as a result of the lockdown?
23. Do you consider that there have been any helpful lessons as a result of the lockdown and changes to educational working practices which could apply to usual working practices in schools?
24. What advice would you give to employers if they wanted to be more supportive and inclusive of autistic school staff?
25. What advice would you give to teacher trainers and other education trainers if they want to be more supportive and inclusive of autistic school staff?
26. Do you consider that autistic school staff are well placed in SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) roles in schools e.g. SENCO, Teaching Assistant, Learning Mentor, or in special schools? If so, why?
27. Do you think it is important for there to be more autistic staff in all education (not just SEND) roles in schools? If so, why?