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Views of practitioners on:

Essential competencies for staff working with pupils on the autism spectrum

(Analysed and compiled by Damian Milton)

Note on the sample:

Practitioners completed a brief online survey to name up to three competencies (knowledge, skills or personal qualities) they consider as being essential for staff to have or to acquire. They were also asked to comment on eight sample competencies and to suggest how they might use the Competency Framework. Their responses were used in the development of the Competency Framework.

A total of 178 practitioners completed the survey and their replies are categorised below into the four categories which have been used to structure the Competency Framework: the individual pupil, building relationships, curriculum and learning, and enabling environments. An additional category of 'personal qualities' has been added here to reflect the large number of respondents who mentioned personal qualities as an essential competency.

Respondents

Type of practitioner	Number of respondents
Outreach workers	46
Teachers (all types of provision)	39
Teaching assistants (all types of provision)	15
Lead practitioners (general specialist)	11
Lead practitioners (autism units)	11
Lead practitioners (autism specific schools)	10
Lead practitioners (mainstream provision)	9
Speech and language therapists	9
Academics	8
SENCOs	6
Educational psychologists	5
Educational advisors	4
Behaviour analysts	3
Occupational therapist	1
Music therapist	1
Total	178

Responses

Category	Suggested competency – number of respondents*
Understanding the individual pupil	Knowledge / understanding of autism – 85
	Knowledge of the individual pupil – 29
	Knowledge of sensory issues – 14
	Knowledge of the triad of impairments – 13
	Understanding and managing behaviours / ways of responding – 13
	Seeing things from the point of view of the person on the autism spectrum – 12
	Recognising strengths and interests – 7
	Understanding of underlying features of autism – psychological models – 5
	General training / Attending accredited training – 5
	General knowledge of child development – 5
	Understanding of communication difficulties – 4
	Understanding stress and anxiety issues – 4
	Experience of working with people on the autism spectrum – 3
	Knowledge of associated disorders – 2
	Seek to understand the function of behaviour (yet not make assumptions) – 2
	Understanding of the 'reduced ability to relate to other people'
	Understanding of 'ASD characteristics'
	Functional assessment
	Not view autism as lifelong or limited to the culture of ASD (<i>not supported by evidence and research</i>)
	Understanding of the 'condition' – and that it can't be cured
	Behaviours exhibited can be a form of communication
	Knowledge of different learning styles
	Reading literature
	Understanding of the social aspects of the condition

Category	Suggested competency – number of respondents*
	Knowledge of diagnostic process
Building relationships	Clear communication – 13
	Communication with parents and family – 6
	Sharing good practice / ability to work with a range of professionals – 5
	Reflective team player / value of working in a team – 5
	Take on views of the pupil wherever possible – 4
	Good communication skills – 4
	Building trusting relationships with parents/carers – 3
	Knowledge of who to contact for support
	Getting to know the individual and not assuming anything about them due to their autism
	Works well with team / others
	Background information gathering from parents
	Self-confidence
	Reassuring approach to communication
	Professional approach
	Ability to build deep relationships
	‘Be able to give without getting ordinary thank you’s’
Curriculum and learning	Knowledge of a wide range of strategies / ‘interventions’ / methods (and rationale for using them) and ability to apply them in practice – 24
	Visual support – 10
	Ability to adapt to individual needs – 5
	Routine and structured teaching – 5
	Social stories – 4
	Strategies to help with independence and integration – 2
	Social skills training – 2
	Knowledge of effective communication strategies – 2
	Acknowledgement that conventional approaches may be inappropriate

Category	Suggested competency – number of respondents*
	No assumptions about what strategy will work with a pupil
	Build on strengths of the pupil
	Knowledge and understanding of ABA (not to be confused with Lovaas)
	See behaviour as a form of communication
	Being systematically evaluated
	Understanding of different learning styles
	Balance between academic and daily life skills
	Reward system
	Finding and building learning tools
	Developing strategies that support progress and learning
	Speech and language needs addressed
	Understanding of how autism impacts upon learning
	Willingness to adapt practice
	Appropriate expectations being set
	TEACCH
	Team teaching with 'violent pupils'
	Positive behaviour management
Enabling environments	Understanding of issues that may arise in the classroom / school environment – 4
	Enabling supportive environments – 2
	Changing the environment and not the individual
	The importance of assessing the environment
	Deploying TA's effectively
	Need for structure and advance warning of change
Personal qualities	Patience – 36
	Flexibility – 25
	Calmness – 15
	Empathy – 10
	Consistency – 8

Category	Suggested competency – number of respondents*
	Adaptability – 8
	Good sense of humour – 8
	A desire to work with people on the autism spectrum and their families – 6
	Willingness to learn and adapt practice – 6
	Think 'outside the box' – 5
	Reflective practice – 5
	Creativity – 4
	Resilience – 4
	Positive outlook – 4
	Not taking behaviours personally – 4
	Respect for the pupil – 3
	Persistence / perseverance – 3
	Open outlook – 3
	Compassion – 3
	Willingness to embrace diversity – 2
	Caring approach – 2
	Self-confidence – 2
	Emotional intelligence – 2
	Kindness
	Sense of adventure
	Accepting and respectful attitude
	Will
	Not taking self too seriously
	Resourceful
	Enthusiasm
	Liking children
	Not to take things personally
	Thoughtfulness
	Good subject knowledge
	Being supportive – help reach potential

Category	Suggested competency – number of respondents*
	Attitude of staff
	Respect for parents and carers
	Being non-judgemental, calm and positive
	Pragmatic approach
	Valuing all
	Interested in people
	Non-confrontational
	Self-awareness
	Observant
	A readiness to learn from the child first, from parents, and from research
	Be ambitious about individuals on the autism spectrum
	Approachable
	Sensitivity
	Intelligence
	Up for a challenge
	Educational background
	Practical skills
	'Infectious optimism' – the desire to continually improve on practice

The responses from teachers suggest that knowledge of autism, the individual pupil and communication strategies were of crucial concern, as was knowledge of a wide range of teaching methods and the flexibility to utilise them for specific purposes. The competencies highlighted by teaching assistants regarded the need to build relationships and get to know the individual pupil they were working with.

It is suggested here that the evidence gathered from the practitioners clearly indicates that an eclectic model is needed and not reliance on a particular model of learning. Valued by many lead practitioners was the input of advice from people on the autism spectrum and parents.

It is important to note that a very large number of practitioners highlighted the personal qualities to be ideally found amongst educational staff working with pupils on the autism spectrum, primarily concerning a patient and consistent approach, and qualities such as the flexibility and adaptability of practitioners.