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Beyond tokenism: autistic participation in a transnational Community of Practice.

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The Transform Autism Education (TAE) project is a tri-national partnership between Greece, Italy and the U.K. with the aim of establishing teacher training programmes to facilitate the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream primary schools. Funded by the European Commission, the TAE is an inter-disciplinary research and development programme founded on the theory of Communities of Practice (COP) (Wenger, 1998). The TAE has gathered together a network of key stakeholders and created a transnational exchange of perspectives in order to build an evidence base on how best to support pupils with an autism diagnosis in school. The focus of this presentation will be on how the participation and input of autistic people has developed through the course of this programme and the different national perspectives represented within it, leading in turn to a reappraisal of the notion of community.

Traditionally, much advisory literature regarding the education of autistic pupils has been dominated by medical and psychological models often challenged by autistic people (Lawson, 2010; Milton, 2016). In recent years, the involvement of autistic people in the work of the Autism Education Trust (Jones et al. 2012; Milton, 2012) and now the TAE project has resulted in a shift in ethos and emphasis to that more akin to a social model of disability.

Conceptualisations of autism have become an important aspect of education policy and practice internationally. This project reflects a widening impact of the neurodiversity movement and the social model of disability on how autism is to be perceived, and how these ideas might be challenged and reframed when working across national boundaries. A primary aspect of this is a disruption of the conceptualisation of autism as a singular categorical ascription, but rather encompassing many variant ways of being and becoming.

This presentation will reflect upon the challenges of building Communities of Practice across national boundaries and that include the participation of autistic people within such communities. We will consider how this interplays with epistemological and cultural issues that emerge from engaging with different nationalities on a European project concerning autism. The presentation will also reflect on notions of autistic sociality and communication, in association with the difficulties and opportunities such involvement have presented in building an inclusive community, and recommending ways in which such communities can be re-envisaged.

The presentation will include an overview of the ways we tried to increase participation and foster deeper reflection on autistic involvement within the community, from the introduction of autistic advisors for each national team, to substantial involvement at the most recent transnational meeting of the project. We will consider how this increased participation has impacted on the goals of the project, as well as the value-base of the community, so that we might potentially reform as a different community, establishing greater understanding across dispositional and cultural divides.

References

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