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Track 1: The Course of Life / IDD Across the Lifespan

Experiences of autistic students in mainstream education settings: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Abstract

Aim: The aim was to investigate the effectiveness of inclusive education based on the educational experiences and on the conceptualisation of self for autistic students. Most of the research about the effectiveness of inclusive education for autistic students has focused on the detection of students' educational outcomes and on the attainment of parents' and professionals' views and attitudes (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2018). Only a small proportion of studies have explored the experiences of students themselves and how their experiences could influence the way that they conceptualise themselves.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 autistic students having experience of mainstream schools in England. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the transcripts of the recorded interviews.

Results: Three themes emerged: a) "Identity formation"; b) "Invisible needs"; and c) "How to survive in mainstream education". Students mostly shared negative experiences and used negative terms to describe themselves. However, they negotiated their identity based on the acceptance they received, or not, from the school.

Conclusion: Teachers' and peers' knowledge and empathy regarding neurodiversity, and school's flexibility to meet participants' needs seemed to contribute to feelings of belonging and empowerment, as well as to a more positive experience of schooling.

Key words: inclusive education, autistic adolescents’ voices