



# Recognising, Valuing and Supporting the Communication of Autistic Children in Schools

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# Background

- Association between autism and language impairments
- Part of DSM-5 and ICD-11
- ‘non-verbal’
  - low attainment in school (Dockrell et al. 2012),
  - poor longer-term outcomes (Howlin, Mawhood and Rutter 2000)
- Interventions in schools
- 158 separate interventions for children with speech and language communication difficulties (Roulstone et al. 2012)

# Study

- 5 months in 5 mainstream primary schools in England
- Participants: autistic children (n = 10); parents (n = 10); school staff (n = 36); autistic adults (n = 10)
- Different aspects of inclusion of autistic children: curriculum, assessment, educational priorities, extra-curricular activities, support
- Recorded and measured extent to which autistic children engaged with activities and how this was communicated

# Children's communication

- Speech
- Gesture
- Actions
- Silence
- Associated ideas
- Different times

# Effective support

- Relationship of trust
- Flexibility
- Centred on child's interests
- Child had control and agency
- Staff member not expected to support other children at the same time
- PECS, visual timetables, choosing boards
- Little evident link with paraphernalia of communication support

# Ineffective support

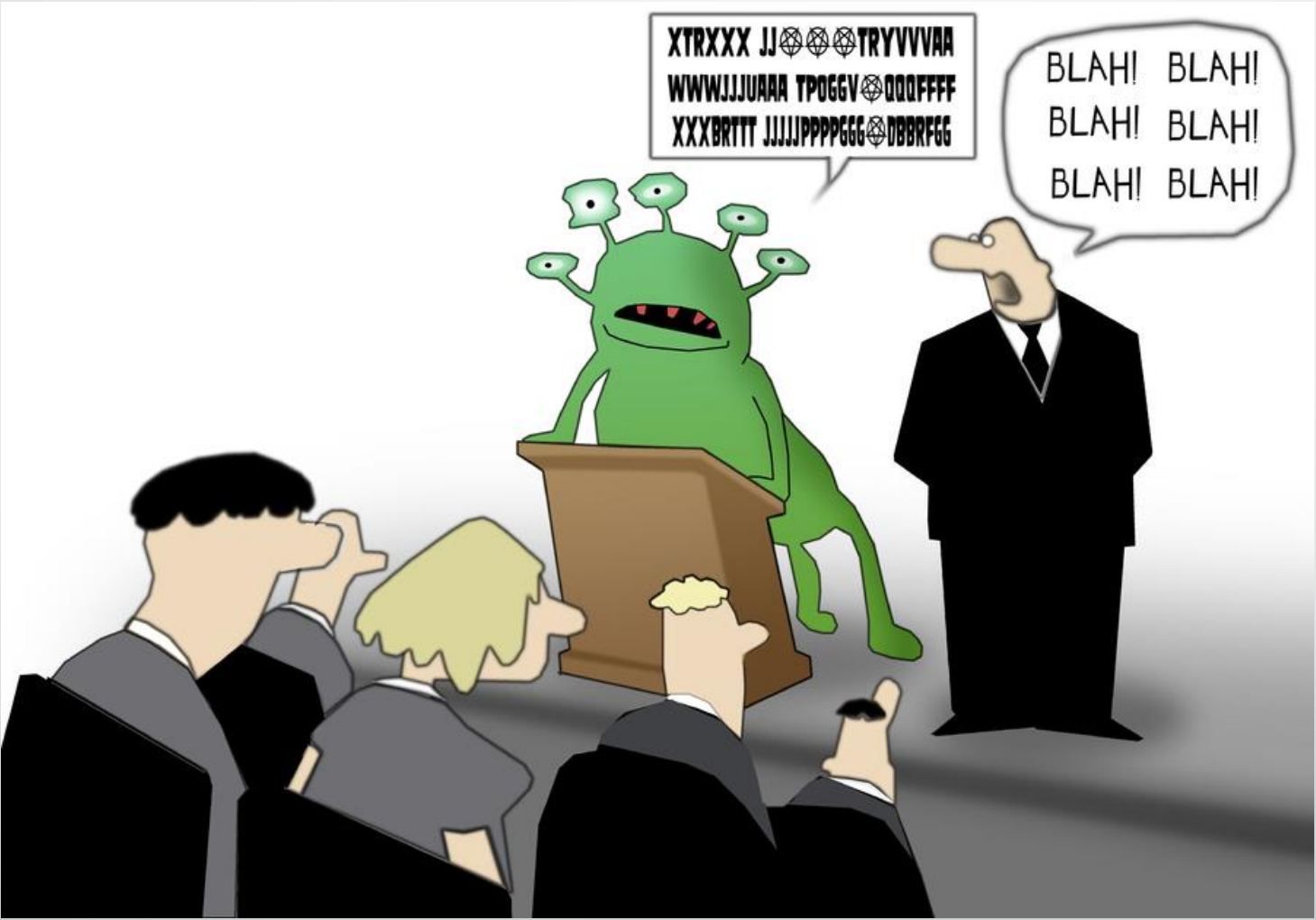
- Child ignored if not on message
- Child coerced into expressing what the adults wanted to hear...
- ...in the manner they expected to hear it
- Compliance with prescribed communication method not necessarily rewarded either
- Silence disrupted by communication interventions
- Lack of agency
- Child gained little from communicating effectively

# Perceptions of autism

- Different (special)
- Ability: perfectionism; attention to detail; focus (not chatting)
- Different (strange/odd)
- Inherently problematic:
  - Inflexible
  - Lack of imagination, empathy, eye contact
  - Low ability/developmental delay
  - Behavioural problems
  - Speech and communication difficulties
  - Social interaction difficulties
  - Problems in understanding

XTRXXX JJ⊗⊗⊗TRYVVVAA  
WWWJJUAAA TPOGGV⊗QQQFFF  
XXXBRTT JJJJPPPPGGG⊗BBRFGG


BLAH! BLAH!  
BLAH! BLAH!  
BLAH! BLAH!





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*"right from the start, from the time someone came up with the word 'autism', the condition has been judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced"*

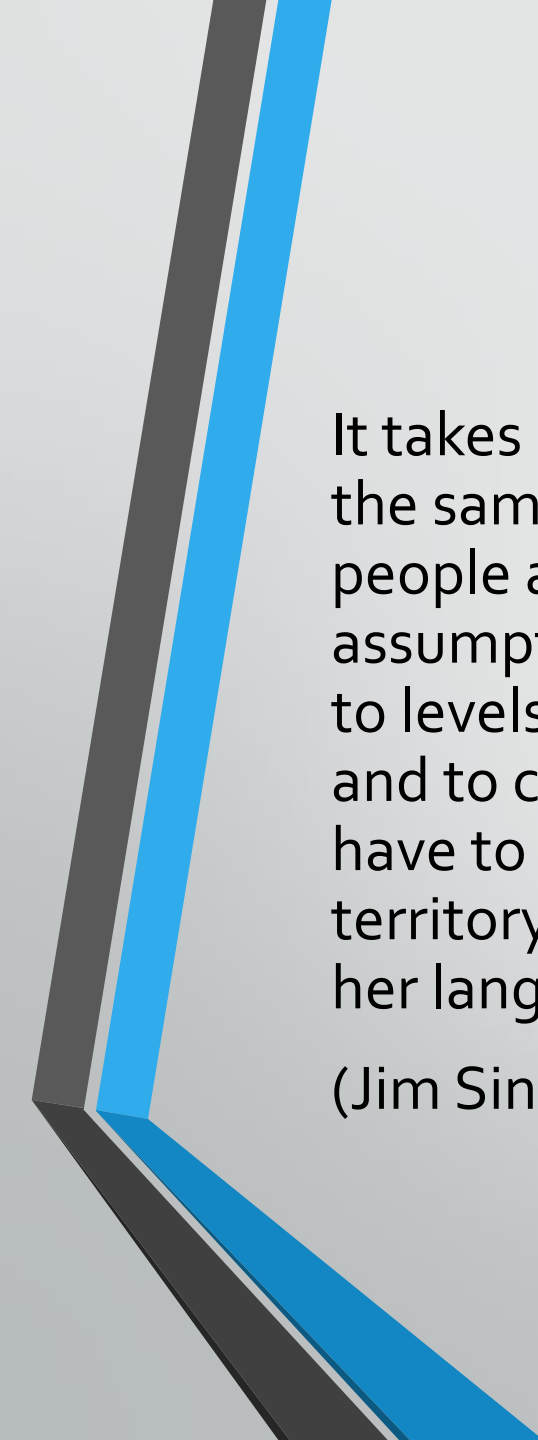
*(Donna Williams, 1996)*



# The Double Empathy Problem

"Simply put, the theory of the double empathy problem suggests that when people with very different experiences of the world interact with one another, they will struggle to empathise with each other."

Damian Milton



It takes more work to communicate with someone whose native language isn't the same as yours. And autism goes deeper than language and culture; autistic people are "foreigners" in any society. You're going to have to give up your assumptions about shared meanings. You're going to have to learn to back up to levels more basic than you've probably thought about before, to translate, and to check to make sure your translations are understood. You're going to have to give up the certainty that comes of being on your own familiar territory, of knowing you're in charge, and let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world.

(Jim Sinclair 1993, Don't Mourn for Us)

# Alternative approaches

- Set aside impairment narrative associated with autism
- Recognise the full panoply of autistic communication
  - ‘People often ignored my chatter, thinking that I was making a series of statements rather than asking questions in the only way I could.’  
(Williams 1992/1999, 51)
- Evaluate the communication context (noise, chatter, partner)
- Don’t overburden support staff
- Need for an emphasis on the shared, interactional nature of communication (Wood and Milton 2018)

# Supporting Communication

- **Incorporate** the child's interests
- **Avoid** problematising silence
- **When** the child wants to communicate
- **How** the child communicates
- **What** the child wants to communicate even if it is not what the adult wants to hear