

Rethinking education across Sussex: What can we learn from experiences of autistic children and their parents and educators.

Hello, my name is Bryony Wilkinson, I am an autistic person who has experienced the education system since the late nineties. I can offer a unique perspective on this subject as, not only have I recently experienced the education system, I also work closely with young autistic individuals who are currently in school and college as a peer supporter for Amazing futures., so I am acutely aware of some of the issues that autistic children and young adults are experiencing.

My education was a mixed bag of experiences, the first years of school were difficult as I found the environment challenging, the education itself I liked because it provided me with structure, however the social aspect of school was not so good as I found myself preferring the company of teachers rather than my own peers, I was also bullied badly until year 9, when other students began maturing. Later as I entered college, I found myself again feeling isolated but I felt fine with that because my education was a priority, I liked the way the college system went into depth about subjects and that you could choose which subjects you wanted to learn. For me, making friends took a back seat because I was better at studying than I was at socialising.

Examinations on the other hand were particularly troublesome, I felt anxious when sitting in the school hall, invigilators roaming the aisles, I felt like I didn't have enough time to finish formulating my answers before the exam was over, and when I did finish I got a much lower grade than I expected. I found that my written work was worse than my oral skills, I could aptly explain my thought processes verbally but on paper they became muddled, a classic sign of dyslexia that the school system did not pick up on.

However, when I was accepted into York St John University to study Theology and Religious Studies, things changed. The environment was totally different from either college or School, it was freer; Lecturers refused to be called sir or miss, your education was entirely what you made it, research skills were a must on my course and as an added bonus the course I was on was entirely coursework based so I didn't have to sit in an exam hall ever again. After a particular assignment my lecturer noticed that I was having trouble reading, that I was slower than most, so I was sent for a dyslexia assessment. When the test came back positive, I received access to a crucial educational service, I got assigned a proof reader, a note taker in lectures and I received some English Lessons to help my grades and English skills improve. I graduated in 2015 with a 2:1 the likes of which may not have been achieved had I not been given that support. Socially university was a growing experience, the first year of the three year course I mainly kept to myself, and had

only a few friends, in my second I became more outgoing, I had grown used to the intensity of my education and was working hard towards each assignment. By the third year I had moved out of my university halls and was living with friends. I believe that the supportive environment of my University enabled me to grow in confidence, for which I am extremely grateful.

With these experiences in mind I will now turn my attention towards today's education system and how current autistic children and young adults can benefit from its improvement.

Upon reflection I personally feel that the modern education system is focussed on getting good results rather than their students getting a quality education. Health and safety concerns in regards to covid 19 are well founded and safety is a huge priority in school, however I feel that shutting schools for the length of time that they were closed and then reintroducing GCSE examinations was a foolhardy idea, especially since some young people had no clue if their Gcses were still going ahead. A suggestion that I would like to bring to the table is the idea of adjusting the national curriculum to suit the needs of schools post covid 19 lockdown. For instance perhaps implementing measures to delay Gcse examinations until the next school Year, giving schools the chance to adjust to covid 19 safety measures and gives students, schools and parents more time to bring the standard of education up, or perhaps lowering the entry grade threshold for college and university, so that this year's students can still receive higher education.

In regards to home schooling I feel that it encourages independent study, which is good, on the other hand some parents may find the curriculum challenging due to educators teaching their children one way and then finding their child resistant to their way of teaching because it isn't how they learnt it in school. Secondly there is the problem of subject bias, what I mean by this is that naturally subjects that parents do well in would take priority, as they are more able to teach their child that skill; however subjects that they do less well in may be side-lined, lowering the quality of education the child receives. In order to fix this issue perhaps resources can be made available to parents by schools that ensure the education they receive is well rounded, for example website recommendations for their child to access, activity suggestions that can be easily digested and homework that encourages research skills to name a few.