

Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of a pilot programme to foster the wellbeing and participation of autistic pupils in schools

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Reduced engagement with education results in poor educational, social, economical and medical outcomes. Autistic pupils are more likely to be absent from school than their neurotypical peers (Nordin et al., 2024). There are many reasons why the school environment might be particularly challenging for an autistic young person including sensory sensitivities, difficulties navigating social relationships with peers and staff, anxiety and other mental health issues, and demands on cognitive processing. Moreover, teachers in mainstream settings often report that they feel ill-equipped to support autistic pupils adequately (Robertson et al., 2003). The ASPENS Pupil Programme is delivered over 6 weeks to both pupils and school staff by the West Sussex City Council in partnership with ASPENS charity to support autistic pupils in mainstream schools. It promotes positive emotional wellbeing in pupils and works towards changing cultural attitudes about neurodiversity. This study evaluated the impact of the Pupil Programme by assessing autistic pupils' wellbeing, mental health and participation in school activities at three timepoints: before, immediately after and one school term after the end of the programme. 99 pupils and 63 parents across 15 schools completed self- and parent-report surveys. Results indicated a sustained decrease in pupils' anxiety levels after taking part in the programme, but no overall change in levels of wellbeing, stress or participation. At the individual level however, increased participation was associated with increased wellbeing and decreased levels of stress and anxiety. Our findings points to the importance of wellbeing and dysphoria in the mechanisms underlying participation in school.

Biography

Dr Anna Lambrechts completed her PhD in 2018 from City, University of London. She is a lecturer in Psychology at City St George's where she is part of the Autism Research Group. Her research focuses on ways to support autistic individuals in education, as well as better understand autistic experiences.

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