Durham University
Centre for Neurodiversity and Development

Triple-A in the Classroom
Attention, Arousal & Anxiety
Brief Report on Consultation Focus Groups

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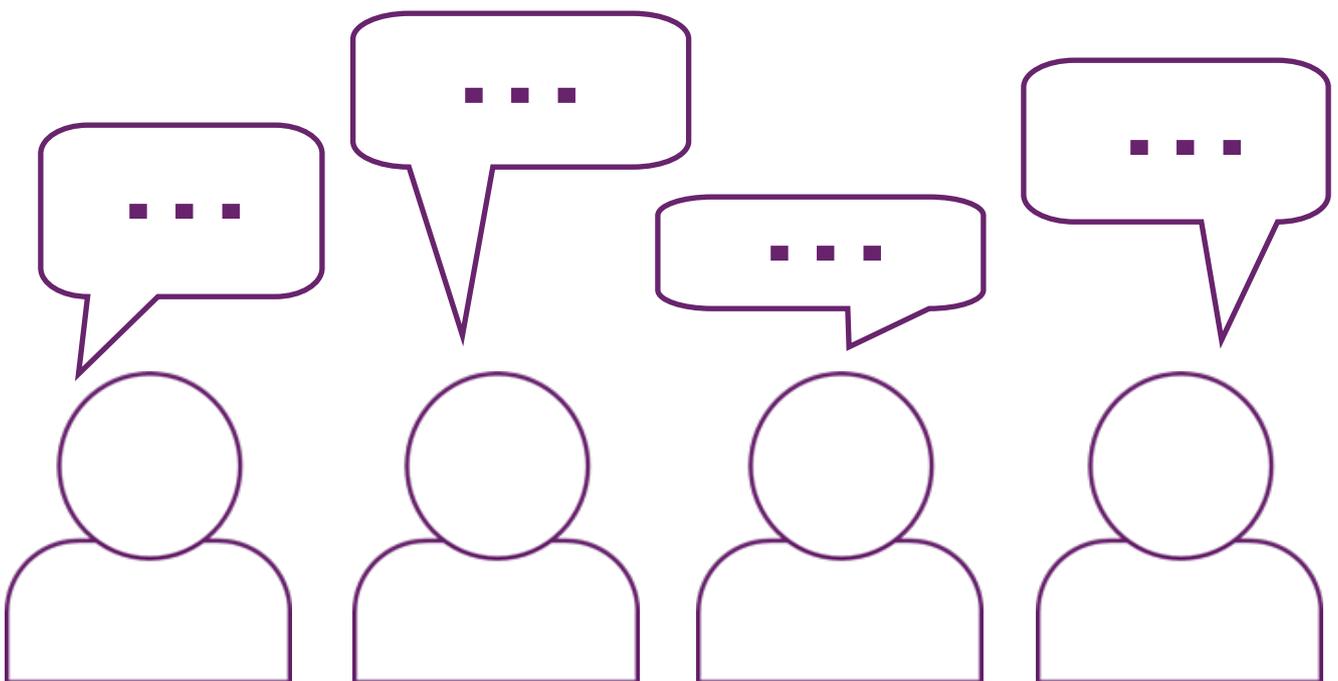
Contents

Glossary

Anxiety: Feelings of unease, worry and fear.

Arousal: The feelings we experience from signals in the body after receiving sensory input.

ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition)/Autism: A developmental disability, affecting individuals in different ways, but generally impacting on communication, social interactions and sensory experiences.

Attention: A set of related abilities, mainly concerned with being able to process certain information while ignoring other information.

EP (Educational Psychologist): An individual that works with children and young people to support them through childhood and school in a psychological capacity.

Focus Group: A group of people with a common characteristic who are brought together to discuss a certain topic.

Heterogeneity: Having diversity between people or things.

Hyper-Arousal: When the body creates an intense reaction to incoming sensory signals; can be very distressing for the person experiencing it.

Hypo-Arousal: When the body fails to create the appropriate level of stimulation from sensory input, leading to failures to notice input, and failure to engage.

Intolerance of Uncertainty: Describes a dispositional characteristic and a tendency to react to uncertain events and information in a negative way.

Likert Scale: Measurement used often on surveys etc., usually on a scale of 1-5, to represent people's attitudes towards something.

NaSEN: The National Association of Special Educational Needs, An online website for SENCO's to share information and resources.

Neurodivergent: Differing in neurological function from what is considered typical.

Open-Ended Questions: Questions that allow for more than just a yes or no response.

SEN (Special Educational Needs): Children with learning difficulties or disabilities.

SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator): Organises SEN activity in school and responsible for supporting SEN children.

Stakeholders: An individual with concern or interest in something.

Thematic Analysis: A type of data analysis concerned with drawing themes and quotes out of transcripts from interviews or focus groups.

Transitions: children's movement in school between classes/teachers and between different schools.

Triad of impairment: Researchers in the 1970's suggested that a large group of autistic children had issues with social interaction, communication and imagination.

Triple-A Difficulties: An inter-linked set of difficulties that can impact children in the classroom. Consists of Attention, Arousal and Anxiety.

Twinkle: an online database with resources/ information/lesson plans for teachers .

Qualitative: Something measuring qualities or characteristics, rather than quantity.

Question Schedule: List of questions to be asked of participants in interviews/focus groups.

General Summary

Evidence from a number of studies at the Centre for Neurodiversity and Development emphasises that there are three important factors that are often overlooked but which can act as barriers to learning and engagement for a wide range of children, especially autistic children.

Attention difficulties make it hard to stay focused on a task. Our studies show that a **visually cluttered classroom** can make it even harder for children to focus on lessons – especially for children with poorer attention skills (e.g. neurodivergent children).

Hanley et al. (2017).

less distraction = better learning

more distraction = poorer learning
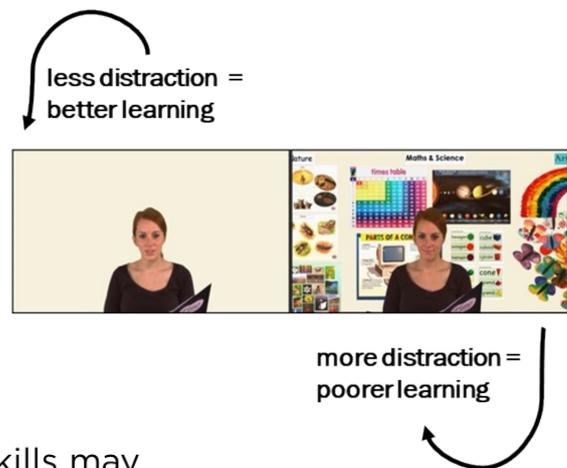
Attention skills may be *particularly important* for learning maths

Arousal Many children with neurodevelopmental conditions have very different responses to **sights, sounds or smells** which can lead to distressing (hyper-arousal) or reduced (hypo-arousal) responses. This can make it very difficult to participate in class.
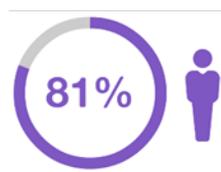
81% of parents believed sensory differences affected life at school **frequently/all of the time**
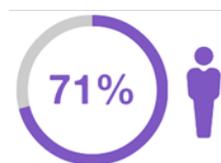
71% of teachers believed sensory differences affected learning **frequently/all of the time**

Jones et al. (2020).

Anxiety can make everyday experiences feel unpredictable, distressing and lead to poor focus in school.

> 'How can you possibly learn with all that adrenaline rushing through you? It's like asking someone to do long division when they're free falling from a plane. Not going to happen.'
> **(Parent)**

Jones et al., (2020)

McDougal et al. (2020b).

We shouldn't view these factors in isolation; we need to understand how they interact
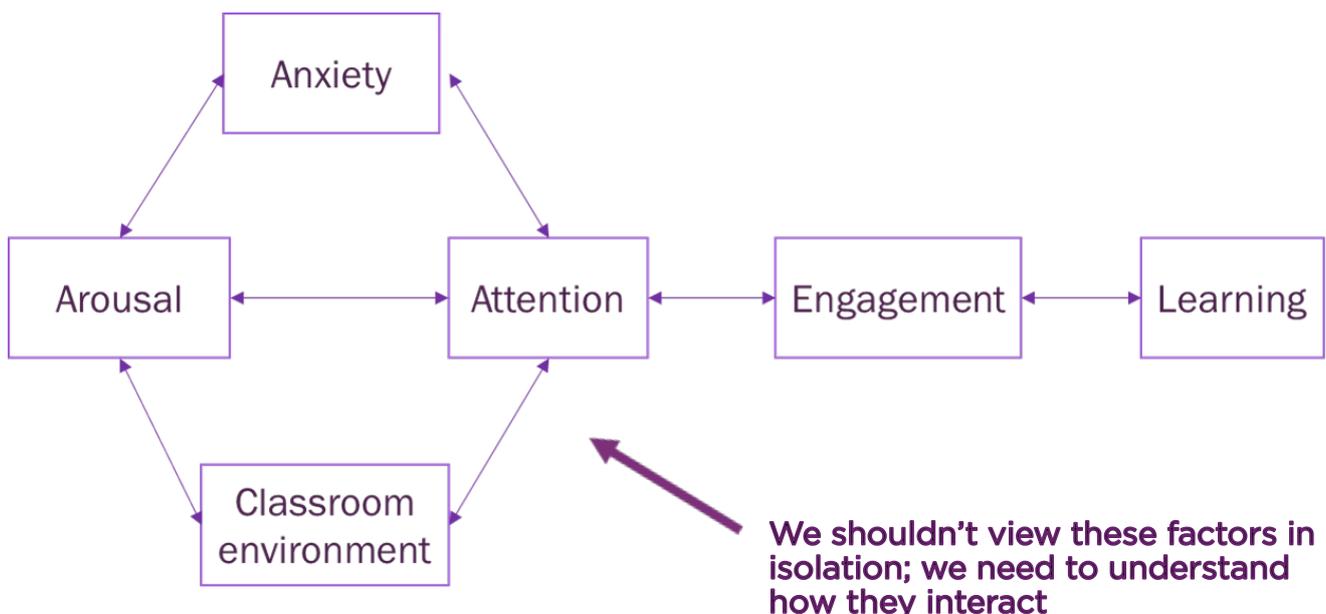
Triple-A difficulties are not easily 'seen'
They are *more common* in *autistic pupils*
They can have a significant impact on learning and engagement.
Small changes could lead to big differences for a wide range of children.

Introduction

Some of the most important learning that children engage in takes place in the classroom, such as learning to read, write and count. The classroom is a busy, complex multisensory environment, including sights (e.g. bright colourful displays), sounds (e.g. noise from other pupils) and smells (e.g. from the canteen).

To focus and learn, children must filter out irrelevant information (distractors) and concentrate on lessons. Some children find this much more difficult than others, especially children with attention difficulties, sensory processing differences, or heightened anxiety.

Having attention difficulties means it is very difficult to stay focused on a task, especially when there are other things to capture attention.

Having sensory processing differences means everyday sensory inputs can both cause hyper-arousal (a very distressing experience) or hypo-arousal (failure to notice/engage).

Having anxiety often means the world feels like a very unpredictable place, which is very distressing and makes it difficult to focus on anything other than the source of the anxiety.

Some children have some of these difficulties, some children have none. Autistic children tend to experience all three (Jones et al., 2020; McDougal et al., 2020b).

Research from our group has shown how attention (Hanley et al., 2017; McDougal et al., 2020 a), sensory arousal (Jones et al., 2020; McDougal et al., 2020b) and anxiety (Jones et al., 2020; McDougal et al., 2020b) have an impact on the engagement and learning of children with and without autism.

Importantly, our research highlights how these issues should not be viewed in isolation (McDougal et al., 2020b) – to be able to help children engage and learn in the classroom we must understand the 'whole child' and see how these key aspects of everyday functioning interact with each other.

Our research also emphasises that although these issues are particularly important for children with autism, they are also highly relevant for children without autism (Hanley et al., 2017; McDougal et al., 2020a).

Finally, a crucial message from our research is that we need to think about the classroom environment itself, and how we ensure it is an environment that supports learning, not detracts from it (Hanley et al., 2017).

This background research, as well as previous research in this area, shows that attention, arousal and anxiety can act as barriers to learning for autistic and other neurodivergent children.

The aim of the Triple-A project, is to translate this research and create an online training resource, in order to raise awareness and understanding among educators and teachers about how these issues may impact in the classroom.

The Communication and Interaction team at Durham County Council are our collaborative partner on this project, and we have been working together to maximise the impact from this research with teachers, schools and families.

As part of developing the online training tool, there has been a consultation period, to see if the proposed project met the needs of key stakeholders, such as autistic people, parents, teachers and EP's, and to get feedback to guide the development of the resource.

As part of this consultation period, focus groups were run with teachers, EP's, and parents of autistic children. (Note: report following interviews with autistic adolescents forthcoming). The focus groups provided these important groups of stakeholders a space to discuss ideas and opinions around these issues, and indeed discuss the relative importance of these difficulties in comparison to other factors that autistic children may face in the classroom context.

This report will highlight the key insights and feedback from these focus groups.
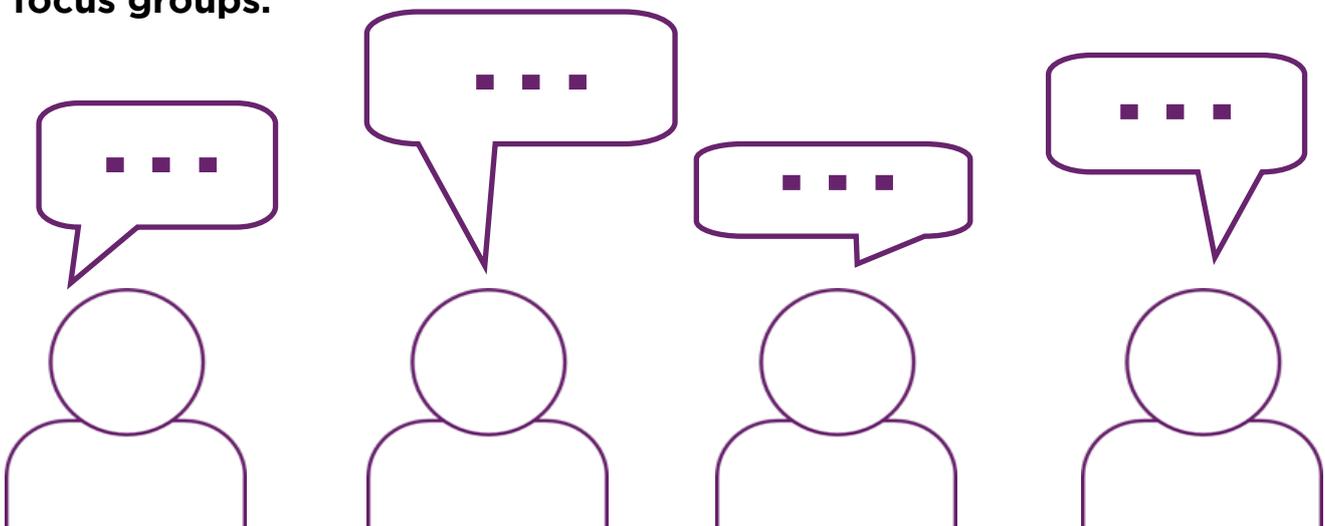
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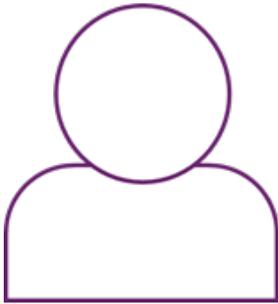
Recruitment

Recruitment announcements were sent through **schools networks** and through the **Communication and Interaction Team** at Durham County Council.

All those who were recruited were aware of the basic principles of the project and the Triple-A work (i.e. they were not blind to the aims of the project).

Participants:

One EP Group (N=4).
Two SENCO Groups (N=2,N=3).
Two Parent Groups (N=1,N=2).
Total Focus Groups: 5
Total participants: 12

Participant demographics:

◊ All over the age of 18.
◊ All teachers were SENCO's/senior leaders in mainstream schools
◊ 10 Females, 2 Males

All focus groups took place between March 24th 2021—May 21st 2021.

Focus Group Schedule:

Introduction, overview of the project and guidelines for the focus group	→	Initial questions about their views about barriers to l earning in the classroom for autistic pupils	→	A short presentation for participants giving an overview of the Triple-A research	→	Questions about experiences of Triple-A and usefulness of the resource
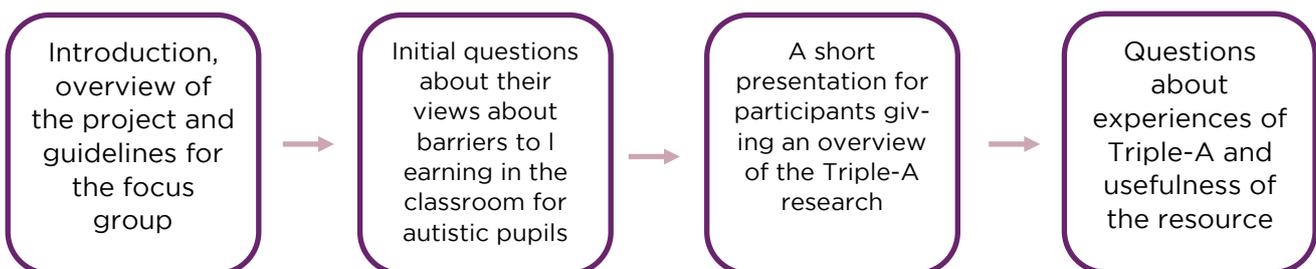
Sample Questions and Format:

1. **Open-ended questions** (e.g. What would you suggest are the top three issues/barriers and facilitators for learning and engagement for autistic pupils in the classroom?)

2. **Likert Scales** (e.g. on a scale of 1-5; do you think it would be useful to have an online resource which covers the research)

Findings

Qualitative data was analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The findings below will be presented in themes per question asked. Some questions were asked only for certain groups, (e.g. only parents), some questions were asked for multiple groups (e.g. parents and SENCO's), and some questions were asked to all groups (parents, SENCOS's and EP's).

Section 1: Initial Questions (Not Specific to Triple-A).

Question 1: What would you suggest are the top three issues/barriers and facilitators for learning and engagement for autistic pupils in the classroom? (SENCO's/EP's/Parents)

SENCO's/EP's and Parents all suggested that aspects of Triple-A could be extremely impactful for learning and engagement in the classroom for children with ASC. Please see below for examples given in the groups.

Anxiety

Anxiety was frequently mentioned as being important, in particular the way that worrying can lead to a lack of concentration:

> "anxiety really and all the ways that anxiety can manifest in terms of a child's ability to settle, to focus, to self-regulate, to stay or to persist" (EP)
>
> "if he feels he's being bullied...it plays on his mind over and over and over again and he can't concentrate on what he's doing" (Parent)

Sensory Differences

Sensory differences and arousal in busy classrooms was mentioned as a barrier by all groups of participants. SENCO's tended to speak about this in terms of the ways in which a classroom as a physical environment was not set up for children with ASC and the difficulties associated with this:

> "most schools are not set up for ASD kids in terms of the physical environments because there's attention and arousal everywhere, it's a busy- it's a busy building" (Mainstream SENCO)
>
> "one of the biggest barriers is that learning environment and getting it right for the child" (Mainstream SENCO)

Parents highlighted the 'busyness' of the classroom, and the sensory impact of other children in the classroom (e.g. from increased noise) as significant factors. Parents emphasised that one positive effect from COVID-19 has been classrooms that have been more manageable for autistic children, due to fewer people being in the classroom:

"the biggest one is how distracted he gets by noise in the room, by movement in the room...so he's actually gained quite a lot from going to school during lockdown" (Parent)

"she doesn't like other children making noise near her, which, in a classroom, isn't easy to stop" (Parent)

EP's tended to highlight a lack of understanding among some teachers around sensory differences and being able to get the right levels of arousal for different children as a barrier for learning:

"I think when thinking about autistic pupils, in particular, sensory needs seem to be...not well understood I suppose in the classroom" (EP)

"thinking about how to maintain optimum arousal levels and them not maybe quite understanding how to meet those needs appropriately" (EP)

Attention

Attention difficulties were also mentioned as a barrier to learning by all EP's, SENCO's and Parents. Particularly the idea that it is difficult to capture attention away from specific interests and towards what is happening in the lesson, and making children see the point to the learning that they are doing:

"whatever's going on in their head, is usually much more interesting than anything that's going on in school" (Mainstream SENCO)

"how do you get them to do something that isn't on their own agenda" (EP)

"anything that's going on in the classroom that isn't to do with the learning could just distract him straight away" (Parent)

Triple-A Interaction

The way in which Triple-A difficulties combine and interact with each other was something which was commented on by both EP's and SENCO's:

"if you've got a big busy class, attention and arousal, anxieties they all kind of crescendo" (Mainstream SENCO)

"anxiety is the thing that comes out initially...when we've unpicked it, there's a huge amount of sensory difficulties that seem to go hand in hand with that anxiety" (EP)

Along with Triple-A issues, SENCO's, but not parents or teachers, also mentioned the impact of transitions and lack of resources in this initial question.

The idea that transitions can be a big barrier for ASC pupils was mentioned, and it was also discussed that having experience in dealing with transitions and sharing information can act as a facilitator for learning and engagement. As well as transitions, SENCO's mentioned resources (or lack of) as a barrier to learning. Both groups of SENCO's also discussed the huge heterogeneity across the spectrum of autistic children, and how this can make it difficult for knowing the best way to approach and support these children:

> '[with] less experienced teachers, sometimes the transitions maybe's not as good' (Mainstream SENCO)
>
> "working with limited resources" (Maintream SENCO)
>
> "the diversity of need that there can be, so one child is not the same as the next child" (Mainstream SENCO)

Question 2: Are the barriers (discussed above) the same or different for autistic children compared to other neurodivergent children (e.g. children with ADHD, dyslexia, downs syndrome)? (SENCO's/EP's)

Largely across the SENCO groups, there was consensus that there were some things that are much more common barriers for autistic pupils, such as the sensory differences experienced by autistic children and some communication difficulties, although they did acknowledge some cross-over in helpful classroom strategies:

> "things like the sensory issues that some ASD children have...neurotypical children just don't have that to the same extent" (Mainstream SENCO)
>
> "communication difficulties as well...often don't come into other kind of issues" (Mainstream SENCO)
>
> "I think some things are a universal strategy...making things clear and visual, that works for all the children" (Mainstream SENCO)

The EP group didn't focus on the specific differences that autistic pupils present, but highlighted that autistic pupils tend to experience all three Triple-A issues at the same time. Following on from this, the EP group also discussed the idea that when these Triple-A issues manifest in children who do not have an ASC diagnosis, educators may be slower to recognize them:

> "as a pattern...if we're talking about those three things happening at the same time, I think possibly you're more likely to see that within a child who has an ASD diagnosis, but that's not to say that these are unique to children with autism at all" (EP)
>
> "I think some children might be quite disadvantaged sometimes by not... perhaps we're not as quick to see those things in non-autistic chil-

Question 3: If teachers could have training to support them in supporting autistic and other neurodivergent pupils, what areas would it focus on? (EP's)

EP's emphasised there was little point in separating out these three concepts, and that training teachers on Triple-A as a whole would be the most useful. They also mentioned that sometimes educators can have a very fixed view on autism and the different ways in which it can present (i.e. outside of the traditional triad of impairment), and so looking at Triple-A may give a different perspective on what can impact learning in the classroom:

> ""I don't think you can talk about one without talking about the other, because...for me they inter-relate in a way that it's not helpful to separate" (EP)
>
> "sometimes you understand those things, by looking at them through the other lenses" (EP)
>
> "you work with staff who have quite a fixed view of what autism is" (EP)

Section 2: Follow-up Questions (Specifically about Triple-A)

As a reminder: The following questions were asked after a brief presentation to the participants about the Triple-A research, to see if they found it useful.

Poll 1: To what extent would you say that you recognize the Triple-A difficulties outlined in the research examples in the support that teachers ask for pupils with autism (EP's)/ in those pupils with autism that you have taught or that have needed support in your school (SENCO's)/ for your children (Parents)?
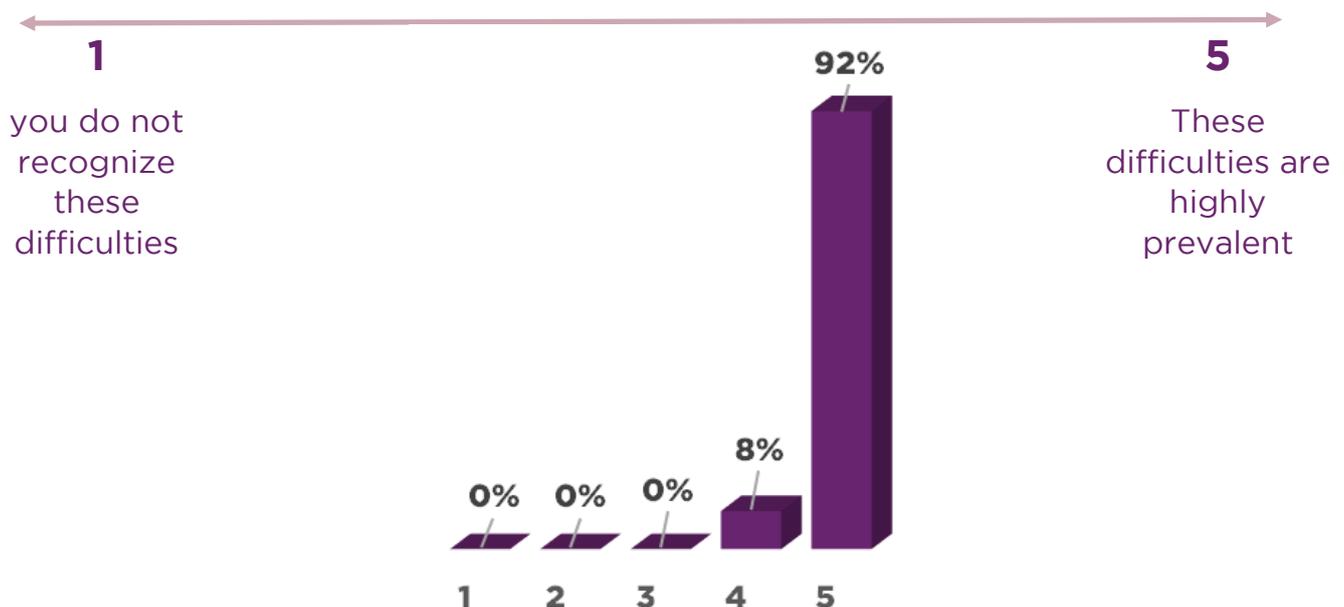
1   **5**

you do not recognize these difficulties   These difficulties are highly prevalent

92%

0%   0%   0%   8%

1   2   3   4   5

All participants answered this question with a rating of 4 or 5 (with 5 indicating that these difficulties are highly prevalent), and the majority of these ratings were 5 (92%).

One of the parents elaborated on their response to the poll, suggesting that particularly the anxiety aspect of Triple-A was something they could relate to their child having difficulties with, and this anxiety manifesting as a certain behaviour. This parent also suggested that all three of the Triple-A issues were highly relevant for their child:

"he does have an awful lot of underlying anxiety, which tends to come out as him being quite angry" (Parent)

"all three of those things are things he absolutely has issue with" (Parent)

Question 4: Do these examples (from the Triple-A research) help you/ help teachers to understand some difficulties experienced by autistic children in the classroom? (SENCO's/EP's)

One of the clear messages from SENCO's after looking at this research, was that it encouraged them to think about the busyness of a school, particularly the classroom and how it may be important for staff to be reminded of this:

"the key is to remind staff...how busy and mad the school day can be" (Mainstream SENCO)

"it does really make me think about the display culture that it is in a primary school" (Mainstream SENCO)

The SENCO's also discussed the idea that some staff in schools may still not have a full understanding of these Triple-A issues and how they can impact on learning, and that the research helps to demonstrate this. SENCO's discussed the idea that the Triple-A resource may be useful to individuals outside of core teaching staff in a school, who may not have any understanding about why certain behaviours are present in some children:

"there's certainly some people still see it as kind of naughty behaviour" (Mainstream SENCO)

"there's the lunch time supervisors, the caretaker, the cleaners, they are you know around at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day" (Mainstream SENCO)

It was also mentioned by SENCO's that early years staff may not always have the necessary training to pick up on subtle Triple-A difficulties, but that by offering them training they may be able to help the child at an earlier stage:

"these children arrive who have got very differing needs...but nothing has ever really been looked into before" (Mainstream SENCO)

The EP group were extremely positive about the Triple-A model and suggested that this was an extremely helpful way to look at these issues with teachers and help them structure their thinking and understanding, although it was mentioned that it might be useful to go into further detail around how intolerance of uncertainty may help explain anxiety:

> "I really like that model you had, I think that's a really…accessible way…it provides quite a neat framework to understand some of these things…and it helps to structure thinking" (EP)
>
> "intolerance of uncertainty, I find that idea extremely helpful" (EP)
>
> "if the world is unpredictable because you don't have the same guidebook that everybody has, then it is gonna be more anxiety inducing" (EP)
>
> "the impact of lack of understanding…that sometimes children are anxious and don't focus and are poorly regulated because they don't understand… the world in the way we do, so everything is much more of an effort because nothing is intuitive or grasped without thinking about it" (EP)

Question 5: Is there a particular aspect of Triple-A that impacts your child the most in the classroom? (Parents)

Parents confirmed that all three of the Triple-A issues were a problem for their child, and that this was an issue for their child most of the time:

> "he does definitely have all three going on, pretty much constantly" (Parent)
>
> "for me it's a mixture of all three" (Parent)

Question 6: If and when these difficulties did arise in school, what support did your child receive from teachers in dealing with these barriers? Did you feel that this support was adequate/ do you think there were any other ways in which you feel they could have been supported? (Parents)

One of the parents relayed that their child's school had been very supportive in helping with his difficulties and had really listened to the parents in this support. They also mentioned that when their child had a newer qualified teacher, she had to undertake a lot of training in her own time to upskill her in the child's needs:

> "his teacher last year was quite new to teaching so she had to do quite a bit of training to get on board with what his needs were" (Parent)
>
> "his teacher last year, she did a lot of learning, and she took up a lot of things in her own spare time as well" (Parent)

Parents also discussed the idea, that even if they have a teacher currently that understands these Triple-A issues and how they relate to their child, it is very stressful not knowing if that might change if they were to move to a class teacher who perhaps has less understanding around Triple-A:

> "although I'm saying I'm really happy with his progress at the minute, if the teacher changes, that could all go downhill and be a completely different story" (Parent)
>
> "it's quite stressful for me as a parent to think well, we're going through a good stage with him at the minute, but that could easily just change at the drop of a hat" (Parent)
>
> "the teacher my daughter has at the moment is fantastic with her, that's another concern of mine, she only has her for another year" (Parent)

It was also mentioned that nursery staff may perhaps need upskilling in this area of Triple-A difficulties. Lack of funding and access to funding was also mentioned by parents as a barrier for staff being able to support children when Triple-A issues have arisen:

> "there was a lot of times when they would actually ring me...and just send her home because the just didn't know what to do with her" (Parent)
>
> "We had all the paperwork, we tried to get the funding, that was another issue". (Parent)

Poll 2: How do Triple-A difficulties sit in relation to other difficulties that autistic children might face, in order of significance for learning in the classroom? (EP's/SENCO's/Parents)

1

Much less important than other issues

5

Highly important for learning in the classroom
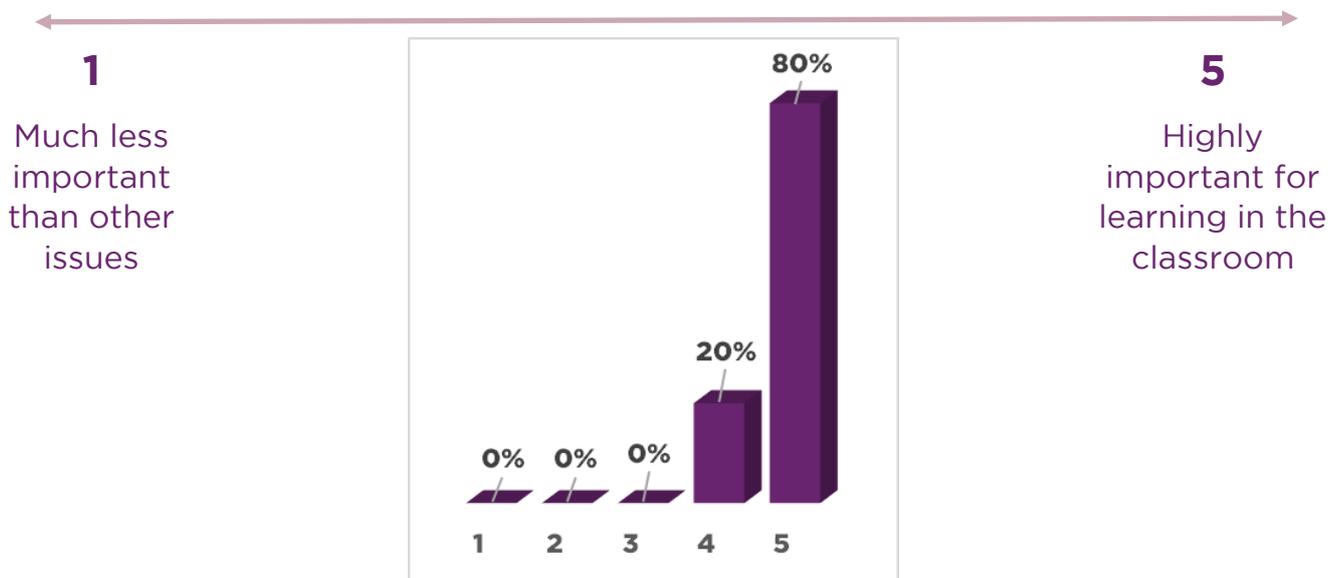
As with the previous poll, all participants answered this question with a rating of 4 or 5 (with 5 indicating that these difficulties are highly prevalent), and the majority of these ratings were 5 (80%).

When discussing this poll, the parent group highlighted how important Triple-A issues were for their children, suggesting they were the main things that impacted their children's learning:

> "he's got the knowledge, he understands the concepts you know, you can ask him anything and he can tell you anything, he takes a hell of a lot on board, but those three key factors are what really impacts how well he does with it" (Parent)

They also highlighted how detrimental to the school day starting out with anxiety can be, and how this can really impact everything else that the child does:

> "Once he has a bit of anxiety it just snowballs from there" (Parent)

Parents did also point out other, more practical skills which can affect their child and that these may be important to take into account too as they can also impact on their learning:

> "he's got a sort of dyspraxia, so his balance is really bad, and that...can cause issues in the classroom" (Parent)

> "my daughter has problems with writing as well...because she struggles with like fine motor skills" (Parent)

> "they like to sit a certain way...so I think something like beanbags or just something more comfortable than a standard classroom chair, would be much better...having somewhere that they would want to sit down in for a longer period of time, would help with their learning, because they're not just wanting to get up and get out of the chair that they are not happy sitting in" (Parent)

When EP's commented on this poll question, the feedback was around the idea that Triple-A issues are hugely important for understanding a lot of learning in the classroom, but that sometimes other issues may compound and add to these barriers:

> "I think it can be easy to forget that sometimes children can have learning difficulties as well" (EP)

> "when you're expecting children to work with other children in groups and a lot of sort of the higher order social skills that are necessary for that, that just then compounds everything else" (EP)

> "I think the Triple-A stuff go an awful long way into talking about sort of what the barriers might be in the classroom, but then there's always gonna be those other things that factor in on top" (EP)

Question 7: If you wanted to get a better understanding of Triple-A issues, where would you look for resources and support? If you have previously found resources and support that was useful, what was it? (SENCO's)

Generally among the SENCO's there was a feeling that there might be snippets of relevant information that can be found on online resources, or webpages, but that these are usually not entirely specific to the issue that they might be getting information about, and may take a lot of sifting through; although there were a couple of website's which they felt were useful:

"Nasen have some videos and bits and bobs, and the National autistic society" (SENCO)

"Twinkle have got a section on there about special needs but it can be a bit hit and miss on what you get, so I prefer to go to an organizational that's particularly about that condition first" (SENCO)

They also discussed that they might either speak to a professional, such as an educational psychologist when the child reached the point of needing help, or would use staff knowledge and share good practice among colleagues:

"I might speak to a professional" (SENCO)

"good colleagues share information" (SENCO)

"we've had the ASC team in from county" (SENCO)

Poll 3: Do you think it would be useful to have an online resource which covers the research outlined at the beginning of the session?

1

Not useful at all

5

Very Useful
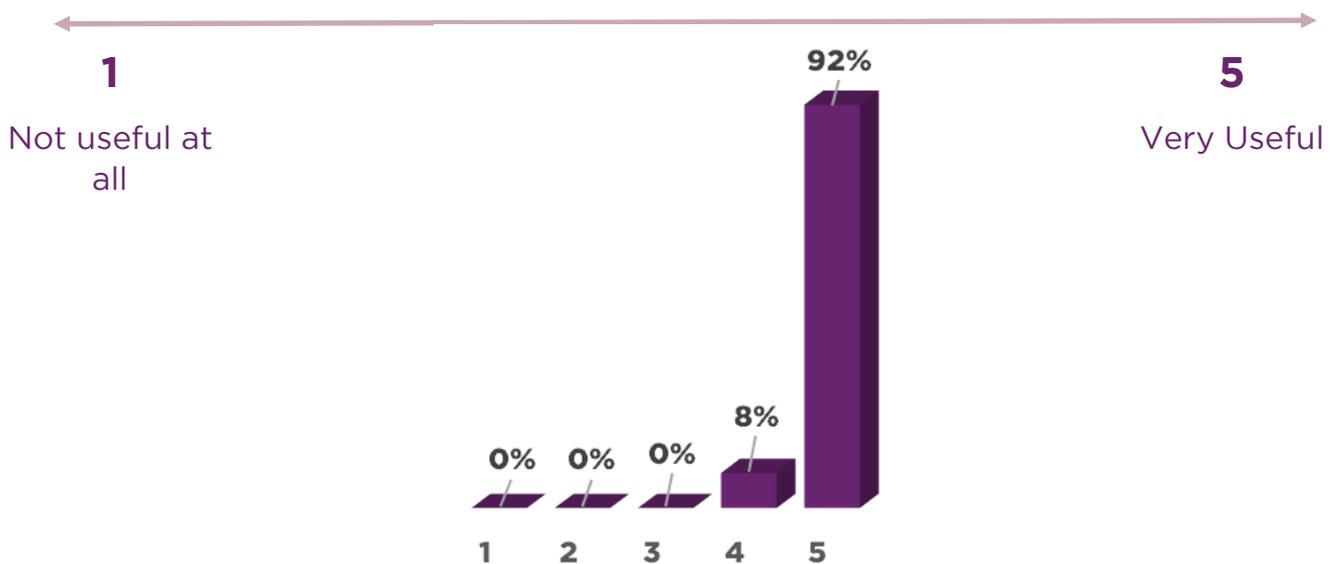
Similar to the previous polls, all participants answered this question with a rating of 4 or 5 and the majority of these ratings were 5 (92%).

When discussing this poll, all of the participants across all groups spoke about how they felt it could be really useful for a range of individuals, including parents themselves:

> "I want anything and everything seriously anything we can have you want as many strings to your bow as possible" (SENCO)
>
> "I think it would be very useful for everyone to be honest" (Parent)
>
> "I think for parents as well, I think understanding that these are the issues that kids are gonna be facing at school...that these issues are there and... what impact they're going to have on his learning" (Parent)

One of the parents also spoke about how their child's anxiety can be mistaken for aggression and that a training tool such as the Triple-A one, which might speak to this, would be extremely useful:

> "I think because of the way he is and the fact he can seem quite aggressive when he gets anxious I think people don't put that down to anxiety, but it very definitely is" (Parent)
>
> "people can make assumptions about him from his behavior" (Parent)

Question 8: What features would be useful? (SENCO's/EP's)

When SENCO's and EP's were asked about what they would like to see in the resource or what features would be useful, they had a number of suggestions. There was a general feeling that between 1-2 hours would be the maximum amount of time it should take to complete. There was also positive feedback around the idea of having certificates of completion, as a useful thing for teachers to have for training – both for internal and external reasons. It was also discussed that for parents who are worried or unsure and wanting to ask questions to researchers and indeed other parents, some sort of forum would be useful to have on the resource. The EP's discussed a lot about how it would be great if the resource had some space for schools and teachers to indicate how they had used this training and celebrated any successes

> "anything over two hours...I'd say you'd be struggling, an hour is probably nice" (SENCO)
>
> "as safeguarding lead I like my colleagues to...send me their certificates of completion" (SENCO)
>
> [talking about whether a certificate of completion is needed] "it is nice to tick some sort of box for the dreaded OFSTED, to say we've had particular training" (SENCO)
>
> "Specific school badges on there for them to...say we've done this" (EP)
>
> "a celebration of success" (EP)

One thing that was suggested that would be useful on the resource, was that as well as the training to increase and encourage understanding, if there was some examples of strategies that you could try which put this training into practice. Similarly signposting to websites, which might be useful for further understanding of other aspects of ASC or evidence-based practice was also suggested. This was discussed by parents, who suggested that after the initial diagnosis they were unsure what they could put in place to try and help their child:

> "examples of things that you can try and put in place to combat certain issues" (Parent)
>
> "we found it difficult because it was…a lot of kinda either you work it out for yourself what works for him, but we needed ideas" (Parent)
>
> "places we can go to, to get that kind of help" (Parent)

There was also a feeling among some of the parents that once their child had been diagnosed they were left feeling quite isolated, and that a resource that outlines how these issues impact many autistic children can be helpful for feeling less alone in dealing with these issues:

> "when he got diagnosed…we were kind of given the report and then left adrift for a bit" (Parent)
>
> "to know that other families are having the same issues…it makes you feel a bit less alone in it all, and they're people that you could potentially talk to as well and share ideas" (Parent)

Parents also discussed the heterogeneity of autism and how it is important for teachers to use this knowledge and understanding of patterns of behavior to relate them to specific children and strategies:

> "every autistic child is different…but there will be lots of similarities, so obviously a teacher needs to understand all the similarities first, and then after knowing a child, they'll then learn the more direct things" (Parent)
>
> "I would want them to understand that every autistic child is different…that they need to take the time to understand what that specific child would want or, what works for them and what doesn't" (Parent)

Question 10: Any other questions or comments?

One thing that was mentioned when we opened up the questions, was that Triple-A training could be useful in the workplace, to educate employers on these issues and how they might impact their employees. One parent mentioned the employment statistics for autistic individuals, and how they cause them stress, and that if they knew employers had some knowledge of Triple-A this could help with getting autistic people into work:

> "when you read the statistics about how many autistic people are in employment, and it's not great" (Parent)
>
> "it'd be good to be able to expand it to employers as well in the future you know so they can understand what autistic people in their staff would need" (Parent)
>
> "so they can sort of take it into the work place and make adjustments and... hopefully encourage more employment for autistic people" (Parent)

One of the EP's also made an interesting point around how, autism is traditionally understood through the 'triad of impairment', where these associated difficulties (such as the Triple-A difficulties) are less well understood by educators, and that perhaps increasing understanding has focused on other aspects of the autistic experience:

> "I think autism has been understood traditionally through the triad of impairment, but people haven't gone beyond that to understand what's underpinning those impairments" (EP)

Conclusion

Although they captured views from only a small group of stakeholders, the focus groups highlighted that Triple-A difficulties are clearly a really important barrier to learning in the classroom for neurodivergent children, particularly autistic children. The focus groups provided key insights in three main ways: **to confirm that the Triple-A resource will be valuable and needed, to give ideas that can be used the shape and develop the resource, and to start to think about ways that the resource and Triple-A project can be developed further**.

<u>Confirming the Triple-A resource will be useful</u>
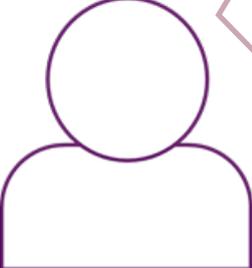
There were a number of points made by all the groups around how the different components of Triple-A can have a real impact on their children, or on the children they support in the classroom. **The participants also rated these Triple-A issues as highly relevant and rated the usefulness of the resource as very useful.** Importantly, participants also highlighted the **usefulness of looking at these difficulties through the Triple-A lens and how they interact with each other** and that this framework is likely to be hugely beneficial for increasing teachers understanding. Increasing teacher understanding is likely to be very important as parents also emphasized that there **may be an inconsistency of training and understanding of these issues across teachers and educators**, and how this can be immensely stressful for parents when their children are moving classes.

<u>Shaping and developing resource</u>

As well as Triple-A, **other issues** were mentioned that may be important for learning in the classroom too, and so it is important to acknowledge in the resource that there are other key issues. It was also mentioned a number of times about the **heterogeneous nature of ASC,** and this is something that will be very important to highlight in the resource. Similarly, these issues are **important for students without a diagnosis of autism**, and teachers should be aware of this. This resource is likely to be useful for non-teaching school staff (lunch-time supervisors, cleaners, care-takers etc.), and parents, so **the resource should be accessible to a broad audience.** Other things to consider when developing the resource will be **making clear the role of certain mechanisms in Triple-A** (i.e. intolerance of uncertainty) and also the more **practical side of things, such as timings and inclusion of certificates of completion etc**. The feedback from these focus groups will be invaluable for the online resource.
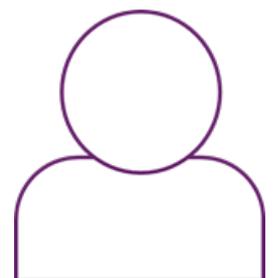
How to develop the project further

Finally, a number of things that were discussed may be useful for thinking about how to further develop this project in the future. These were things **such as extending the training to be suitable for early years staff**, extending the tool into a **manualised whole school training tool**, and **creating a Triple-A in the workplace training tool**. These are all wonderful ideas, which can be explored in the future through extending the project or through separate projects.

Overall, the focus groups provided an excellent insight into parents, teachers and educational psychologists thoughts around barriers to learning in the classroom, and feedback on the relevance of Triple-A.

We will now continue the consultation phase of the project through workshops with teachers to try out the Triple-a resource material, and through interviews with autistic adolescents to capture their views and voice around these issues.

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