

The classroom that didn't fit

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Editorial comment

The employment data often states that only about a third of autistic adults are in paid employment. However, these data only refer to those who are diagnosed as autistic and/or those who choose to disclose their autism diagnosis to their employers. There are many more who are employed who do not have a formal diagnosis of autism. Some adults may never seek or need a diagnosis as they feel they are successful in their employment and are physically and emotionally well. In this paper, the author recounts her experiences as a teacher in training and subsequently during the Covid pandemic and beyond. At the time, she did not realise the difficulties she experienced were linked to her autistic identity and was not diagnosed until some years later. Looking back, she realised this made sense of some of her childhood experiences. Chloe describes the response of other staff to some of her actions and comments and gives details of adjustments that helped or would have helped her to stay in the profession, and in so doing, help to foster school environments where autistic educators can thrive.

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Thank you to my husband, who helped me to get an autism diagnosis, and find a career path that works with my unique mind.

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Introduction

Research on the unique experiences of autistic teachers remains limited. However, one study (Wood and Happe, 2023) highlights that this demographic often experience sensory challenges, exhaustion, and ill-treatment. This personal reflection charts my journey as a new teacher facing the overwhelming challenges of a classroom environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, I was unaware that the struggles I encountered were linked to my autistic identity—a diagnosis I received years later. As I look back on my time in the classroom, my goal is to contribute to a broader conversation about the urgent need for inclusive educational spaces that support autistic professionals, including teachers. By sharing my experiences, I hope to highlight how small accommodations, and a deeper understanding of sensory and social challenges, can foster environments where autistic educators, like me, can truly thrive.

Early experiences and the path to teaching

Growing up, I never considered that I might be autistic, but in hindsight, my childhood and adolescence were filled with subtle clues. I avoided eye contact, ran away from shopping centres, and swayed uncontrollably. In primary school, I was quickly labelled as the “weird girl”. The other children didn’t seem to understand me, and I struggled to understand them. They bonded over sharing crisps, but I didn’t like their hands near my food. At playtime, I tried to join in with games such as tag and hokey-cokey, but I didn’t like being touched. To escape the noise, I sought refuge in books and spent playtimes sitting alone on a bench, lost in my own world. However, I found my tribe at secondary school. My friends and I, all late-diagnosed autistic, bonded over our shared, intense interests. We would sit cross-legged in the quiet of the school library, exchanging fun facts about everything from Pokémon to the Apocrypha. We were the school nerds—people thought we were strange, but we had each other, and that was enough.

At 21, I chose teaching, driven by the Get Into Teaching Campaign's promise of making a difference. Having excelled academically throughout my life, I felt a responsibility to give back. I wanted to be the kind of teacher who could inspire every student to excel, regardless of their background or whether others thought they were nerdy, and this ambition filled me with excitement. However, the reality of school life was far more challenging than I had anticipated. I vividly recall sitting alone during a free period, lost in a book, when a colleague approached and asked if I would help with a display. Without much thought, I bluntly replied, "No". Similarly, when colleagues brought in home-made cakes and offered them to me, I would refuse, not knowing the cleanliness of their kitchens. To them, I must have seemed rude, but to me, I was simply being cautious.

The classrooms during my placement schools, however, were calmer than I had expected, with my mentors offering behavioural support from the back of the room. The structured training programme provided stability, and my lessons and essays were met with positive feedback. While connecting with colleagues proved difficult, I chalked it up to being 21. That suspicion solidified when I met another lady who was a similar age, and we bonded over our shared fascination with sharks. While we both found the social demands of teaching challenging, we cared for the students and felt like we were making a difference. In our connection, we felt less alone. What I hadn't realised until much later was that she was autistic.

Then, in early March 2020, everything changed with the Government's announcement: "*You must all stay home.*" Suddenly, I found myself uprooted—new town, new school, new colleagues—and all of this with the looming threat of COVID-19, alongside just six months of teaching experience.

Navigating uncertainty and isolation

On 25th June 2020, at 10:03 pm, I boarded the train to my new home. In the pocket of my pink coat, an unopened bottle of hand sanitiser sat silently, promising it could somehow fend off my death. The campus, once alive with the sounds of drunken students and late-night chatter, now felt like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*—barren and bare. Unlike Eliot, I found June to be the cruellest month, not

because of lost spring, but because it uprooted me from the quiet safety of my dorm and planted me into a city where I wasn't the student anymore; I was the teacher.

Adapting to new places had always been a gargantuan task, but in the middle of a national lockdown, it felt impossible. My days shrank to a single ritual: a trip to the small Tesco beneath my apartment to buy things I didn't need or want. The routine offered certainty in a world that had suddenly become uncertain. Buried beneath my bed, hidden in a bag, were tins of tomatoes I'd hoarded, convinced they were my lifeline for an apocalyptic future. It seems irrational now, but a part of me feared that letting them go would somehow trigger the very disaster they were meant to protect me from. They were my safety net—my "in case of emergency, consume these red beauties" backup plan.

Between binge-watching childhood TV shows and my daily sojourn to Tesco, I'd wander to my balcony, pull back the curtains, and wait. I positioned myself like an omniscient narrator, tracing the fleeting shadows of strangers, each one a story I longed to understand. One woman, in particular, caught my attention. Every day, she passed by a nearby pub in a blue shirt, black trousers, and bright Doc Martens, talking animatedly on her phone. I imagined she was speaking to a lover—her face always lit with a smile so effortless, so radiant, that I envied it. Her joy seemed natural, unforced, as if she were genuinely in awe of life. I longed to wear a smile like hers, so I practised it in the mirror, but it never felt real. It was a smile, but not mine.

Then came the dreaded 7th September. I woke up drenched in sweat, my eyes fixed on the grey jacket and black pinafore dress I had laid out the night before. I poured myself a coffee, my hands trembling, my heart racing. Nervous didn't even begin to describe what I was feeling—my body shook. I practised my performance, swapping a red hairband for a black one. I rehearsed my "I'm confident" face—eye contact, a soft laugh, a gentle expression, words carefully chosen. "Hi, I'm Chloe. I'm the new English teacher," I said to the mirror, but the reflection stared back at me, lost. In the staffroom, I sat alone, eating my safe food—peanut butter thinly spread on brown bread—while reading a book about marine life. During the interview, I had been promised a "happy family," but in reality, there

were only glances and cruel comments about my “iconic diet”. It seemed like my colleagues were bitter with me, but I never understood why. Their silence suffocated me with unspoken expectations. As the months passed, my attendance faltered, and I was placed under monitoring. What had once felt like my dream job slowly morphed into a daily battle for control. The moments of joy I once found in teaching no longer lifted me—they weighed me down, not with the sudden force of a storm, but with the quiet, relentless pressure of rain, gradually sinking me before I even realised, I needed a lifeboat.

When teaching becomes unbearable

By mid-December, the classroom had become unbearable. The physical environment felt as if it were conspiring against me. In an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19, the windows had to remain open. The sound of the wind, combined with the endless chatter, was too much. I tried to give instructions but found it hard to manage student behaviour. One student threw his book out the window, shouting “confetti” as it fluttered to the ground below. Another pounded on the piano, trying to serenade his friend. I could feel my nervous system unravelling like a string of beads.

Just before Christmas, I broke. I stormed into my line manager's office, and in a blur of frustration, exhaustion, and fear, I screamed, “*I can't take it anymore. I quit. I quit. I quit.*” But I didn't quit. Instead, I kept going, wearing my fake smile like armour, pretending everything was fine. But inside, something had shifted. The things I once found comfort in—warm baths, food—no longer offered solace. Bread became an unbearable texture, peanut butter stuck to the roof of my mouth, a constant reminder that nothing felt right anymore.

In January, I finally reached out for help. My voice cracked as I spoke to my GP. “Please, I need medication. I need a new mind,” I whispered, barely able to get the words out. The doctor listened, asked a few questions, and prescribed 50mg of Sertraline. I swallowed the first pill, but it felt like nothing more than a placebo. The world didn't slow, didn't soften. It stayed loud and overwhelming. Then, another lockdown announcement came. Schools were closing again. Everyone in my teacher training group expressed fear and uncertainty. Some worried about their professional

development. I felt something different—a strange sense of relief. The pressure was gone, at least for a little while. Time away from the classroom allowed me to step away from hell and into purgatory.

Teaching online during COVID-19

I enjoyed teaching online. There was no behaviour to manage, no harsh overhead lights, and quiet breaks between lessons. My room was softly lit by a string of fairy lights, and everything was becoming predictable again. Peanut butter started to make me smile, and I ate it freely, without anyone telling me I had “an iconic diet”. Without the extra challenges of the school environment, I was able to plan exciting lessons and felt like I was thriving once again. Online meetings were far easier than in person; I didn't have to turn on my camera, and I could just sit swaying in my chair without fear of appearing different. Most importantly, at home, it was just me and my fiancé—and he never asked me about the weather. Instead, we adopted quiet routines and spent our evenings playing chess or painting Warhammer figurines. He knew me, and I knew him, and sitting side by side in quietness was always enough for us both.

The return to school

When schools reopened on 7th March, it felt like the cycle was repeating itself. But this time, the chaos was different. It wasn't just about the students—it was about me. A meme I saw perfectly captured how I felt: “Teaching is easy. It's just like riding a bike. Except the bike is on fire. You are on fire. Everything is fire”. And fire became the perfect metaphor for my early career. It was a constant burn. Every day brought new challenges. One student declared, “It's a bit hot in here”, and the class dramatically collapsed on their desks, pretending to faint in unison—a TikTok trend. Another student photocopied book covers, only to recycle them again. I felt like I had fallen into Kafka's absurd, trapped in a world where nothing made sense, but I had to keep going anyway, trapped in a loop of chaos.

By 6th June, I couldn't take the absurdity anymore. I called in sick. On the 7th, I did the same. By the 8th, I was on the floor, gasping for air, convinced the house was burning down around me. But it wasn't the house—it was me. On 9th June, I returned to work. The staffroom was silent as I filled out my “return to work” form. Nobody asked how I

was. I kept up the façade, sneaking away for “cry breaks” during lunch, silently letting the tears fall, no longer sure of whether I could hold it together.

The response of colleagues

My struggles were often misunderstood, partly because I couldn't fully grasp what I was feeling. I told my manager that I felt like I had to be someone else at work, and she replied, “*we all wear masks*,” so I thought it was normal and continued to wear mine. I confided in my mentor that the classroom was unbearable, and she advised me to rely on the behaviour system, which I was already using. In the midst of this, a kind colleague—who I will always remember—became my quiet refuge. She listened to me, acknowledged my interests, and accepted me as I was. Even though she didn't understand why I swayed, she told me it was cool. Most importantly, she took time to get to know me—even going out of her way to make me food I enjoyed, reassuring me that she didn't have any cats on her countertops. On my birthday, she gifted me giant earrings, a llama mug, and an octopus plush—and in that moment, I felt truly seen. Yet, as much as I cherished her kindness, it wasn't enough to keep me in school.

On the day I handed in my resignation, I requested immediate effect. I couldn't serve my notice period—I was too burnt out. They asked if I wanted garden leave, but I told them I didn't have a garden. I think they thought I was being sarcastic. I walked out of that school and danced circles in the rain, letting the drops fall onto my skin. For the first time in a long while, I walked home, basking in two hours of silence and simplicity, without the weight of expectations pressing on me.

Moving forward: understanding myself and the need for change

At 24, I went on to become a supply teacher, which I found liberating. There was no pressure to connect socially, as I was in a different school each day and didn't feel the need to build relationships with staff. It was a role that allowed me to focus solely on teaching. A few months later, I took a position as a higher-level teaching assistant at a lovely school, where I felt supported. The staff appreciated my methodical approach to lesson planning, and my line manager recognised my strength in creating structured schemes of work. As such, I was allowed quiet time periods

in a classroom to plan alone. This helped me regulate, and, thanks to my hyperfocus, the department completed their schemes of work, which usually took a year, in a couple of months. In this environment, my strengths were nurtured, and the positivity of my colleagues helped me to become more confident in my abilities. One colleague called me “the Queen of resources”, which quickly became my nickname, and I loved it. However, at the time, I was also completing an MA degree and began to feel somewhat overqualified for the role. During both positions, I often got asked why I quit teaching. While I used to answer, “I just couldn't hack it,” I now realise that I was never the problem.

Diagnosis of autism

At 26, after years of struggling to fit into various environments, I was identified as autistic. I had spent so much of my life feeling out of place—always trying to adapt, always failing to understand why the world felt so overwhelming, why my medication never seemed to work. With this information, I understood that my frequent panic attacks were meltdowns, culminating from an unpredictable, loud environment. The diagnosis was a revelation. It was like seeing the pieces of a puzzle fall into place—and the completed puzzle spelled autism.

I now realise that three specific areas made my first, and last, permanent teaching job especially difficult for me. These are explored below, along with simple accommodations that could have helped me thrive. Had these accommodations been available, I may still be in the classroom today.

Accommodations that would have helped Changes in routine and poor behaviour

As a teacher, I was frequently given last-minute cover assignments, which meant I was placed in unfamiliar classrooms with unfamiliar students. This disruption, which may be a minor inconvenience for non-autistic teachers, sent my entire day into chaos. Minimising last-minute cover assignments and ensuring more consistent routines would have been incredibly helpful in reducing my stress. Student behaviour was often unpredictable and unmanageable, especially when there was a lack of on-call support. Additional in-class assistance, such as a teaching assistant, would have been invaluable in managing these situations and maintaining structure. Additionally, learning

walks, where senior staff could observe my lessons at any time, were especially distressing. The sudden presence of unfamiliar individuals disrupted my focus, making it difficult to gather my thoughts or explain information when students asked questions. Had I been given prior notice that someone would be observing a lesson, I would have felt more at ease.

Lunchtimes and planning periods

Lunchtimes, intended to be a break, were often distressing and intensified the pressures of the day. Had a quiet, sensory-friendly space been available for me to eat, it would have alleviated the social demands and offered much-needed respite. Flexible working arrangements would have made a meaningful difference, especially since I found it difficult to complete work during free periods—the school environment was simply not conducive to focus or self-regulation. Even in my second year, with a classroom of my own, I would spend the first thirty minutes adjusting the lights in search of a tolerable brightness, opening and closing windows as my body temperature fluctuated, and repeatedly standing to regulate after my chair spun unpredictably. The walls were a dull grey when I needed colour; the air wore lingering perfumes and aftershaves that unsettled me long after students had gone. By the time I had made the environment bearable, my planning time would be over, leaving me with no choice but to take work home. At home, where the space was already tailored to my needs, I could work productively and without distraction—had I been allowed to work from home, I believe it would have spared me from unnecessary sensory overload and helped me maintain a healthier work-life balance.

Expectations and shared understanding

Alongside the arbitrary social expectations during lunchtimes, I struggled to respond to feedback in ways deemed socially acceptable. When managers told us, “You might want to do X,” I interpreted it as a suggestion, presenting a choice. So, when weeks later I was asked why I hadn’t completed the task, I responded, “You said I might want to do this, but I didn’t want to.” To them, my response likely came across as sarcastic. My attempts to understand the reasoning behind decisions or to offer an explanation often seemed confrontational. For instance, when the school mandated the use of mini whiteboards, I simply asked, “Why do we need them?” To some, this likely felt

like an unnecessary challenge, especially considering my background. With a first-class degree from a top university, I probably appeared arrogant, as though I were questioning their practices to undermine them.

Similarly, when changes were made to the behaviour policy and managers sought our feedback, I assumed candid responses were encouraged, so I bluntly stated that I didn’t think it would work—a comment that was met with frowns. My facial expressions often betrayed my true feelings, particularly on topics like data or learning walks, which were never my passion. I would sigh, fidget, or doodle to stay focused, but to others, this likely appeared as disengagement. The truth was, I was trying my hardest to connect, but I often missed the unspoken social cues others navigated with ease. Had staff taken the time to ask why I sought answers to certain questions, rather than assuming I was being rude or sarcastic, I would have felt more comfortable sharing my ideas. Instead, I learned to sit quietly, which ultimately was a loss.

Concluding comments

While the challenges I’ve highlighted may resonate with other autistic teachers, it’s crucial to remember that autism is not monolithic. As such, school leaders must work closely with their staff to identify not just their challenges, but also their strengths. Though I sometimes feel guilty for leaving the profession and miss my students dearly, I had to confront the reality that I needed a calmer environment which allowed flexible working.

Now, at 27, I sit quietly at home, away from the classroom noise, working on my PhD thesis. I’m learning to pace myself, embracing the slow, deliberate process of writing without the pressure of constant performance. As I write, I think of others like me—those who have struggled to fit into neurotypical spaces. I’m carving a path for those who feel misplaced, showing them—and the world—that we belong. And though I’m no longer in a classroom, I continue to teach.

References

Wood, A and Happe, F (2023) Sensory challenges and the impact on the professional experiences of autistic teachers *Autism Research*, 16(2), 123–137.