

Staff experiences in learning ATLASS in a special school setting in Denmark: a qualitative analysis

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Editorial comment

In this paper, the authors gain the views of school staff who followed a seven day ATLASS programme. This is an approach developed by Andrew McDonnell, a Clinical Psychologist and Michael McCreddie, a Health Psychologist, at Studio 3 in the UK. When staff come to autism for the first time, they often want to know how best to deal with behaviours they find challenging. The ATLASS approach seeks to enable staff to understand their own stress levels and the impact of this on the people they work alongside in addition to the causes and effects of stress in autism. Three themes emerged from staff interviews which were personal growth, professional growth and a change in school culture. The findings suggest that learning the ATLASS framework had a significant and positive impact on the staff in terms of recognising the function of their own stress and in gaining a better understanding of the children's response to situations which in turn led to changes in staff behaviour and interventions. It would be useful to do a follow up to ascertain whether the incidence of behaviours that caused concern at the school reduces over time as a result.

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Introduction

Research that has explored the consequences of stress in adults who care for autistic children and incidences of challenging behaviour (CB) has been scarce and yielded inconsistent findings (Lovell, Moss and Wetherell, 2011; McCreddie, 2013). Some research suggests that CB might be strongly linked to negative emotional reactions in caregivers, such as stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, and helplessness, and that it is of critical importance to understand the

emotional impact on staff who care for these children (Butrimaviciute and Grieve, 2013; Lovell and Wetherell, 2016). Carer stress has been identified as a critical variable in the development of CB (McDonnell et al, 2007; Michell and Hauser-Cram 2009; Richmond et al 2009) and research suggests that further studies should assess whether improving the caregivers' psychological wellbeing may lead to a reduction in CB (Lovell and Wetherell, 2016).

What is ATLASS?

ATLASS is a programme which aims to provide a framework for understanding the role of stress in special education. It is designed for staff to recognise the role of stress in their own and others' behaviour and to adapt their practice accordingly. The programme was developed by Studio 3, an organisation based in the UK, in response to the growing awareness of the role that stress plays in the onset and maintenance of CB (McDonnell et al, 2014).

There are four core elements to the programme:

- 1 An understanding of the transactional nature of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and the biological mechanisms and how these relate to autism (Goodwin et al, 2006)
- 2 The PERMA wellbeing model (Seligman, 2011) and CB
- 3 The low arousal approach that focuses on stress reduction and mindfulness (McDonnell et al, 2014; McDonnell, Waters and Jones, 2002; McDonnell, Reeves, Johnson and Lane, 1998)
- 4 Autism is understood from a developmental perspective

ATLASS aims to produce a stress support plan as an outcome. The purpose of the plan is to enable the participants to organise their practice, learning environments and interventions based on their own reflections. The intervention is not exclusively limited to working with the individual in isolation but also with those who support them. To date there have been few published outcome studies investigating the ATLASS programme.

Semi-structured interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview schedule was developed based on recommendations by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and included 13 open ended questions with optional prompts (see *Appendix 1* for these). A key question focused on the changes they had observed in themselves as a result of participating in ATLASS.

Participants and the setting

The study took place in a Danish school for children with additional needs. There were 85 pupils on roll ranging in age from 5 to 15 years. These children had autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other diagnoses. Class sizes ranged from eight to ten with four staff. Four key staff completed formal training in the ATLASS Autism and Stress programme. They had between 13 to 33 years' of teaching experience. They were a teacher, two consultants and a manager. The first author was a consultant also working at the school. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identity (see *Table 1*).

Table 1: Name, age and role of the four participants

Name	Role	Age in years
Thomas	Teacher	38
John	Consultant	51
Peter	Consultant	60
Anne	Manager	45

The interviews were carried out in the school.

Key questions

The following questions guided the inquiry:

- How does the ATLASS framework affect their perception of situations they face in their day to day lives?
- How does ATLASS affect their own experiences in terms of emotion and cognition?
- Has learning ATLASS changed the way they make sense of their personal and social world?
- How does ATLASS change their perceptions of the emotions and thinking in others?
- How are these experiences reflected in their practice?

The ATLASS course

All the participants took part in a 7 day ATLASS course. Each day had a different learning outcome. Day 1 revolved around theories of positive psychology, well-being and Low Arousal. On Day 2, the course focused on the developmental differences in autism. Day 3 was about sensing and perceiving and concepts related to attention. Day 4 enabled participants to define stress and the role of appraisal, and Day 5 was about coping and being able to separate coping from stress responses. There were two follow-up days, where the concepts and stages of grief and motivational interviewing were examined, and where all attendants worked through a stress reduction plan together with a staff member from Studio 3.

The findings

Three themes emerged from the interview data; personal growth, professional growth and changing school culture. These themes are discussed below.

Personal growth

Along with a change of attitude and increased self awareness, all participants reported that they were open to new ways of thinking (eg being aware and observant of bodily sensations, emotions and thoughts within themselves).

Peter said:

"I think the ATLASS programme has been very positive for my way of thinking because the aspect of wellbeing is much more present and seems of greater relevance than it has been to me before. So in that respect it has made a good impact."

Anne commented:

"I think I have become more aware of my own ways of coping, with my own reactions and what stresses me". I have experienced a couple of situations where I stopped myself and thought, is this a healthy way of coping or should I do something else than I usually do."

She also mentioned ways in which she could reduce her stress. She said:

"As a manager you have to take control and be able to help in lot of different situations. So I am becoming more aware and I am taking breaks... I go for a walk or just take a break from the computer and go out."

John explained how ATLASS had helped him seek help in very difficult situations. He said that before, when he had been very stressed about something, he tended to shut down. He said:

"Now when things get really tough then I know, I am more aware of that now, that I should still open up and ask for help, I should not have just tried to cope with it myself."

Professional growth

The participants expressed a deeper understanding and acceptance of children with autism as well as their own role as professionals as a result of the ATLASS course. The framework made it easier for Thomas to make sense of the experiences of autistic children. He said:

"I have become more aware of...the things I can say that can be interpreted in so many different ways. So instead of just repeating what I just said I am a bit better at waiting a second and trying to figure out what the child thought I said. Then I try to say it in a different way."

"I am not going to say that I was unreflective before, but reflected less I think."

Thomas now describes 'flexibility' as a new professional characteristic, and acknowledges that he is now better able to explore the child's perspective.

All of the participants reported an increased confidence in their work as they were better able to explain themselves to colleagues, and made decisions based on the evidence behind ATLASS.

Change in school culture and practice

All participants reported an increased understanding of autism as well as the overall challenges of children living with autism. The concepts that are most frequently used in this context revolved around the neurobiology of stress, sensory differences and a greater awareness of stress responses and coping. Some of the changes in attitude that were mentioned were a sense of compassion towards children with autism, and an increased curiosity towards exploring things from their point of view.

Thomas said:

“Viewing their behaviour more like a symptom of stress instead of just behaviour, I think has changed for me.”

Feeling unable to cope or having difficulties in adapting their responses to the child seemed to characterise the participants' work life in some situations in the past. Anne explained:

“I think I felt my stress levels go up in situations where the student would not do what I had planned, but I did not think to myself that I was stressed or that I should do something else, I just felt it.”

Now she is more able to realise the effect that feeling stressed has on her decision making and can change her response and not feel so helpless.

The ATLASS framework created new dilemmas for the staff. Thomas explained he has found it hard when he has to choose between teaching the curriculum and letting the children jump on the trampoline to reduce their stress. He feels pressure to work on academic tasks and for them to make progress and it is hard to appreciate that taking time out might actually benefit their ability to learn.

ATLASS helped the participants to recognise the limitations of traditional classroom learning, and they now prefer to integrate health approaches as a supplement. John is now able to select more non confrontational strategies that emphasise the transactional nature of stress between him and the child and to cope differently.

He said:

“I have new ways of coping as well. Just more kind of like, ‘let go’... let him run, nobody will die. Let it go let us just take a step back. I sometimes did that before, but I am more secure now.”

Thomas has begun to encourage more students to be physically active during their time in school. He said:

“I have a boy now who likes to jump on his trampoline a lot. Clearly it makes him happy when he has jumped on this trampoline, but it is not exactly school work when he is jumping. I think before, I would have been much more impatient with him. I would not have had the focus on his wellbeing in the same way. I would not be able to see the benefits that he gets from this jumping. I would have interpreted it as a distraction maybe”.

Concluding comments

This small scale study suggests that learning the ATLASS framework had a positive impact on the staff and helped them to better understand the children's responses to situations. Findings suggest that learning about autism through the ATLASS programme has helped facilitate the participants' personal and professional growth and had a number of positive effects on practice. Learning ATLASS has changed the way participants make sense of their own emotions and responses and those of the children. They reported increased empathy, increased confidence, increased self awareness and self compassion.

Being able to understand the children's struggle is likely to impact the participants' ability to cope with children's stress in more appropriate ways and to use less confrontational approaches. This is consistent with literature linking psycho-behavioural interventions to reduce CB with improved psychological functioning in staff (Lovell and Wetherell, 2016). This is also consistent with literature highlighting the practitioner's ability to 'tune in' to the experiences of people with autism in order to create the conditions where the individual can cope (Jones and Hurley, 2014). Therefore, these

findings suggest that ATLASS reflects recognised good classroom practice since this increased dynamic emotional sensitivity in their turn makes more positive responses in children (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; McDonnell et al 2014). The holistic framework in ATLASS reduces the use of inadequate strategies which can lead to negative emotions and stress in staff working in special education.

It is worth noting, that integrating and understanding the concepts of ATLASS is an ongoing process, where participants are trying to fully comprehend the different concepts within the framework to properly deal with the many complex dilemmas that arise in their field of work. These include the neurophysiology of stress, the transactional nature of stress, sensory and perceptual differences in autism, coping mechanisms, non confrontational approaches, positive psychology, and concepts of wellbeing and mindfulness. On a conscious level, participants report on positive changes in their experience of both self and others. Learning ATLASS has changed or strengthened their ability to ascertain the needs of autistic children and alter their practice.

This study suggests that it is advisable for staff to learn about all the root causes of stress in autism. Understanding and identifying stress responses in themselves and the children enables more appropriate and effective actions to be taken.

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview questions

The experience of ATLASS

1. What has changed in you since participation in the ATLASS class?

Knowledge

2. What is your experience of approaches used with children with autism?
3. Could you describe how you felt about using these approaches? (Prompt: stressed, satisfied, unaware)
4. Were you aware of the child's level of stress when using these approaches?
(Prompt: if you were aware can you provide details of what you observed and thought?)
5. Were you aware of your own stress level when using these approaches?
(Prompt: If you were stressed what did you observe in yourself? What were your thoughts?)

Roles

6. How would you describe yourself as ateacher?
7. Has having learned about this programme changed how you see yourself?
(Prompt: if YES can you elaborate?)
8. How do you now consider your practice before you participated in ATLASS?
9. How do you think other colleagues see you now?

Coping

10. What does the term stress now mean to you? How would you describe it to someone else?
11. How much do you think about your own stress?
12. On a day to day basis how do you cope with stress now?
(Prompt: can you describe the coping strategies you now use?)
13. How do you now think about the future and how you will manage situations?