# Contemplating teacher talk through a critical autism studies lens

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## Abstract

This chapter begins with a digital story made by Nick Hodge as part of the Re•Storying Autism in Education project led by Patty Douglas. Re•Storying makes space for autistic people and their supporters to produce short first-person multimedia videos about autism and education. These offer new ways of knowing, and trouble, challenge, disrupt and reform the dominant cultural scripts of autism such as autism as biomedical disorder, brain difference and the insidious child stealer (Douglas et al. 2018). Hodge’s digital story invites us to reflect on and problematise everyday examples of teacher talk used about and around children in class. Critical Autism Studies is employed as a methodological tool to analyse how in classroom chatter the apparently mundane and ordinary in fact conceal and reproduce dominant disabling discourses that deny autistic children personhood and position them as other and problem. Statements, such as 'careful she's a biter', 'see if you can spot the autistic ones' and ' he's one of our special needs' swirl around children and then land and may be absorbed. The danger is they may become internalised as the structures of who children come to think they are and form the boundaries of who they may come to be. We put out a request on Twitter for examples of teacher talk that autistic people have born witness to having experienced and which they feel harmed their sense of who they are. We employ CAS to root out and come to know the disabling structures that permit and sustain such teacher talk. In applying CAS to classroom practice in this way we extend its reach beyond the theoretical to propose new ways of talking to and about children in class that validate and empower rather than reduce and deny.

Keywords: critical autism studies, multimedia storytelling, teacher talk

## Introduction

The starting point for this chapter is a short film created[[4]](#endnote-1) within a storytelling workshop as part of the *Re•Storying Autism in Education* project.[[5]](#endnote-2) The film invites the viewer to reflect on and problematise examples of everyday teacher[[6]](#endnote-3) talk used about and around autistic children in class: the sort of talk that autistic people later report experiencing as wounding and disabling. To support us in identifying these words, understanding their effects and theorising why they might occur we[[7]](#endnote-4) employ Critical Autism Studies (CAS) as a methodological tool of analysis. In doing so we seek to root out and identify how in classroom chatter the apparently mundane and ordinary conceal and reproduce dominant disabling discourses that deny autistic children personhood and position them as Other and problem. In applying CAS to classroom practice in this way we hope to extend its reach beyond the theoretical to propose new ways of talking to and about children in class that validate and empower rather than reduce and deny. The chapter begins by introducing the *Re•Storying Autism in Education* project. We then describe the film made about teacher talk and reflect on the motivations and reasoning behind its construction. To help us with understanding the extent, nature and effects of words that wound in school we put out a request on Twitter for examples of these from autistic people. In spite of us expecting these to be challenging to read we were still shocked by how destructive and devastating some of the comments are that autistic pupils hear said about them. In the chapter we capture these microaggressions before considering the disabling discourses and theoretical constructs that might be in play which permit and leave largely unchallenged such attacks on personhood.

## The Re•Storying Autism in Education Project

*Re•Storying Autism in Education* is an international multimedia storytelling project led by Patty Douglas that brings together autistic people, family members, educators, practitioners and artists (these are not mutually exclusive categories) in storytelling workshops to make short first-person films about their/our experiences of school. The aim of the project is to co-create a proliferation of understandings of autism outside the dominant biomedical one; intervene in deficit understandings of autism as disorder in education; and consider implications for inclusive practice by centering the previously excluded perspectives of autistic people and their/our supporters (Douglas et al. 2019). Thirty-four films have been made so far on the project by seventeen people who have attracted or claimed the label of autism and/or who identify as autistic (hereafter ‘autistic persons’) and seventeen people who work with and care about autistic people including family members, practitioners and educators (www.restoryingautism.com). Three workshops have been held in Toronto, Canada; one has been held online post-COVID 19 with participants in Manitoba, Canada; and one more is currently planned online in spring 2021 with collaborators in Sheffield, England. The *Re•Storying Autism* project is an intellectual and creative collaboration with our affiliate, the Re•Vision: Centre for Art and Social Justice, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, a research creation centre founded and directed by Carla Rice that explores the power of the arts to transform stereotypes of embodied difference and advance social inclusion in health care, education and the arts (Douglas et al. 2019; Rice et al. 2015; Rice et al. 2016). The aim of the *Re•Storying Autism* project is an explicitly social justice one. Films made on the project often push back against dominant biomedical assumptions about the normative human as nondisabled and the ‘critical exigence’ (Yergeau 2018) to remedy or ‘fix’ different bodies and minds before they are thought to be educable (Douglas et al. 2019). The significance of the project is its commitment to justice-facing approaches, including critical autism studies and participatory autism research (Davidson & Orsini 2013; Fletcher-Watson et al. 2019; Milton 2014; Milton et al. 2019; Runswick-Cole et al. 2016; Waltz 2014; Woods et al. 2018; Yergeau 2018) with the potential to enable better outcomes in education and research with and for autistic people.

Films created in *Re•Storying Autism* workshops are short first-person videos that use multimedia to bring into being new understandings of autism, self and other, and push back against exclusionary systems (Douglas et al. 2019; Rice & Mündel 2018). Our approach is distinct from uses of multimedia in autism research with therapeutic aims (see for example Golan & Baron-Cohen 2006). Briefly, *Re•Storying* workshops bring together autistic and non-autistic people in 3-day in-person or 3-week online workshops to create short films about their/our experiences of school and knowledge of embodied difference. Workshops provide storytellers with access to computers, training in filmmaking software, cameras, photography support, story development and so on, with approximately one month of pre-workshop and post-workshop 1-1 contact to develop and complete stories and access technical and other support. Storytellers in *Re•Storying* workshops retain ownership of their films and are invited to participate in follow-up research and arts activities as co-researchers including, for example, a co-researcher collective, a day-long post-workshop screening event to begin the work of film analysis, co-authorship on journal articles and chapters like this one, professional development initiatives with educators, disability arts film festivals and academic conference presentations using their/our films. Members of the research team wish to transform deficit narratives and change practice through engagement with the films so that autistic people feel more enabled and valued within educational and other services as these develop their understanding of autistic experience.

In a recent *Re•Storying Autism* workshop held in Toronto in November 2019, the idea for this chapter emerged after Nick Hodge, a researcher on the project and former teacher in England made a short film about his experience of teacher talk he overheard in schools about autistic students. The film sparked a conversation with members of the storytelling workshop and research team, who resonated with Hodge’s experience of overhearing troubling negative comments as part of everyday life in schools. One autistic participant reported the viewing of the film as a healing experience: for him the film represents an acknowledgement that it is not right to speak of children and young people in this way. This participant had lived in silence for many years with the hurt such words had caused him. Through such discussion we realised that we wanted to explore further why and how this kind of mundane, yet extraordinary talk can occur, along with how it may impact how autistic people come to view them/ourselves. We begin this consideration with a description of Hodge’s film.

## So That’s Who I Am: A Short Film

 'Careful she's a biter’; 'He's one of our special needs'; 'He's just an attention seeker. Ignore him'.

These are some of the ways in which we have heard autistic and other disabled children conceptualised and referred to by educators over the years. This is the everyday teacher talk that is used by educators in the presence of children without any apparent awareness of how such comments can have lifelong effects on the young people who hear and absorb them. Nor do educators always reflect upon how frequently children might hear such things said about them and the potential cumulative effects of this drip-feed of negativity on how they come to know and view themselves. Heard often enough, these remarks may come to form how autistic people understand and represent themselves. 'She's a biter' becomes' I'm a biter'; 'I'm a special need'; 'I'm just an attention seeker' and so on. Currently very little is known through research about the outcomes for children when they come to know themselves in these ways. Some autistic people may absorb these representations of themselves uncritically, accepting that authority figures possess specialist knowledge that empowers them to know and assert how children are. Some however may reject these characterisations, relying more on their own evaluation of themselves to decide who and how they are. Others may just be made troubled by these remarks and remain so, repeatedly questioning themselves for many years over what exactly might have been meant by the comment, why it was made and what there was/is about themselves that made someone think and say that about them. Autistic people may find ways to resist the effects of the comments but often at the cost of expending lifelong energy to do so. Into whichever category we fall, for all of us the words that wound will affect us in some disabling ways.

Although he does not identify as autistic, Nick finds himself continuing to dwell on things that educators said about him as a child that still disturb and frustrate him as an adult. One seemingly harmless everyday example occurred when Nick was 8 years old. His class teacher looked at Nick's emergent writing and declared, 'Your writing looks like a spider walked across your page'. The class teacher may not have intended harm through this comment; she may even have meant it to be amusing. But 50 years later Nick still remembers it each time that he writes and experiences again the shame that he felt at the time. Nick still apologises for his handwriting to whomever is receiving the script. It feels to Nick like a lifetime of trying to make sense of and reduce the effects of a comment that the teacher might never have intended to be of particular significance.

Perhaps because of his own experiences of words that wound, scab over but sometimes never fully heal when Nick became a teacher of autistic children he remained alert to the ways in which educators talked about and to children that Nick felt were not supportive to enabling development of a positive sense of self in young people. Children with a medical diagnosis are often subject to scrutiny by a range of services and various practitioners visit classrooms to observe and invariably discuss pupils. Teaching staff in classrooms rarely have opportunity to be released from the room so find themselves compelled to talk about their pupils even whilst they are sharing the same space. Nick often challenged and debated with colleagues over these concerns. Often when teachers heard their words repeated, they were surprised by what they had said and had not reflected, until that point, on how their words might be received by children (Hodge & Runswick-Cole 2018). Colleagues would respond with assertions such as 'she wouldn't even know I was talking about her', 'he's an autistic - he's not paying attention to what I say', 'she's disabled, she won't remember it tomorrow'. Through the act of being assigned to a medical category such as autistic, ADHD, Fragile X or learning disabled, children were then denied the right to be recognised as fully sentient beings who paid attention to and came to know themselves partly through how others perceived them. In some way the category seemed to liberate educators from needing to self-monitor what they thought about pupils and how they conveyed this to them through the words that they used about, around and to children.

Curiosity and concern about these practices never left Nick and so he decided to explore this within his story for the *Re•Storying Autism* Project. In this representation Nick captures some of the expressions that he remembers using himself as a teacher and that other educators used around him. The story begins with a classroom of children. As they appear to be distracted through activity it is not immediately apparent who remains alert to what is being said around them. In Nick's story the negative words said about children swirl around them, phrase upon phrase absorbed at least to some extent, however much children may try to resist them. As our examples below from autistic adults demonstrate, these words then set to work, potentially laying the foundations for disturbed well-being and the formation of a troubled sense of self for many years to come (Masten & Barnes 2018). Words that wound have been argued to contribute to anxiety and depression in later life (Isaacs & Kilham 2017). As it is estimated that 50% of autistic adults experience ongoing significant anxiety and/or depression this is a matter of real concern (White et al. 2018). We wanted therefore through the film and this chapter to expose and critique what often appear to be only mundane, everyday non-reflective uses of language. To help identify what was taking place in these exchanges, how they might be operating to marginalise, exclude and disable and why they might occur we turned to Critical Autism Studies to provide a critical framework.

## Critical Autism Studies as a Methodological Tool

Critical autism studies grounds the *Re•Storying Autism* project and our analysis of teacher talk as disability microaggressions in this chapter. The initial impetus for the *Re•Storying* project came out of Patty’s troubling encounters with disablism and violence toward autistic ‘difference’ within education systems as the mother of a son who attracted the label of autism, a special education teacher and a person who lives with neurodivergence and invisible disability. Patty wanted to build a project to challenge problem-saturated understandings of autism in education and create space to bring into the world new representations of autism and inclusive practices that center the perspectives and experiences of autistic people and their/our supporters (Douglas et al. 2019). On the *Re•Storying* project, this means our methodology is participatory; we take up calls by autistic scholars, activists and critical allies for autistic voices to be at the centre of autism research (Davidson & Orsini 2013; Fletcher-Watson et al. 2019; Milton 2014; Milton et al 2019; Runswick-Cole et al. 2016; Woods et al. 2018; Woods & Waldock 2020). We do this by prioritizing mentorship of and by autistic researchers; democratic and inclusive leadership; employment of autistic and disabled people; and co-authorship. We also organise a co-researcher collective, a group of autistic co-researchers, artists, activists and critical allies directing research priorities on the project as well as autistic-led space, arts initiatives and representation from Black, trans, women-identified, Indigenous and other autistic communities excluded from diagnosis, services and conventional autism research.

For this chapter, we employ Critical Autism Studies as a methodological tool to challenge the ableism and exclusions of conventional autism research (Fletcher-Watson et al. 2019; Milton 2014; Milton et al. 2019; Woods et al. 2018; Yergeau 2018). After autistic participants in the storytelling workshop responded to Nick’s video by recalling experiences of negative teacher talk of their own, we surveyed a wider group of autistic people to learn if they, too, recalled examples of teacher talk that wounded them in some way. On April 21st, 2020 we posted the following tweet[[8]](#endnote-5) on the *Re•Storying Autism* twitter account @ReStorying:

We are asking autistic people to share in this thread examples of things you heard school staff say about you that wounded you in some way. Some of these will be used as examples in a chapter about “teacher talk” in a book being edited by @milton\_damian & @sarasiobhan.

To analyse responses to our tweet about talk by school staff that wounds, we draw methodologically on the elements put forward by Davidson and Orsini (2013) about critical autism studies in *Worlds of Autism* as articulated by Mitzi Waltz (2014) in her review of the book. Waltz summarises Davidson and Orsini, asserting that the ‘criticality’ in critical autism studies ‘comes from investigating power dynamics that operate in discourses around autism, questioning deficit-based definitions of autism, and being willing to consider the ways in which biology and culture intersect to produce “disability”’ (Waltz 2014, p. 1337). In this chapter, we share Nick’s story and analyse tweets to interrogate neuro-normative and ableist power dynamics—disability microaggressions—that operate in educational discourse to identify and flush out deficit-based understandings of autism. In so doing, we also theorise about how such talk, which interferes with autistic people’s sense of self and well-being, can be possible at all.

Critical Autism Studies directs us to understand disability as co-constituted by the intertwining of ‘different’ bodies and culture. This means we do not ‘fix’ the meaning of autism in a biology/culture binary, whether as a deficit-based disorder in biomedicine and psychology or as a positive brain-based difference as it appears in some versions of neurodiversity discourse (Runswick-Cole et al. 2017). Rather, we hold open the meaning of autism in our approach and orient to embodiment through new materialist ontology—an anti-essentialist processual and relational approach. This places at the center of our Critical Autism Studies methodology the inextricable entanglement of ‘different’ autistic bodies and world, between knowledge/power, discourse, material realities, affect, objects and stubborn bodies that ‘push back’ against normative expectations (Douglas et al. 2019). This is an ontology that understands body and world as in a constant relation of becoming, rather than as settled matters. This is not to deny the reality of ‘different’ bodies or disablism and neuro-normativity, but rather to recognize the serious disabling effects of how bodies/minds and world are entangled in everyday talk, as witnessed in this chapter in examples of the long-term effects of teacher talk. More, it is to assert that paying attention to autism as a material-discursive entanglement offers a methodological beginning point from which new possibilities for a more just world might emerge (Douglas et al. 2019). This is because such an approach embraces autism and embodied difference as valid and valuable ways of being that are not in need of professional remedy but instead, are fully human ways of being. Our approach thus combines a Critical Autism Studies critique of power/knowledge and autism discourse with a disability studies politic of possibility around ‘different’ bodies (Douglas et al. 2019; Rice et al. 2016). In doing so we seek to identify, interrogate and counter deficit practices, as well as trouble teacher talk and understandings that can produce devastating material and discursive effects for autistic pupils. Reductionist and disabling everyday attacks on personhood are sometimes referred to within critical disability studies literature as ‘microaggressions’ (Keller & Galgay 2010). It is the nature and operation of microaggression that we now expose and trouble within the making of the film and the writing of this chapter.

## Microaggressions in practice

The microaggressions that Nick captured within his film were those remembered from his own experience as a teacher in schools. As shared above, when we shared the film with other practitioners, autistic people and family members at the storytelling workshop, some people reported either having heard educators talk about autistic children in these ways and/or having been talked about. This inspired us to try and capture some of these experiences from across the autistic and autism communities[[9]](#endnote-6). We sought approval therefore from the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee to put out the call via twitter for autistic people to share with us examples of educator talk that had wounded them in some way.

Some debate occurred within the pursuant twitter discussion about how it might not be experienced as enabling for autistic people and practitioners for a book chapter to be developed around a 'negative' focus of talk that wounds. One contributor suggested that it might be more helpful to balance this with some examples of positive practice. We recognise that these comments were motivated by concern for the well-being of the autistic people and/or the practitioners who might read the tweets and/or the chapter. However, we wanted in this instance to maintain the focus on the words that wound in the hope that, like in the earlier example of the workshop member, the naming of these words and the damage that they do might be a healing process for some readers. Autistic children are socialised like all others into ableist and normative cultural understandings that position them as odd, abnormal, challenging and deviant; as being in need of intervention, treatment or even cure. Autistic people are observed by, attend meetings with, and hear themselves discussed by an extensive array of health, education and social care practitioners. These practitioners, through their qualifications and accepted status, speak about the nature and value of children with a perceived authority (Mallett & Runswick-Cole 2014; Sarrett 2016). Bombarded with these daily representations of themselves as being at fault, autistic children, like other disabled people, often consciously or unconsciously take on responsibility for any disruptions of fit between how they are and the environments in which they find themselves (Thomas 1999; Williams et al. 2018). Autistic people have told us in our discussions on twitter that because of this when they heard what was said it made them feel upset but they did not perceive of themselves as having the power or means to challenge it. Some people find ways to rationalise and resist these harms but for others the words seem to sit resentfully with their recipients and trouble them throughout their lives. Some autistic viewers of the film at the storytelling workshop informed us that hearing others now critiquing these statements and revealing them as the illegitimate practices of ableism and normalcy supports them with exercising agency over the words that have wounded them. Bringing the comments into debate helped these autistic people towards accepting their own evaluation of themselves as a more legitimate representation of who they are rather than how they have heard others speak of them.

Some of the authors of this chapter used to be teachers in schools. It is not our intention or desire to disparage the practice of education or to demean and vilify the actions of well-intended educators. Rather we have always seen reflective practice as a critical contributor to our own development as practitioners (Minott 2019; Schon 1991). In this analysis of educator talk we are not critiquing what educators say but rather seeking to expose the systems and structures that permit and promote such ways of understanding and talking about autistic children. We are interested in what is revealed about how society understands and responds to autism and disability when educators use words that wound.

In response to our tweet we had 57 responses: 27 of these were from autistic people and 10 were from parents reporting on incidents that had happened to their children (these categories are not mutually exclusive – some respondents spoke of both their own experiences and those of their children). These were made by a total of 36 individual contributors. We have not treated the tweets as research data in the sense of them being critical contributors to a full and detailed examination of how autistic people experience words that wound in educator talk. Instead we have utilised them to illustrate the nature of such comments and the effects that they have on the children who hear them. In helping us to reflect upon these we have employed the 10 categories of disability microaggressions that were identified by Keller and Galgay (2010): denial of personal identity; denial of disability experience; denial of privacy; helplessness; secondary gain; spread effect; infantilisation; patronisation; second-class citizen and desexualisation. In our reflections we have also taken into account the two additional categories suggested by Olkin et al. (2019): symptoms not being believed by medical professionals[[10]](#endnote-7) and disability being discounted by others based on looking healthy and young. Within this reflective process we have attempted to highlight how ableism and normalcy appear to be operating to position autistic people as Other and lesser.

This examination of educator talk reveals how having a diagnosis of autism or being perceived as significantly 'different' in some way permits others to attack even one’s fundamental nature without any expectation or care for how this may make the recipient feel as a person. We did not consider that any of the 12 categories above sufficiently captured the unbridled ferocity and cruelty that some of the collaborators' tweets bore witness to. Therefore, we suggest here that a thirteenth category should be added to those suggested by Keller et al.: denial of personhood. This is perhaps a more overarching category and one which encompasses some of the 12 that have already been identified. We suggest though that it is more than a failure to recognise a person's identity; rather it is the denial of them as a person. Our autistic respondents and parents reported young children being referred to by educators in ways that dehumanised and reduced them. Children were referred to by educators as 'feral', a 'perfect pest', 'a liability', ‘special needs’ and objectified as unwelcome additional labour: 'look what I have to deal with'. Even though we were prepared for some distressing responses, the destructive savagery of a number of these still surprised us. Annie Sands, for example, wrote of how a teacher had shockingly told her son, 'the best thing you can do is get in a boat and sail out to sea, without oars or a sail'. Reading this made us wonder how a child would be able to maintain any positive sense of self when faced with an authoritative summary of their worth that asserts that the world would be better off if they were dead. A denial of disability experience takes place within this as the actions of children that gave rise to this educator talk were at times the result of impairment effects, part of the very embodiment of being autistic. These included challenges with controlling motor skills that led to a spilling of milk and a 7-year-old child unwittingly transgressing a social rule that had not yet been explicitly taught: looking in a bag without permission that was being held by a teacher.

Even where children's skills and abilities were recognised personhood could still be denied through what Keller and Galgay (2010) referred to as the 'spread effect'. Alex Adams for example was described by a teacher as an 'untapped resource' and derided for not exhibiting his intelligence within class discussion. Even less respectfully, JoJo was described as 'selfish' for 'refusing' to share the answers to questions that were directed to the class. Ableism is revealed therefore even within what the educators might have intended as positive or complimentary remarks: whilst recognising the individual ability of Alex and JoJo, the teachers reproduce the trope of the autistic savant whose talents should always be 'on tap' in the same way as one can retrieve information from a computer; regardless of what it might cost an individual to make a public contribution. Midbook Review reminded us too of the pressure that is put upon children when they then feel obliged to live up to this construction of themselves. For Midbook Review, performing being the 'smart' one became too challenging to maintain as they got older: 'I struggled as I got older and felt like I was failing at being me'.

Another of the categories identified by Keller and Galgay (2010) is the assumption of lack of ability; a downgrading or disregard of knowledge and skills simply because that person had been medically categorised in some way. Our respondents provided a number of illustrations of this. A parent, Josiejo, shared how an art teacher stated about her son, 'I'm not having someone like him in my class. I'm not here to teach colouring in'. This remark continues to trouble her son even though he is now aged 19. Within this one remark a child was reduced from person to category through being constructed as 'someone like him' i.e. as 'an autistic person'. He was homogenised into the single category of the mythical autistic who is 'like this' and so we must teach them 'like that'. In referring to this child in this way the teacher's talk reveals an ableist, reductionist understanding of autistic people as necessarily being limited in what they can do and achieve. In not recognising the child as an individual learner this teacher fails to identify and appreciate this person's capabilities and interests. Through such ableist acts autistic people are then denied opportunities to achieve (Hedley et al. 2017). Another example of this came from Chloe Farahar Âû who now has a PhD. Chloe was advised by a teacher that there was no point in her taking A levels[[11]](#endnote-8) as she was 'not capable of further education'. A school report for Damian Milton, who also has a PhD and is a University Academic, declared, ' I'm afraid that Damian is not very bright, and his lack of effort only compounds the problem'. Similarly, a teacher informed Connective, who now has a Master’s in Education, that 'she should go into clothes or fashion' as she was 'not the brainy type'. Even more starkly, Smurf was advised in the 11th grade[[12]](#endnote-9) by a creative writing teacher that she would 'never amount to anything' whilst JoJo aged 13 was similarly informed that she would never get anywhere because of her personality. Even when children demonstrate capability this is sometimes still denied by educators who frame it as cheating. Windy Malone's creative writing abilities, for example, were dismissed by a teacher as '(t)here’s no way you wrote that poem'. Connective's child was also charged unwarrantedly with cheating over his creative writing and Miche\_Marples told us that when her daughter self-reported in front of the class her test results of ten out of ten the teacher replied with 'well that can't be right, not for you'. Deficit is automatically assumed if a child does not demonstrate capabilities within expected norms. Alex Adams, for example, was told 'I used to think you were dumb because you never talked', making explicit the link often made by educators between nonspeaking autistic students and presumed lack of ability or intelligence (Yergeau 2018). These attitudes have very real potential to limit opportunities for autistic pupils to progress to university. Despite the fact that there are effective support systems in higher education for disabled students it is quite possible that autistic people miss out through lack of encouragement at school (Martin et al. 2019).

Behaviours and characteristics associated with autism such as reduced social verbal interaction with peers, emotional responses that are not always obvious to neurotypical others, issues with spatial awareness resulting in what others term as clumsiness and not readily recognising social rules unless these are made explicit were all constructed within educator talk as individual failings in either ability or attitude. This is perhaps a manifestation of a different kind of spread effect as some contributors would not have had a diagnosis of autism at the time the remarks were made. Ableism and Normalcy assume that all bodies are made and behave in the same way; that they all meet developmental norms (Campbell 2009; Davis 1995). In actuality this is a different kind of spread effect: the Ableism and Normalcy spread effect. For the undiagnosed autistic child, the ways in which they operate within the world go unnoticed and so remain misunderstood by educators. Absence of an official diagnosis does not protect autistic children from being positioned within a category of deficit. An Autistic Academic shared how when she was 12 or 13 a teacher through the use of one short phrase, 'shyness problem', constructed her as being both shy and as having a problem. Similarly, a parent, Abi Myers, revealed how she has been asked by a number of PE (Physical Education) teachers if English was her daughter's first language, presumably because her daughter did not interpret and respond to language within expected 'norms'. Lucy Stokes’ challenges with writing were not named as dyslexia so were defined as being 'slow at my work'. With reference to how their bodies operated within time and space, four contributors remembered being asked if there were on drugs. Damian Milton was 14 years old and did not know what this meant. Ross Henley still remembers that incident happening to him, aged 6, 48 years later and the lack of power to challenge the same accusation reduced Autistic student nurse to tears. Children are made individually responsible for breakdowns in social communication and understanding. They are expected to change the fundamentals of who they are as though being autistic is some sort of lifestyle choice. Aspie Jedi Lisa, for example, was told 'If you acted/dressed/talked like the other kids, they wouldn't bully you'. Smokey, on alerting a teacher that she was being bullied by peers was advised, 'if you weren't so weird they wouldn't notice you'. Joanne was held accountable for not demonstrating sufficient affect through expected modes: 'Smile- you won't crack your jaw'. School reports stated that 'Jorn could participate more in class' without recognition that Jorn Bettin did not know how to do this. For as Jorn states, 'we never received instructions on when and how to participate'. Similarly, for It’s not Schrödinger’s Autism their fine motor control dyspraxia was reinterpreted by an art teacher as a lack of effort that generated a burdensome bother: 'You’re not even trying, stop wasting my time'. Like Nick's handwriting experience which has stayed with him throughout life, this contributor was also told by a social studies teacher that their handwriting was 'disgusting' and so they too remain conscious of their writing and embarrassed over it in adulthood.

Ableism, in positioning disabled people as lesser and outside of 'normal', seems to remove the protection of respect and dignity that would typically be afforded fellow human beings. It is almost as though it provides an amnesty from typical social conventions in which we are expected to watch what we say and allows educators, and others, then to critique and define children within earshot and without filter. This corresponds with what Keller and Galgay (2010) categorised as 'denial of privacy'. Our autistic contributors gave examples of how they had been publicly humiliated by educators who attacked their ways of being in front of the class. Andy Jordyn (A.J.) Carlisle, for example, as a non-speaking 9-year-old child was hauled before their classmates who were then told ' You do not want to be friends with Andy, because they are retarded and will be a welfare bum when they grow up'. The hands of Ann Memmott PGC were beaten with a wooden ruler in front of everyone, Iain was slapped 3 times with a slipper and a teacher kept open a personal folder on Harriet Axbey during a lesson. In response to K's (knife symbol) selective mutism they were 'commanded' by a teacher to speak in front of the class. On apologising for being late to class after attending an assessment for autism, Chrissie Fiddle's teacher publicly announced, ' ah yes, sit down, you've been at your psychiatrist assessment haven't you'. n.v.b. experienced a traumatic incident in class that resulted in a 'meltdown' in their behaviour. Rather than recognising and responding empathically to n.v.b’s distress, the teacher responded to this by joining in with the laughter of classmates. ‘Challenging behaviour’ is disturbing term in common usage by educators. ‘Indicators of distress’ is a more accurate description, we suggest, as the expression ‘challenging behaviour’ is frequently applied in situations in which a child has become overwhelmed and upset.

It can be seen therefore that one tweet that called for examples of teacher talk that wounds and reduces revealed at play in our schools a whole range of microaggressions. Some of these are overtly aggressive and apparently intended to injure whilst others were more subtle disguised in humour or made carelessly without an appreciation of the lifelong harm that they might cause.

## Conclusion

Within this chapter we have employed a short film that was made within a *Re•Storying Autism in Education* workshop as a starting point for exposing and critiquing examples of teacher talk that are experienced by autistic people as wounding and disabling. In doing so we have advanced Critical Autism Studies as a methodology that directs us to reflect on what these examples of microaggressions within teacher talk might reveal about how autistic children and young people are framed, valued and responded to within our society. The tweets we received from autistic people and their allies who responded to the themes of the film reveal the nature and extent of the lifelong damage that can be caused through some of the comments that teachers make about children, either directly to them or within their vicinity. The things we hear said about us as children clearly play a part in constructing the adults that we become. The words of teachers carry a particular significance for many children because children are taught to conceive of teachers as bearers of knowledge and authority figures. When we talk to teachers after watching the film about these comments many tell us that they recognise these words as being part of classroom talk. Some teachers report having used them themselves as have some of the authors of this chapter during their times as teachers. Often this has been done with the intention of the comment being humourous rather than hurtful or just made carelessly without consideration for how a child might receive the words heard. The emotional effects of hearing these comments, as shared by our twitter contributors, illustrate however that humour is personal and is easily lost and/or distorted as it travels the space between communicators. Similarly, what might have been intended as a ‘throwaway’ comment by a teacher to a child continues to be ruminated over by our twitter contributors in their adult lives.

We have sought here to expose the mundane and everyday microaggressions that many autistic pupils experience through careless teacher talk within our schools. We appreciate that the recognition of these by teachers and the realisation of the potential effects of these on pupils may make this chapter difficult to read. However, we trust in the desire and capacity of teachers for reflective practice that can enrich and support their work. None of us are perfect in our craft; most of us learn about the nature and effect of microaggressions through committing them ourselves and then later coming to know and understand how children really experience them. The examples that autistic adults and their allies have shared with us demonstrate how important teacher talk is and how carefully it needs to be practised. Our analysis of the comments we received in response to our tweet provides a set of indicators of the ways in which, as teachers, we should take care of the words we use. The most important of these is that we should always remain alert as to how our words are received and processed by others. We need to become practised in recognising when our words wound and then seek to counter the effects of these. In monitoring our talk, we should seek to catch out those occasions when Ableism and Normalcy insidiously creep into our thoughts and speech. We must resist their desire to cast disabled children as Other, as permitted objects of speculation whom we can reduce through critique of their ways of being without concern for how our words might affect them.

As well as capturing the wounding effects of careless teacher talk the examples within this chapter also illustrate how autistic children and young people desire to hear themselves talked to and about: in ways that communicate recognition of, and value for, who they are and how they engage the world. They want the words they hear to reflect the positive aspects of their personalities, abilities and skills as well as appreciating the things that challenge them. We must therefore always respond to the challenge set us by Critical Autism Studies and Critical Disability Studies: to remain vigilant to the ways in which Ableism and Normalcy replicate themselves through our understandings of disability and the ways in which we communicate these. Here we have focused on talk but as one of our twitter contributors, Maura Campbell[[13]](#endnote-10), reminded us, as powerful as words is the stare:

The teacher, a stern woman of a certain age, folded her arms across her ample bosom and stared intently over the top of her thick-rimmed glasses. The reason for her evident irritation cowered before her – a painfully shy seven-year-old girl (Campbell 2017).

Looks of dismissal and disappointment can wound as deep as words .

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1. Sheffield Hallam University [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brandon University [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. London South Bank University [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To view this film, go to <https://vimeo.com/377570146> and enter the password ‘restorying’. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
5. https://restoryingautism.com/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
6. We use ‘teacher’ here as a term to represent all those who, in whatever role, support children and young people within education. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
7. We are a collective of academics some of whom identify as autistic and some who do not. Some are also parents of autistic people. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
8. <https://twitter.com/ReStorying/status/1252582659764748290> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
9. We adopt McGuire & Michalko’s (2011) definition of these terms here. The autism community generally refers to the parents and carers of autistic people and practitioners working in the field. The autistic community refers to autistic people. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
10. Olkin et al focused in particular on medical practitioners in their study. However here we have applied the concept to all practitioners who work within education. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
11. A levels in the UK are exams taken by pupils when they are aged around 18 years old. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
12. 11th grade in Canada is attended by pupils usually aged around 17-18 years old. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
13. <https://www.spectrumwomen.com/my-life/the-glass-of-milk-maura-campbell/> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)