

Antistasis 10(2): Introduction to the Issue
Patricia Peterson, Editor-in-Chief

This issue of *Antistasis* is dedicated to the many children and youth in our education systems with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the educators who mentor and encourage them, and the researchers who seek knowledge to better serve this population. The focus of this issue is *Reimagining Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Classroom: An Exploration of Promising Practices in Personalized Learning Approaches*. It is hoped that this issue will encourage discussion of the gifts and strengths inherent among individuals with ASD, and the impact of teaching practices on students' capacity for self-actualization and flourishing.

The response to this issue's Call for Papers has highlighted both the unique lived experiences of those on the spectrum, and the innovative educational approaches and perspectives that are making a difference in the lives of individuals and in our teaching and learning environments. Two of the issue's articles are authored by individuals who live and thrive within their personal experiences of Autism Spectrum Disorder, while others share research and experience in teaching students with ASD. The importance of hearing from each of these perspectives is paramount in our efforts to enhance the positive growth and development of individuals with ASD, and we are pleased to provide a forum for this essential conversation.

In choosing the theme for this issue, our editorial team shared stories of risk, challenge and, ultimately, *resiliency* as experienced by people with ASD and their families. While research is uncovering more and more essential information regarding ASD, there is a need for the dissemination of findings related to strength-based and personalized learning approaches. ASD programs, services and supports within school settings have too often focused *solely* on the identification of risk-need factors, and the delivery of associated intervention and support services. Traditionally, such approaches have emphasized problems or challenges and the approaches or interventions needed to remediate social deficits or behavioural concerns. However, emerging better practice research across health and educational domains asserts the importance of moving beyond a sole focus on deficits toward a more positive view of strengths, gifts and potential. This shift involves the recognition that a student's state of well-being is not only influenced by efforts to address problems and risk-need concerns, but also is impacted by the existence of positive factors present within individuals and their educational, social and familial settings that contribute to positive growth and development.

Adopting strength-focused approaches does not minimize the risks faced by students with ASD, either during their school years or throughout their experiences as adults. Clearly, many who live with ASD and/or related social challenges are at risk for isolation and mental health concerns across the lifespan. My oldest son, a successful and gifted small business owner with high functioning ASD, has overcome tremendous challenge to learn to function to the best of his ability in a society that, too often, has failed to understand him. To many who know and care for him, it appears that he has dealt with his personal challenges with great effectiveness. As his family, however, we are well aware of the trials he faced on a daily – sometimes hourly – basis as he navigated the school system during the 1980s and '90s. When my son was in his late

teen years, he shared with me a story that encapsulated his sense of the risks he might face as he entered adulthood. I asked him to recall the story for this issue, and he shared the following:

I read about a man in his 40's, brilliant at football analysis, who lived in total, self-imposed isolation. This guy could tell you anything you wanted to know about football or the players; he could go back for years. The article said if a guy sprained an ankle, he knew which ankle. He wrote for a professional football magazine, and was a color commentator for the NFL, although he always phoned in his comments – he never left his apartment. Although his work was widely respected in the sports world, few of his colleagues had spent social time with him or even met him face to face. He lived in a tiny apartment that was packed floor-to-ceiling with books and statistical manuals on football, and his cupboards contained only a few canned goods and some diet soft drinks. He was five feet, eight inches and less than 100 pounds when he died alone in that apartment at age 48 from malnutrition. Thousands of people respected his abilities, but he was friendless and alone.

In his teens, my son asked: “Mom, do you think he had autism too?” He saw himself in this story and feared this future. The idea of a solitary life holds little appeal for most people, and those with ASD and social challenges are no exception. However, they are too often torn between the emotional self-protection that working and living alone provides, and the need to be loved and accepted in broader social settings. Families, teachers, communities and peers must commit to fostering strengths and well-being, and the confidence that the future is not to be feared, but to be built – one step forward at a time, and on the individual’s own terms.

In this issue, our authors explore emerging approaches to strength-based education and the impact that such strategies have on learners on the autism spectrum. The first article by Teresia Waisman, Shelleyann Scott and Donald Scott presents an overview of a proposed doctoral research study with a focus on advocacy-oriented inclusive leadership, as well as ways to identify how university leaders, professional staff and instructors can support enhanced outcomes for autistic university students. As noted in the introduction to the article, the research is being conducted by “an autistic author, an author with a disability, and an author living and working with those of us with exceptionalities” (Waisman, Scott and Scott, 2020, p. 1), who have chosen to write in “identity-first language” (i.e., an *autistic author*, as opposed to an *author with autism*). According to the authors, this choice allows others to “perceive autism as an inherent and normal part of our identity” (p. 1). The proposed study seeks to provide direction to university leaders about the effectiveness of policy and practices designed to serve students with special needs, including those with what the authors term *Autism Spectrum Condition*.

This article is followed by a description of Josée Lebouthillier’s 2019-20 study that explored promising writing instruction practices for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a French-Immersion context. Adopting a case study approach, the writing progress of students in a Grade 7 FI class were documented as part of an ethnographic study. Dr. Lebouthillier posits that

despite a commonly held belief that students on the spectrum are not suitable for second-language instruction, careful planning and personalized approaches that draw upon the strengths and gifts of these students can lead to successful outcomes.

The third article presents Dotan Nitzberg's reflections on his experiences as a doctoral student and classical musician with high-functioning ASD. His journey through the Israeli education system, followed by post-secondary experiences in the United States and Canada provide insight into both systemic deficits and the power of emerging efforts to foster positive learning environments for students with ASD. This article highlights the need for music teachers to focus on the importance of individualized, experience-based and interactive learning for musicians with ASD, stressing that successful pedagogy "rises and falls upon the notion of compatibility" with student learning styles and preferences.

Beth Bourque's article explores promising practices for enhancing the preparedness of Educational Assistants in inclusive classrooms through a study that analyzed the perspectives of educators, school administrators, district staff and paraprofessionals. With Educational Assistants often carrying the responsibility for day-to-day learning and development for students with Autism, a reexamination of their role and preparedness for working with students on the spectrum is essential. Findings resulting from this study highlight implications related to training, supervision, planning and ongoing professional learning opportunities.

Shernel Justin explores the power of strength-based art education for students with ASD and other learning exceptionalities, drawing on her experiences as an educator in St. Lucia. This study examines the importance of providing an artistic platform for children and youth with ASD to encourage the development of strengths and passions that may be (as noted by the author) "lurking in their subconscious" through structured approaches to the identification of areas of interest. Ms. Justin analyses findings from the literature as well as transcripts from key informant interviews to arrive at a series of promising practice statements to guide educators in the delivery of arts-based education.

Finally, Dr. Jeff MacCormack shares insights resulting from his work in the field of socialization and play behaviours among children and youth with ASD. This unique perspective posits that we may not be meeting the needs of students with ASD through the delivery of programs that attempt to *normalize* socializations, but should instead "start designing programs that will make their lives *better*" (p. 3). Dr. MacCormack stresses the importance of reimagining support programming to better reflect the types of interventions that are actually needed, and think beyond our notion of what defines typical play and relational behaviours.

We encourage other authors with insights and promising educational practices to share their stories. *Antistasis* will continue to provide a forum for unique and personalized approaches to education in an ever-changing landscape. Our next issue (due in September-October 2020) will focus on *Education in the Time of Covid 19: Storying the Crisis*, with subsequent issues dedicated to *Fear in Education*, and additional topics of interest related to primary, secondary and post-secondary education.

Thank you for your continued support!
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