

How is the autistic student constructed in South Australian education?

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1. Background

- The purpose of this qualitative research is to examine through a critical lens, the dominant cultural representations of autism, and how these influence understanding and practices in the field of South Australian education. Social constructionism forms the epistemological and ontological lens to view the way discourses are constructed about autism.



2. Knowledge Gap

- The original contribution to the field is to investigate the economies of meaning and the relationship to power/knowledge within which the autistic student is constructed and represented in the field of education in South Australia.



3. Method

- Met twice with a focus group of 4 autistic adults.
- Semi-structured 60 minute interviews with 4 autistic high school students and 6 teachers.
- Photo elicitation was used in the semi-structured interviews using Photolanguage cards (Barton & Cooney, 2001).
- Text analysis of key policy documents.



4. Results

- There is a tension between the medical model and social model of disability, that impacts on the way that autism is represented in education policy and practice.
- The portrayal of autism in the media and pop culture reinforces stereotypes that in turn influence teachers' understandings of autistic students.
- Teachers reported that they were not confident or equipped to effectively teach and support autistic students when they finish university studies, and needed ongoing high-quality professional learning.



5. Recommendations

- Positive language and representations of autism co-produced between autistic people and education sectors needs to be reflected in policies and resources that are accessible for school staff, families and students..
- Pre-service teacher training requires deeper reference to effective teaching and support of autistic students.
- Teachers need access to ongoing high-quality professional learning and mentoring.



References:

1. Barton, K., and Cooney, J. (2001). *Photolanguage Australia, Third Edition*. Catholic Education Office, Melbourne



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