

Supporting autistic identity development at school: a collaborative approach to self-discovery camps in specialist education.

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WHY DOES IDENTITY MATTER?

Autistic students often face stigma and reduced autonomy. A strong and healthy sense of identity and self-advocacy can protect wellbeing. Aspect SES partnered with Social Science Translated (SST) to create their first Autism Self-Discovery Camp - a program helping children explore their autistic selves and communicate their needs in safe, affirming ways.

Co-creation led by SST - Included input from clinical, education, research, lived-experience, and older student perspectives.

What if schools were places to discover who you are, not hide it?



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WHAT WE DID:

16 students (ages 11–13) engaged deeply with lived-experience presenters and shared authentic self-portraits.

- Two-day immersive off-site co-created by Aspect SES & SST
- Grounded in strength-based, neuro-affirming practice
- Parent & staff preparation and in-class activities
- Education on Autism & Aspect autism schools
- Exploration of profiles and current supports
- “This is Me” creations, identity mapping and lived-experience sessions (from Aspect and SST staff)

Feedback gathered from students, parents, and staff through surveys, interviews, and observations.

How do we help autistic students see difference as strength?



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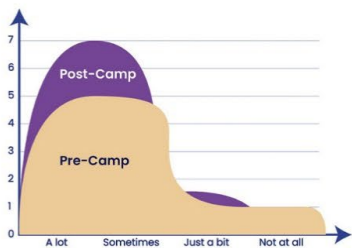
KEY OUTCOMES:

1. Identity Affirming Among Students

Embraced autistic identity – some for first time

- Decrease in students reporting negative views of autism
- Active curiosity and questions asked
- Some proudly affirmed "I'm Autistic" and included autism on their "This is Me" posters.

Student Responses: How much do you like Autism?



"Is it fun being an adult with autism?"

2. Lived-Experience Connection

Powerful connection (for both students and staff) with adult lived-experience presentations and Q&A.

- Fostered psychological safety.
- Embraced differences.
- Provided relatable role models.

Two students chose to stand-up to share their lived-experience in front of their peers and teachers.



Staff created the space for discovery

3. Staff Professional Growth

Strength in collaborating across-sectors – Clinical/therapeutic expertise walking alongside education professionals.

Meaningful changes in teaching practices:

- Greater comfort talking about autism with students.
- Deeper understanding of support tools like the Aspect five-point star.

“We’ve given our students an opportunity to discover more about themselves and discover more about their peers.”

4. Positive Ripple Effects

Impact seen beyond the 2 day event!

- Students: Referring to camp activities and requesting similar initiatives.
- Home: Camp sparked important autism conversations at home.
- School: Interest in embedding identity-focused approaches into school culture.

“I would like to do this every year at least”

“We have provided the teachers and staff an opportunity to recognize the importance of all these autism supports that we take for granted.”



“Too many neurodivergent children grow up feeling misunderstood. We’re changing that.”

NEXT STEPS

SST is creating practical tools to support child identity and self-advocacy. The Autism Self-Discovery Camp was a key step in shaping these resources. Soon, schools will be able to guide their students and staff on the same journey.

Interested in finding out more?
Contact us at connect@sst-institute.net



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