Title: An individualised model informed by student voice supporting best practice for nurturing autism strengths within an inclusive school environment

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Abstract

Creating inclusive schools which autistic students genuinely want to attend each day will encourage them to thrive. Implementing a strengths approach is key to making intentional change happen. We will unpack a strengths focussed framework termed Individualised Navigation (IN). This role renovation model grew out of student voice and school success stories. As the model conceptualises what teachers, parents and support staff already did that worked (best practice) it simply requires imitation to enact it. IN articulates roles and relational behaviours which were found to purposefully value autism strengths. The next step is to replicate this strengths focussed paradigm shift inside our schools.

Key words

Autism Strengths, Individualised Navigation (IN), Inclusion, Student Voice

Introduction (Literature Review)

School has the job of educating all young minds and striving for each child to reach their full potential (Government, 2018; United Nations, 2006). School can be a social jungle, filled with interactions, distractions and drama. Students with autism can be considered as neurodivergent and may possess cognitive aptitudes coupled with behavioural difficulties (Armstrong, 2012; Baron-cohen, 2000; Wood, 2021). Research can paint a bleak picture regarding school survival for those diagnosed with autism (Danker, Strnadová, & Cumming, 2019). Students may experience challenges related to social interaction and communication (Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman, & Hutman, 2013). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2022) summary of survey results on disability reported that there has been an increase in autism of 41.8% from 2018. The highest numbers of between 3 and 4% of the population fell within the school age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Australian Government, 2025). The ABS (2022) survey summary also reported that 68.9% experienced challenges socialising, communicating and learning. According to comprehensive research studies, the national autism strategy and government reports the school scene is not going well for individuals with autism (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Australian

Government, 2025; Saggers, 2023). Schools need strategies which help to ensure they are contextually suited to all learners, including ones who are neurologically diverse.

Inclusion may be an illusion if students enrolled in a school aren't present or engaged in learning due to extenuating circumstances. In the last two decades there has been an increase in the number of students with autism enrolled into regular (mainstream) schools (Roberts & Webster, 2022; White, McGarry, Williams, & Black, 2025). The actual number of these students attending school each day may be lower than this enrolment data shows. Research findings from several autism studies, chronicle disturbing issues like anxiety, bullying and high rates of school absence (Adams et al., 2025; Nordin, Palmgren, Lindbladh, Bölte, & Jonsson, 2024). School refusal for students with autism has been described in research as a prevalent problem by the parents who were interviewed on this topic (Adams, McLucas, Mitchelson, Simpson, & Dargue, 2022; Anderson, 2020). Students with autism may have lower school achievement if they are struggling to attend their school on a regular basis.

Disability and ability should be considered synonymously, rather than allowing one to dominate when configuring an autism identity (Kapp et al., 2013; Mottron, 2017). Avoiding the stereotyping of strengths by recognising the way abilities could change to weaknesses in different contexts is important (Cohen, Joseph, Levinson, Blacher, & Eisenhower, 2022; Cooper, Cooper, Russell, & Smith, 2021; Warren et al., 2021). When strengths become the focus and classes are conducive to them, autism traits deemed a weakness may indeed become an aptitude (Price, 2022). This view is evident in studies which discuss how educators could positively reframe the interests of students to increase achievement (Mottron, 2017; Winter-Messiers et al., 2007). Individualising inclusion and leveraging strengths by provisioning support to circumnavigate barriers could involve creating nurturing niches in schools (Armstrong, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Schools have complex ecosystems which could cultivate the abilities of neurodivergent students. Armstrong (2012) proposed that 'positive niche construction' needs to occur in schools so that the neurodivergent students might fit comfortably into them. The suggestion of school reform, where institutions are better suited to the learner's character traits and aptitudes, is not a new ideal (Asperger, 1944; Wing, 1981). A scoping review by White et al. (2023) evaluated the ingredients of different strengths-based approaches used in schools. This study found that guiding interactions in classrooms involving different factors (teachers, peers, setting) and personalising the curriculum and assessment by linking this to what the

student was good at, were critical factors for leveraging strengths (White et al., 2023). In a round table discussion on strengths-based approaches it was determined that context-based strengths approaches could help to turn the deficit paradigm around (Urbanowicz et al., 2019). A comprehensive white paper developed by the Autism Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) investigated how to remove educational barriers in Australian schools for students with autism (REBAS) (Saggers, 2023). The REBAS white paper (2023) stated that there was a growing need for individualised approaches to be designed, which were better suited to nurture the strengths of learners on the autism spectrum.

Aims and Significance of the Research

How to value autism strengths within the school context requires clarification as strengths may influence communication, social interaction and engagement. Inclusive education should foster the talents of all individuals. Autistic student's abilities may be over-shadowed by pervasive school challenges. Emotive teacher observations, educating many students with autism whose abilities appeared undervalued and overshadowed by school challenges was the catalyst for this empirical study. Structured educational approaches, incorporating strengths-based strategies, could help demystify the way forward. Affirming research demonstrates how autistic students may be successfully included in schools when their strengths are appreciated.

The qualitative study conducted in a Brisbane high school explored what 5 autistic students considered were their strengths and indicators of how they were using them to engage in learning. The research investigated barriers and facilitators affecting engagement and explored the perceptions of support staff, teachers and parents. Examination of artefacts, semi-structured interviews, class observations and staff conversations generated the rich data and fieldwork narratives. This study's goal was to listen to the stakeholders and be person-centred when searching for insights on autism strengths from within a school.

Appreciative Narrative Inquiry (ANI) Methodology

Bespoke hybrid appreciative narrative inquiry methodology, aligning with the positive research focus was implemented. The appreciative inquiry cycle of, discover, dream, design and destiny led to creation of an actionable model (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Inquiry-based methodologies, appreciative and narrative were joined and the architecture of an appreciative narrative inquiry (ANI) was built (Clandinin, 2013). Initial evaluation of potential methodologies occurred to determine their match with a positively framed school-

based investigation. Methodological decisions were informed by the aim of the research which was to investigate autism strengths. The school context, participants' social interactions and lived experiences were explored within the project parameters. The ANI project prioritised capturing voices and lived experiences to explore how a school includes participants with autism and nurtures their strengths.

The broad scope of a narrative inquiry, shown diagrammatically in figure 1, below helped data generated to be thick with detail. The emphasis on listening to and reflexively documenting the narratives meant the participant's voices were prioritised.
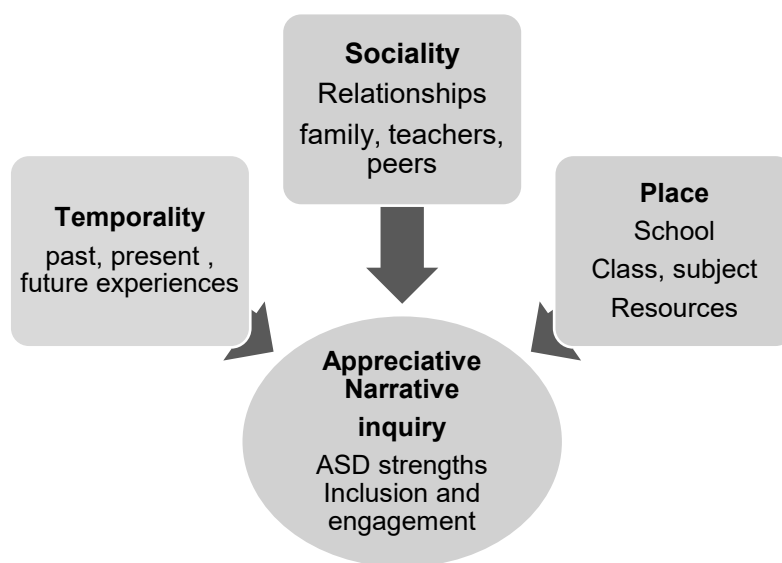

Figure.1. The three-dimensional narrative inquiry field work space

The customised ANI methodology and NVIVO 12 software guided the reflexive and interpretative data analysis process. The Individualised Navigation (IN) model arising from application of the methodology, simplified these research outcomes into a descriptive, visual process outlining how schools of the future might better include students with autism. Harking back to the explanation given of appreciative inquiry and the 4-D design, the model ticked off the final Ds of dream, design and destiny. IN is a model which could be piloted in schools. The ANI was a methodological approach which facilitated developing themes and a model as the finale of the school situated research project.

Summary of the Outcomes of the Inquiry

The beneficence of using a strengths approach meant involvement in the positively framed study was informative and transformative for the participants and the researcher. Three types of findings were generated due to the broad scope of this study 1) narratives 2) themes 3) a model of best practice termed Individualised Navigation (IN). The way the school nurtured student's strengths and demonstrated inclusion in action was conceptualised within the IN model.

Student participants received "Strengths Stories" as a form of benevolence at the end of the fieldwork phase. The positively written school narratives were generated from an inquiry focussed on happy stuff. These narratives celebrated the wonderful abilities the students had shared (student voice) and were stories of hope for the future. One mum cried proud tears when she read her son's success story. This appreciative narrative inquiry celebrated student's abilities, moving away from the deficit driven discourse.

Table 1

6 Themes and 4 sub-themes which reflect participants' responses

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- A Close teacher relationship is key to unlocking my strengths
- I don't care about anyone in the room except the teachers
- I have a surprising spectrum of strengths
- Real inclusion is navigating me through my schooling valuing my strengths
- I like to shine, facilitators of engagement in learning
- Some of the usual culprits, barriers reducing engagement in learning
- Challenging social situations affect me
- My communication can be different, so keep an interpreter handy
- Strengths grow in nurturing places
- The junior years provide a window into my strengths

Overview of the IN Model

A model termed Individualised Navigation (IN) showing best practice was generated by the school situated inquiry. This framework was designed to promote a paradigm shift, growing the abilities of autistic students using the stipulated strategies outlined within the approach. The model is considered evidence based. IN translated the research themes related to navigating and nurturing strengths, parent's knowledgeable advocacy and the way teachers

may play a role as mentors into an approach which could be used by educators. The IN model has the potential to improve achievement and reduce behaviour issues by focussing on what students on the autism spectrum can do.

The purpose of this model is for it to conceptualise for educators how to include students with autism by using a strengths lens as the focus. The model has a number of important internal elements. These include the strengths-identity of the student, prescribed adult roles and the school context. The two main facets of the model are (1) learning is 'individualised' by being based on the students' strengths, and (2) that ongoing 'navigation' is provided by staff which are given specific roles. Each aspect of the model works together to facilitate the individualised navigation process which guides the student's inclusion. Strong relationships and positive connections between educators, students and guardians are important, as the model should ultimately be built on these. Relationship building is an inherent element in how the model should be actioned.

The graphic figure 2, shown below, visualises how school inclusion could be modified for a student by using IN. The first element symbolises the importance of knowing the student's self-identified strengths. The battery which has positive and negative terminals and stored energy, reminds everyone that strengths have power, with the potential to become weaknesses within the school context. Individualised navigation as the process guiding the student through their schooling is shown by the forward arrow. The navigator role of proactively directing the student's learning journey is symbolised by the map. The supportive roles of mentors and advocates are grouped with the navigator to show they are part of a team. Awareness of the student's strengths is shown by the visual of strengths in a cycle format. The end goal for the student is symbolised by a suitcase, with the aim being to travel on to a career using their strengths. The model visual highlights the way IN can be used to support and include students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in a school setting.
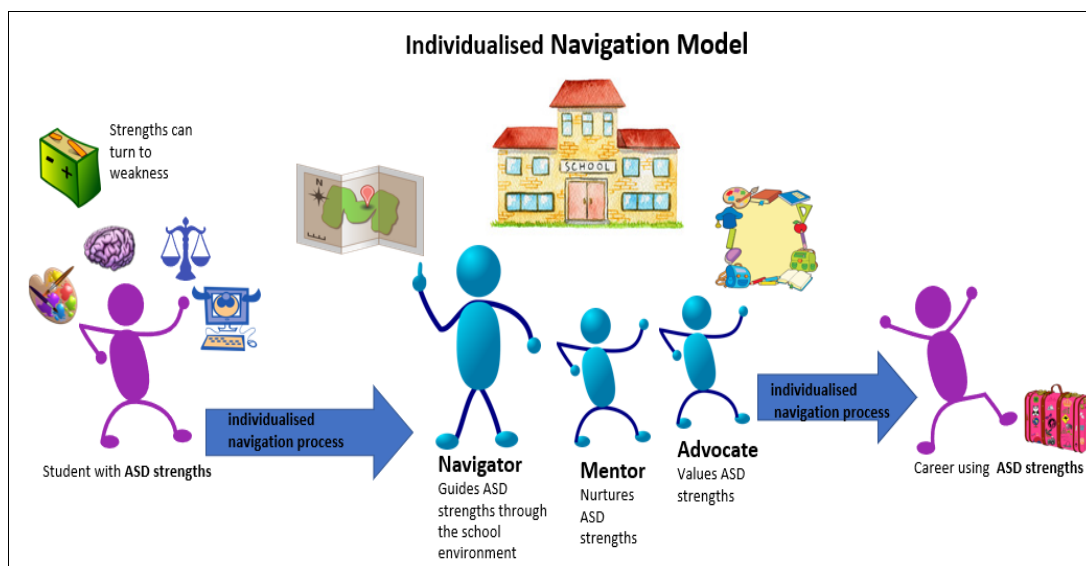
Figure 2. Visual of the Individualised Navigation (IN) model (Autism Spectrum Disorder ASD)

Navigation is the main process actioned to enhance engagement and inclusion for students with autism. An aim of navigation is to steer the school journey for the student in such a way that it values and nurtures their self-identified strengths. Navigation is more than physically guiding the student around the school. It involves being aware of the intricacies of school life that may impact the student. When the student is included into a school which fully uses IN then decisions on how to support that student should be made with an expectation that they will be actively navigated by skilled staff in the school.

Using navigation involves provision of targeted supports so that students are able to experience a version of inclusion tailored to suit their needs. Recognition that a student with autism may encounter social interaction and social communication difficulties within the school setting is an underlying assumption supported by the literature (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Saggers, Hwang, & Mercer, 2011). Schools are inherently social environments where students are expected to mix with peers in class and during breaks. Adjustments to the learning environment are made acknowledging strengths whilst envisaging any challenges which could occur due to them. Using the IN model, social situations are monitored, and verbal prompts provided by a navigator to help alleviate any potential issues which may arise.

Roles in the IN Model

People, including peers and parents, can execute significant support roles when IN is administered as the inclusion process for students with autism. Full implementation of this model relies on the establishment of benevolent relationships for its success. Schools may decide to evolve existing procedures into versions of the model if their circumstances and resourcing reduce their capacity to fully adopt the model in its entirety. Schools could provide quiet zones where the student could have a break from socialising. Placement of the student in higher achieving classes may be a strategy used which reduces possible environmental triggers which could adversely affect student behaviour.

The first step in inclusion using the model is to place the focus on the strengths of the student and how they could be appreciated and grown within that specific school setting.

- Enlist a navigator who then develops a close connection with the student.
- Seek staff and students who could act as mentors for the student because they have similar interests to them.
- Enlist the support of guardians and those staff and students who are willing to advocate for the student.
- Profile the student's self-identified strengths and include dialogue with guardians about positive childhood experiences they can recall.
- Determine what supports the student may require based on an evaluation which includes a prediction of how strengths could become challenges and affect behaviour at school.
- Review subject and teacher choices with mentorship of the student's strengths in mind.
- The navigator evaluates the school landscape and how it can be a facilitator in using and nurturing strengths.
- Mentors grow the student's strengths by providing knowledge and opportunities.
- Advocates speak up, reminding others how important it is to value and nurture the student's strengths.

The foundations of the IN model are based on expert pedagogy and the existence of a well-resourced school. The model hopes to build mutual understanding and strengths-based responses. It aims for excellence in the midst of school life imperfections. Developing a staff understanding of the model, and a willingness to support it is important for its success. The

model, when operating in a school requires people to be involved to make it happen. Several fundamental features of the IN model have an expectation placed on the teacher's skills and level of competence and confidence. Ultimately IN relies on the proficiency of staff expected to help navigate the student effectively in what could be a complex school environment.

Ideally developing teacher qualities so they might operate as skilled navigators, mentors and advocates would be integral to applying the model to a school. Teacher navigators, mentors and advocates could become role models for other teachers in a school to grow the school's culture of strengths-based support provision. Predominantly the model is actioned through the formation of purposeful relationships and strengths based connections.
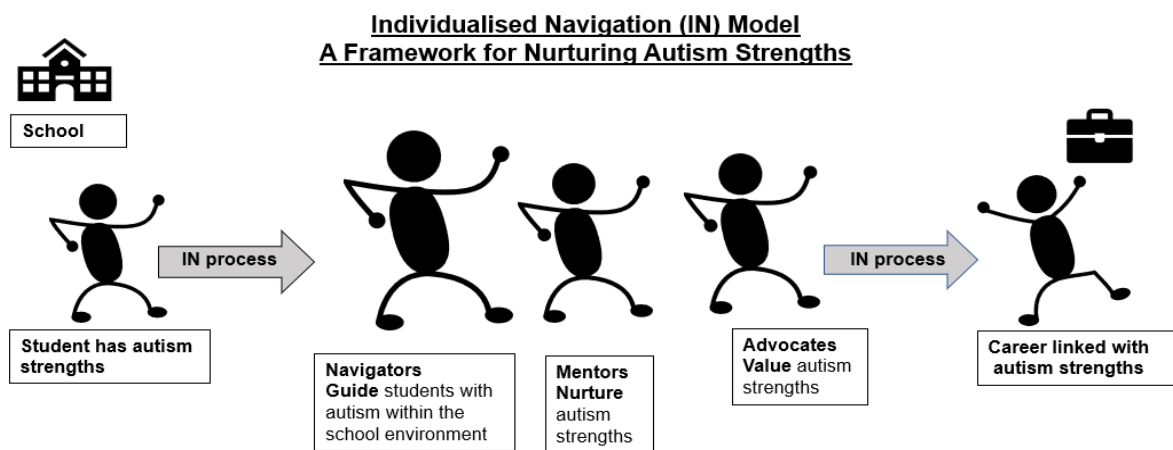
Individualised Navigation (IN) Model
A Framework for Nurturing Autism Strengths

School

IN process

Student has autism strengths

Navigators
Guide students with autism within the school environment

Mentors
Nurture autism strengths

Advocates
Value autism strengths

IN process

Career linked with autism strengths

Figure 3. IN Model Relational Role Framework

Conclusion

The Individualised Navigation (IN) model is a framework for guiding inclusion by organising existing school resourcing into a systematic process focussed on nurturing autism strengths. It shows how current practices could be renovated to potentially improve student outcomes. The IN model is based on relational inclusion, using people power, and requires a paradigm shift towards a focus on autism strengths. Navigation aims at achieving the best suited person, place and activity for the student based on the options the school has available. Tweaking the timetable and staffing so that it has a better chance of success for students with autism is a step in the right direction.

How to drive positive school changes should be inspired by what is working and be grounded in student and school voices. Strengths-based, structured and contextualised strategies may encourage students to flourish at school. Autism is a pot of gold, end of the rainbow, spectrum condition (Wing, Gould, & Gillberg, 2011). Each child is an individual whose abilities, personalities and dreams are unique to them. The question for educators is what role can we play IN a process which identifies and nurtures our student's strengths?

Highlights

- School situated appreciative narrative inquiry captured voices and experiences

- Individualised Navigation (IN) is a framework designed to nurture autism strengths

- IN simply uses existing school resourcing to guide inclusion and enhance engagement

- An autism strengths approach evolved from school stories highlighting best practice

Author Contributions

Lisa Hurrell - conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing

Professor Rhonda Faragher AO - conceptualisation, methodology, editing, supervision

Professor Karen Nankervis – editing, supervision

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest occurred through the research project.

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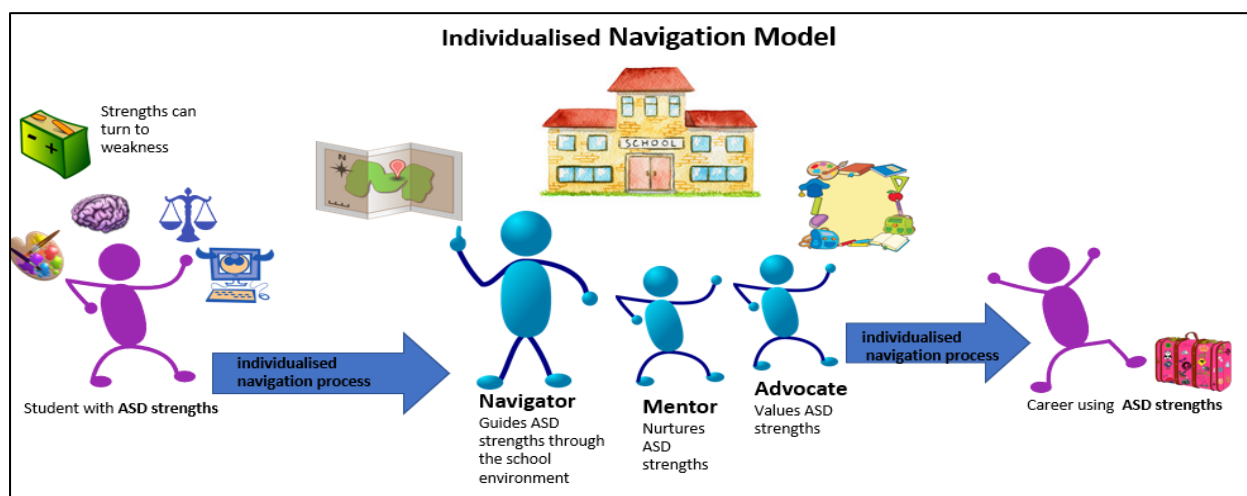
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Valuing Autism Strengths Needs a New Student-Centred Process

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The Individualised Navigation model guides the **IN**clusion of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) appreciating their self-identified strengths and creating nurturing educational settings.

Individualised navigation relies on teamwork. Resourced schools with **skilled staff** and invested carers carry out **specified roles** and actions to provide purposeful, **people powered inclusion**.

Individualised Navigation Model

Strengths can turn to weakness

Student with **ASD strengths**

individualised navigation process

Navigator Guides ASD strengths through the school environment

Mentor Nurtures ASD strengths

Advocate Values ASD strengths

individualised navigation process

Career using **ASD strengths**

IN Team members may have multiple roles and involve peers, parents, teachers, specialists, school leaders, teacher aides, case managers and administration. 😊

Navigator Role
- Close bond with the student
- maps out and guides the school journey.
- Knows the student's strengths
- Proactively plans ways to reduce any challenges
- Provides support in social situations

Mentor Role
- Common interests as student
- nurtures abilities.
- Knows the student's strengths
- Proactively plans ways to reduce any challenges
- Provides support in social situations

Advocate Role
- Close bond with the student
- cares about the school journey.
- Decision maker
- Knows the student's strengths
- Wants to reduce any challenges
- Provides support in social situations
- Provides a voice so the student is always heard

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