

Special Children

Meeting Children's Additional Educational Needs

- Virtual reality helps pupils with autism gain independence
- Getting pupils with challenging behaviour to stop and think
- A new CAMHS approach helps pupils thrive
- How to support pupils with attachment difficulties



Finding my voice

Learning outdoors can help language skills develop faster

PULL-OUT RESOURCES
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WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS WEEK

AT SCHOOL

27 March – 2 April 2017



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The government has announced that every secondary school in England is to get free mental health training and improved support from local health services over the next three years.

While welcoming the news, Russell Hobby, the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said it would ‘fall short’ without proper funding, especially in the face of school budget cuts. Joint research by the NAHT and mental health charity Place2Be has already revealed that seven out of 10 school leaders found funding was the ‘chief barrier to putting in place professional mental health support for pupils’, while six in 10 said the ‘lack of services or qualified professionals locally’ was a ‘significant barrier’.

There are glimmers of hope, however, and the newly published evaluation of joint DfE and NHS England pilot project work designed to link schools to mental health services showed that some improvements had been made. Meanwhile, on pages 34-36, Annie Grant outlines two impactful initiatives that have come out of a collaborative network of CAMHS providers called i-THRIVE.

Combatting social deprivation

4.4 million children will be living in poverty by 2030 according to research by the Fabian Society. This compares with 2.5 million today, but with cuts falling disproportionately on single parents, the number is expected to rise exponentially.

Commenting in *The Guardian*, the former MP for Stoke-on-Trent Tristram Hunt stressed ‘the desperate need to move discussion of disadvantage and social mobility beyond the school gate into the much more vexed territory of family, parenting, community and economic injustice.’

On pages 16-19, an inspiring headteacher shows how supporting families and the wider community in an area of high deprivation has a powerful impact on children’s emotional wellbeing and capacity to learn. On a more practical note, behaviour issues are often symptomatic of difficulties at home. On pages 32-33, John Galloway outlines a strategy that helps pupils stop and think before they get themselves into trouble – it won’t get to the root of their emotional troubles, but it might help them cope better at school and even begin to enjoy it.

On a slightly different tack, the link between poverty and low literacy skills is well known. See Kenny Pieper’s strategies to promote a love of reading in all children, whatever their difficulties or social

background, on pages 25-28.

Unlocking communication

The physical intelligence learned through dance should be seen as of equal value to academic studies, according to Wayne McGregor, resident choreographer of the Royal Ballet. Speaking on *BBC Radio 4’s Desert Island Discs*, Mr McGregor said: ‘I think we have always done ourselves a bit of a disservice in the arts to say that arts are supplementary to maths and English.’

For young people with severe learning difficulties, dance can inspire them to express their views, gain independence and interact with people outside their normal circle – see *Talking Point* on page 52. Meanwhile, the article on pages 29-31 features another group of children who found their voice – not on the dance floor, in this instance, but in the rich sensory environment of the natural world.

Growth mindset

Interviewed recently for *The Atlantic*, Carol Dweck expressed concern that some educators are introducing growth mindset without fully understanding what it really means (<http://bit.ly/sc235-50>). One example of ‘false mindset’ she cites is praising effort, regardless of outcome. ‘It’s not just effort, but strategy,’ she says. ‘Effective teachers who have classrooms full of children with a growth mindset are always supporting children’s learning strategies and showing how strategies created that success.’

That is certainly the case in the primary school profiled on pages 11-14, where children are co-agents in the development of their own and each other’s learning. With specific regard to SEND, on pages 8-9 Dr Amelia Roberts reflects on the challenges these children face and suggests practical ways of supporting them to overcome these.

Autism in all its complexity

Don’t forget World Autism Awareness Week from 27 March to 2 April. You’ll find lots of resources here: <http://bit.ly/sc235-51>. You may be interested too in recent research which sheds new light on the nature of autism (pages 22-23) and a virtual reality intervention that is helping children with ASD develop better functional skills (pages 20-21). Finally, we return to the theme of attachment difficulties on pages 40-41, a condition that can sometimes be mistaken for autism. Lots of food for thought.

Alison Thomas *Sophie C.*

Inside

Growth mindset

Growth mindset and SEND

Reflections and advice on developing a growth mindset in pupils with SEND

8

Learning without limits

Profile of a primary school where pupils are not labelled by ability and become co-agents in the development of their own and others' learning

11

Working with parents

Putting the school at the heart of the community

Supporting hard-to-reach parents through difficult circumstances wins their trust and transforms outcomes for children in a primary school

16

Autism

Teaching independence skills using virtual reality

Technology helps pupils with autism learn the Green Cross Code in a safe environment

20

Video feedback therapy

A parent-mediated intervention that has improved the social communication skills of children with autism is now being extended to schools

22

Behaviour

Thinking not reacting

De-personalising feedback helps pupils with challenging behaviour stop and think more often

32

Mental health

Helping young people to thrive

A new approach to CAMHS puts children and young people at the centre of provision

34

Sport

Powerchair football

A sport that is growing in popularity enables children in powered wheelchairs to play 'the beautiful game'

38

Condition insight

Why you shouldn't treat all children the same

How to support pupils with attachment difficulties

40

Regulars

News

Half of children with SLCN unidentified in primary schools; 63% of primary pupils worry 'all the time'; gene study identifies 14 new development disorders in children; free online course on making best use of TAs

3

Pull-out resources

Reading for pleasure: ideas to help struggling readers acquire the reading habit

25

Letters

Bringing a marginalised community in from the cold

43

Book reviews

An overview of SEND; supporting pupils with selective mutism; getting literacy off to a good start

44

Tried and tested products

A touchscreen adaptive maths app; enabling creative play with music and lights; teaching pupils with SEND to tell analogue time; the musical app ThumbJam made easy

46

Talking point

The impact of an inclusive dance workshop

52

Cover story

Finding My Voice

A project that improves the communications skills of pupils with learning difficulties

29

Cover picture:

'I can see the hills,' muses a pupil, empowered by the calm of the woods to find his voice; in a classroom setting, sensory overload makes it hard for him to access language at all



Half of children with SLCN unidentified in primary schools

A worrying number of children are starting school with significant unidentified language difficulties.

The Surrey Communication and Language in Education Study, led by University College London, found that approximately two children in every Year 1 class (7.6%) experience a clinically significant language disorder that impacts learning. Yet Department for Education data from the same year reports that only 3% of children in Year 1 were identified by schools as having speech, language and communication needs.

As a result, more than half of children with language disorder are being missed and far too many children who struggle to talk, understand and communicate their thoughts are at risk of not receiving the crucial support they need.

This discovery is one of the reasons why I CAN, the children's communication charity, in partnership with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), has launched an inquiry: *Bercow: Ten Years On*. This is a follow-up review to the landmark report into provision for children with language difficulties by House of Commons Speaker John Bercow, which was published in 2008.

Jean Gross CBE, former Government Communication Champion for Children, will chair the review. She says: 'It's shocking that, almost 10 years after John Bercow's report, so many children are



Without good communication skills, pupils will always struggle in school

not being identified in schools when good language and communication skills are so vital for learning.

'We need to find out why. Is it because schools suspect there might be a problem, but struggle to get advice now that speech and language therapists and advisory teachers are thin on the ground? And what is happening to identify children before they start school? The *Bercow: Ten Years On* review will help us understand what might need to change at both a local

and national level to get children the help they need.'

To kick-start the review, I CAN and RCSLT are inviting practitioners, parents/carers and young people as well as service managers and experts in the field to make written submissions sharing their experiences of the reality of SLCN support and the impact of this for children and their families.

To find out how to get involved, visit <http://bit.ly/sc235-36>

63% of primary pupils worry 'all the time'

In Place2Be's first children's survey for Children's Mental Health Week, pupils at its partner schools tell about their concerns and coping strategies, and highlight the importance of kindness.

The charity surveyed over 700 Year 6 pupils (Primary 7 in Scotland), and found that 63% worry 'all the time' about at least one thing to do with their school life, home life or themselves. The children's top concerns were their family, friends being okay, and not doing well at school.

Place2Be's Chief Executive, Catherine Roche commented on the results. 'We like to think of primary school as an innocent, happy time, but in reality we know that young children can worry about a lot of things – whether it's something going on at

home, with their friends or even about bad things happening in the world. It's perfectly normal to worry from time to time, but if these worries become more serious or persistent, it's important that children know where they can turn for help.'

The survey also found that two in five children said their worries can get in the way of school work, and nearly a third said that once they start worrying, they cannot stop.

When asked what adults should do to help, over 80% of the children surveyed said that 'being kind' and 'listening' are very important. The pupils also believed that it is very important that children are kind to each other. If a classmate was worried about something, they said they would ask them how they are, try to cheer

them up and listen to them.

The children had many different ways of coping with their worries, including, most commonly, talking to someone in their family, talking to friends or spending time on their own.

Catherine Roche adds: 'What's really positive is that many children already recognise the importance of being kind to each other when times are tough. Even seemingly small things, like asking someone how they are or listening to them, can make a big difference. Schools and families play a crucial role in ensuring that children learn to look out for each other, and know how to get help if they need it. These are skills that will last a lifetime.'

See more results from the survey: <http://bit.ly/sc235-42>

One in four young people don't feel in control of their lives

The Prince's Trust Macquarie Youth Index released in January warns that more than a quarter of young people (28%) don't feel in control of their lives, with concerns about job prospects, self-confidence and recent political events playing on young minds.

Sponsored by Macquarie, the Youth Index is a national survey that gauges young people's wellbeing across a range of areas from family life to physical health. The latest report demonstrates that young people's wellbeing is at its lowest level since the Index was first commissioned.

The eighth Index, based on a survey of 2,215 young people aged 16 to 25, reveals that many young people feel trapped by their circumstances, with 18% saying they don't believe they can do anything to change things. The research also reveals that 16% think their life will amount to nothing, no matter how hard they try.

The report highlights a wide range of factors that could be contributing to young people's distress. For example, 12% of young people claim they don't know anyone who 'really cares' about them, 45% feel stressed about body image and 37% feel stressed about how to cope at work or school. Of those young people who don't



Young people feel trapped by their circumstances

feel in control, 61% feel a lack of self-confidence holds them back.

The Youth Index indicates that the current political and economic climate also appears to be taking its toll on young people. 58% of young people say recent political events make them feel anxious about their future, with 41% feeling more anxious about life in general than a year ago. Many feel confused, with 44% claiming they don't know what to believe because they read conflicting things in the

media about the economy.

Half of young people feel the pressures of getting a job are greater than a year ago and 36% don't feel in control of their job prospects. Rising living costs are also a big concern, with 37% of young people who feel out of control of their lives worried that their living costs are going up faster than their wages or salary.

42% feel traditional goals such as owning a house or getting a steady job are unrealistic. 34% think they will have a worse standard of living than their parents did.

Dame Martina Milburn DCVO CBE, chief executive of The Prince's Trust says: 'This report paints a deeply concerning picture of a generation who feel their ability to shape their own future is slipping away from them. It's shocking how many feel so desperate about their situation and it is vital that we support them to develop the confidence and coping skills they need to succeed in life. The single most important thing we can do to empower these young people is to help them into a job, an education course or onto a training programme. Now, more than ever, we must work together to provide the support and opportunities they need to unlock a brighter future.'

Writing for enjoyment is vital

Research from the Literacy Trust shows that just 20.7% of children and young people write daily outside the classroom.

This is a significant drop since 2014, when 27.2% of pupils put pen to paper or wrote digitally every day outside school. In fact, more than 28.1% of children now say they rarely or never write something that is not for school.

Children's and Young People's Writing in 2015, a report from the Trust's sixth annual survey of 32,569 pupils aged between eight and 18, also evidences a decline in the number of pupils who enjoy writing and a significant gender gap.

- 44.8% of pupils said they enjoyed writing either very much or quite a lot in 2015, compared with 49.3% in 2014.
- While 51.9% of girls enjoy writing, only 36.8% of boys do.
- Boys are twice as likely as girls to say

they don't enjoy writing at all (19.4% versus 9.1%) and that they never write (10.6% versus 5.1%).

This development could have a negative impact on school attainment, as children and young people who enjoy writing very much are seven times more likely to write above the level expected for their age, compared with those who do not enjoy writing at all (50.3% versus 7.2%).

Similarly, students who write outside school daily are five times more likely to have levels of writing above those expected for their age, compared with those who never write outside the classroom (30.9% versus 5.8%).

This drop in daily writing frequency outside school is in stark contrast to the huge increase in daily reading frequency, which rose from 29.1% in 2010 to 43% in 2015.



51.9% of girls enjoy writing compared with 36.8% of boys

Download the report:
<http://bit.ly/sc234-13>

Gene study identifies 14 new development disorders in children

The largest genetic study of children with previously undiagnosed, rare developmental disorders has discovered 14 new conditions.

Published in *Nature* (25 January), the research led by scientists at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute also provided diagnoses of rare conditions for over a thousand children and their families.

These diagnoses allow families with the same genetic conditions to connect and access support, and help inform better clinical management. The study also accelerates research into disease mechanisms and possible therapies.

Each year, thousands of babies are born who do not develop normally because of errors in their genetic makeup. This can lead to conditions such as intellectual disability, epilepsy, autism or heart defects. There are over 1,000 recognised genetic causes. However, many developmental disorders are so rare that the genetic causes are not known. The Deciphering Developmental Disorders (DDD) study aims to find diagnoses for children with as yet unknown developmental diseases.

Working with 200 NHS clinical geneticists, the researchers screened 20,000 genes from more than 4,000 families taking part in the study. Coming from across the UK and Republic of Ireland, the families all have at least one child affected by a developmental disorder. The DDD team focused on spontaneous new mutations that arise as DNA is passed on from parents to children. The children's conditions were also clinically assessed and the team combined the results to match up

children with similar disorders to provide diagnoses.

The study team was able to diagnose children who had new mutations in genes already linked to developmental disorders – approximately one quarter of the patients in the study. In addition, they identified 14 new developmental disorders, all caused by spontaneous mutations not found in either parent.

Dr Jeremy McRae of the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute says: 'Each of these disorders is incredibly rare, so the large number of patients in this study was crucial to diagnosis. An individual doctor may see only one case, but by collaborating with hundreds of NHS staff and researchers, we were able to link children from clinics across the British Isles.'

Professor David FitzPatrick, a supervising author from the MRC Human Genetics Unit at the University of Edinburgh, says: 'Families search for a genetic diagnosis for their children, as this helps them understand the cause of their child's disorder. A diagnosis can help doctors better manage the child's condition, and gives clues for further research into future therapeutics. In addition, a diagnosis can let parents know what the future holds for their child and the risk of any subsequent pregnancies being affected with the same disorder, which can be an enormous help if they want a larger family.'

Overall, the researchers estimated that for 42% of the children in the study, a new mutation in a gene important for healthy development is likely to be the underlying cause of their condition. The DDD study also estimated that, on average, one in



Each year, thousands of babies are born who do not develop normally because of errors in their genetic makeup

300 children born in the UK have a rare developmental disorder caused by a new mutation. This adds up to 2,000 children a year in the UK.

They also demonstrated that older parents have a higher risk of having a child with a developmental disorder caused by a new mutation. The chances rose from 1 in 450 for 20-year-old parents having a child with a rare developmental disorder to 1 in 210 for 45-year-old parents.

From this, the researchers calculated that nearly 400,000 of the 140 million annual births across the world will have a developmental disorder caused by a spontaneous new mutation that is not carried by either parent.

Dr Matt Hurles from the Sanger Institute, who led the study, says: 'This study has the largest cohort of such families in the world. The diagnoses we found were only possible because of the great collaborative effort. Finding a diagnosis can be a huge relief for parents and enables them to link up with other families with the same disorder. It lets them access support, plug into social networks and participate in research projects for that specific disorder.'

DDD: www.ddduk.org

Skills Academy reading intervention

The Literacy Trust has launched Skills Academy, a new reading intervention aimed at pupils in years 7 and 8 who are falling behind. It uses football skills and tricks as motivation to improve core reading comprehension and confidence.

Building on the success of Premier League Reading Stars, the 10-week programme focuses on five core comprehension skills: questioning, clarifying, summarising, predicting and inference. Students are rewarded for their

progress with the chance to learn how to master amazing freestyle football tricks.

Teachers' resources include 10 curriculum-linked lesson plans, a set of 20 books, exclusive clips from two of the UK's best freestyle footballers showing pupils how to do tricks with a football, and a year's access to the Literacy Trust's Skills Academy microsite, which includes all programme content as well as comprehension challenges and rewards.

The resource pack is available from the Literacy Trust at £300. www.literacytrust.org.uk



Videos of freestyle footballers show pupils how to do football tricks

Discrimination against pupils with autism

Martin Vickers (Conservative MP, Cleethorpes) has proposed a new parliamentary bill with the aim of closing a legal loophole in the Equality Act 2010 that can lead to discrimination against pupils with autism in relation to admissions.

He says: 'The Equality Act 2010 exists to protect people of all ages from discrimination. It is an irony that the Equality Act is being used to discriminate against children with autism. The National Autistic Society believes that too many schools do not fully understand their duties towards children and young people with this

condition. The law requires them to make reasonable adjustments for their disabled pupils so that they may achieve their full potential. "Reasonable adjustment" means ensuring that a disabled child can do what their non-disabled peers do.

'There appears to be a loophole in the law that does not consider challenging behaviour linked to a child's disability as an impairment. If their disability could result in aggressive behaviour towards others in the school, the law on disability discrimination does not help them, and some governing bodies use "tendency to physical abuse of others" as a reason not

to meet the needs of an autistic child and to exclude them. Of course, governors have a duty to others in the school, but it can sometimes be easier to refuse admission than to facilitate a solution.'

The bill will be given a second reading on 15 December.

Although the proposed bill focuses on pupils with autism, it has implications for all disabled children and young people who may present challenging behaviour.

Details of the issues involved can found here: <http://bit.ly/sc235-37>

Hansard's reporting of the proposal/debate can be found here: <http://bit.ly/sc235-38>

Free online course on making best use of TAs

Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) consistently shows that when teaching assistants (TAs) are trained to deliver structured one-to-one or small group interventions, they typically add three or four additional months of educational progress for struggling pupils, compared with more standard ways of using TAs.

In order to support the best use of teaching assistants, the EEF has partnered with the TES to create an online course with practical examples of how to implement the recommendations, as well



Good use of TAs can accelerate learning

as interviews with headteachers who have changed the way they use TAs, and step-by-step guidance.

The course, which is hosted on the EEF website, is completely free and consists of text, video, curated links and downloadable documents. <http://bit.ly/sc235-43>

Alongside the course, the EEF has created a free pack of resources that include the following.

- A list of six TA-led projects that have shown a marked positive impact on pupil's learning.
- An EEF report offering guidance on making best use of TAs.
- An online audit tool, Red Amber Green self-assessment, interventions 'health-check' and a suggested change process.

And finally...

Autism and Technology Conference

This conference will discuss the specific types of technology available and how these can help improve the lives of autistic individuals. Topics include *Using virtual reality to counter phobia*, Carol Allen speaking on *Technology in the classroom*, and *Autism and cyberbullying: equipping people with tools to cope*. 13 June, Manchester. <http://bit.ly/sc235-44>

National Dyscalculia and Maths Learning Difficulties Conference

This conference brings together the worlds of research, maths teaching and SEN expertise and will provide opportunities to access and engage with leading practitioners and trainers.

The two keynote speakers are Dr Denes Szucs, deputy director, Centre for Neuroscience in Education, Cambridge, who will offer fresh perspectives on developmental dyscalculia, and Professor Ruth Merttens, education director, Hamilton Trust, who will offer challenging insights into maths mastery learning. 29 June, London. www.dyscalculia-maths-difficulties.org.uk

Sensory Strategies for Everyone – The magic of muscle stretch and heavy work

Proprioception is a most magical sense: if we are sleepy and low, it can help us to feel more alert and grounded, ready for work or play. When we feel stressed, fidgety or headed for a meltdown, it can assist us to get back to a state of being calm and alert.

This one-day course will include practical participation in short tasks to highlight the difficulties daily life can

pose to those with sensory challenges. The focus will be on what can be done to support those struggling with self-regulation. Case studies will focus on opportunities to understand and support children, teens and adults. 13 March, London. <http://bit.ly/sc235-45>

Introduction to Sensory Integration Difficulties

This one-day course will provide an introduction to sensory integration difficulties including autism. Delegates will explore how differences in sensory integration may affect people with autism and those with sensory integration difficulties. Through hands-on activities, they will experience how different individuals may be affected and how this links to their participation in daily life. They will also find out how sensory differences can affect behaviour, learning, emotions and communication. 20 March, London. <http://bit.ly/sc235-46>



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A child's expression of intent concentration shows that he is motivated to make an effort and keep going



Growth mindset and SEND

Dr Amelia Roberts shares some reflections on the challenges of developing a growth mindset in pupils with SEND and offers some practical advice

People with a growth mindset embrace challenge, are not afraid of failure and see mistakes as opportunities to learn. They have the will and determination to keep going when things get tough; they don't see success as an end in itself, but as the next step towards even greater achievement.

No one would dispute that encouraging pupils to acquire a growth mindset is a laudable aim. But what of pupils with SEND? A child with ADHD manages against all the odds to sit still for six minutes and gets told off for fidgeting on the seventh. A child with dyslexia puts enormous effort into every piece of writing they do and has very little to show for it in terms of results.

It is all very well encouraging these children to see problems as challenges, or telling them that they should welcome

“ **The target is stretching, but achievable, and moves their learning on** ”

struggle because it's the process of resolving that struggle that enables them to progress their learning. However, when a child's self-esteem is already very low, when they feel they are being knocked back on a daily basis, expecting them to have the resilience to turn these negatives into positives may be at best unrealistic, and at worst could demoralise them even further.

So am I saying you can't do growth mindset with pupils with SEND?

Absolutely not. But it requires much more careful planning.

Setting the right level of challenge

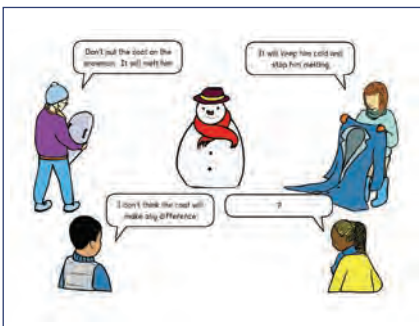
Clearly, if a child is to be persuaded to see problems as challenges, these challenges have to be set at just the right level. There is real skill in that – how you differentiate your lessons to give tasks that will stretch each child and set them up for success. Too easy, and they won't get any sense of achievement. Too hard, and they will fail or not even bother trying.

How you determine what the appropriate level might be comes down to formative assessment.

Formative assessment

Effective formative assessment takes many different forms. Here are two simple examples.

- A pupil uses prompt words to fill in spaces in a text accurately. The next text covers the same topic, but without offering prompts, and this time the pupil struggles. That allows the teacher to see that they understand the concepts, but are not yet able to generate the correct vocabulary. That knowledge then feeds into the design and differentiation of the next lesson.
- When giving feedback, the teacher remarks: 'You have used five powerful verbs. That is fantastic. Could you add a few more? Could you think about your description of the beginning and try to make it richer?' That is formative assessment that feeds directly into growth mindset because the child knows exactly what their next step is. The target is stretching, but achievable, and moves their learning on.



Concept Cartoons

Another key aspect of formative assessment is listening to how children are learning, picking up on how they express their ideas, the language they use, and how well they have grasped the concepts. Science Concept Cartoons from Millgate House (<http://bit.ly/sc235-47>) lend themselves beautifully to this.

Created for key stages 2 and 3, they illustrate scientific concepts in everyday settings and are designed to generate discussion and argument. All of the possible answers are plausible and highlight common learner misconceptions. Your role is to listen while the children talk, follow their reasoning and encourage further reflection with your comments and questions. 'That's very interesting. You used the word insulate. Can you tell us what that means?' 'You seemed very sure that the coat will make no difference. Can you explain why?'

If a child is thinking about a topic and trying to make sense of it, if they are using expressive language to put their point across, then they are engaging in the

“ We need to develop children’s ability to reflect on their learning ”

curriculum. Engaging in the curriculum is what generates the motivation to make an effort and keep going.

High expectations

Having high expectations does not mean setting the same standards for everyone. But neither does it mean deciding in advance how far you think a pupil can go.

On visiting a secondary school recently, I spent a little time working with a boy with autism who was writing a story about a superhero and creating beautiful turns of phrase, like 'the superhero cocooned his victims.' As I left his desk, to my huge frustration, the TA supporting him said: 'That's great. Well done. Now we are going to draw a picture.'

Why pull him down to pictures at that point? Why not say: 'Wow! I think that what you have written is really beautiful,' and support him to come up with a few more evocative expressions? And then maybe branch out into biology to talk about spiders, cocoons and chrysalises and introduce some new vocabulary? Just how far can you go?

The power of the child's writing shows that he was already engaged. By tapping into that and building on it, you can generate a genuine excitement for learning that is more motivating and sustainable than simply saying: 'Work hard and you'll get there in the end.'

Overcoming obstacles

To begin shifting the mindset of a child who is convinced they are forever doomed to fail, we first need to challenge that perception by coaxing them to remember instances when it clearly wasn't true; and then we need to develop their ability to reflect on their learning, identify what helps them to learn and what blocks them, and what they could do to remove these blockages.

Before embarking on a new piece of work, you could ask them to consider some of the following.

- Have I done this before? What do I remember?

- How did I tackle it? What did I find easy?
- What was difficult?
- Why did I find it easy or difficult?
- What did I learn?
- What helped me to learn?
- What made my learning difficult?
- Should I tackle it in the same way as before?
- What do I need to keep doing because it helped me?
- What do I need to get better at (in terms of how I learn or what I achieve)?

Learning diary

An extension of the above would be a learning diary. Say, for instance, you were working with a child in Key Stage 2 or 3 on using a writing frame to structure a report. Before they leave the room, you could ask them to jot down the essence of what they have taken from the lesson in their learning diary. Then the next time they have to write a report, they will have their notes to guide them rather than having to start all over again; they will be one step further in the process. What's more, they will be reading that step in their own words and their own handwriting. Which ties in perfectly with growth mindset. 'Here is the evidence of where I got to last time, this is what I knew I knew, and now I am going to build on that.'

As time goes by, they can accumulate a whole bank of strategies or key information that unlocks certain aspects of their learning. For example, I am working with an adult student on decimals at the moment, and she is struggling to get to grips with how the decimal point works. She has got the hang of it by the end of a session, but the next time I see her, she is lost again. So she has noted down how it works in her learning diary, and will use this as a trigger every time she has a sum involving decimals until her understanding is secure and she doesn't need it any more.

It is a way of getting students to build up their own understanding of their learning so they are in a position to progress it themselves. If you can support a child to master that, you are setting them up to be learners for life.

And surely that is what growth mindset is all about?

Dr Amelia Roberts is a lecturer in education and deputy director of SENJIT, UCL Institute of Education

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Learning without limits

Alison Thomas finds out about a primary school where children are not labelled by ability and develop a growth mindset from their earliest years

When I spoke to Professor Dame Alison Peacock in January, the former executive headteacher of The Wroxham School in Hertfordshire had just taken up her new post as the first CEO of the Chartered College of Teaching.

'My role is about giving the teaching profession a voice,' she told me, clearly excited by the prospect. 'We can't carry on as we are, constantly expecting to find the bad as opposed to finding the good. Constantly worried that someone else is better than we are, rather than being in a position to say: "I would like to improve. Could you help me?" And when you do have some good ideas, if performance management is based on being better than the teacher next door, why would you share those ideas with anyone else?'

'Performance management doesn't have to be like that. It should be about professional learning. What are your professional learning objectives? What are you wanting to learn next? How can we help you? And how will this impact on the children you work with?'

Learning Without Limits

Before taking over the headship of The Wroxham School in 2003, Alison Peacock was one of nine teachers who rejected the notion of fixed ability and whose classroom practice was studied by researchers from the University of Cambridge, concerned by the revival of ability-focused practices instigated by the government's drive to raise standards through testing and targets, attainment levels and league tables.

Learning Without Limits (Hart et al) was published in 2004 and highlighted three key pedagogical principles that had emerged from the study.

- Co-agency – working in partnership with all members of the school community.
- Everybody – ensuring that everybody has a voice and that everybody's interests are taken into account when decisions are made.
- Trust – an unshakeable belief in everybody's capacity to grow and learn, given supportive conditions.

Creating Learning Without Limits (Swann et al) followed in 2012. Co-authored by Alison Peacock, it charted her journey of discovery as she led The Wroxham School out of special measures to become a flagship teaching school, known for its innovative practices and empowering learning culture.

Assessment for Learning Without Limits by Alison Peacock picks up where the two previous studies left off and explores alternative, more meaningful approaches to assessment that might give schools food for thought as they contemplate the challenges and opportunities of the post-level era. Published by Paperback, <http://bit.ly/sc235-48>



Children field questions from the delegates at a Learning Without Limits conference

Valuing everyone for who they are

The same principles are fundamental to the Learning Without Limits ethos of The Wroxham School, where they apply not just to staff but to the pupils as well. This is a school where children are not labelled by ability or ranked according to their performance in tests; a school where they choose their own level of challenge in dialogue with the teacher and play a proactive role in reviewing their own progress.

‘It’s my profound belief that labelling children by ability is deeply unhelpful and limits their capacity to learn and grow,’ says Dame Alison. ‘It is really important that we value everyone we work with, children and adults, for who they are. Anything that happens on the educational landscape that appears to drive children who may have difficulties of some kind towards behaviours that marginalise that section of the school community feels deeply immoral to me. That’s how strongly I feel about it.

‘Instead, we should be enabling them to become partners in their own learning, rather than unintentionally limiting what they are able to do. Everyone has a deep-seated need to be heard, have a sense of agency and be trusted. These are the core principles of Learning Without Limits: trust, agency, and inclusion of everyone.’

‘Moreover,’ she adds, ‘I think it is our responsibility as teachers to be constantly striving to work together to find a way through for every child, as opposed to trying to identify what the child’s problems might be. It tilts it slightly into a much more productive space if we say:

“What can we do differently to enable the child to learn?” as opposed to: “What’s wrong with the child? Why can’t they learn?”

SEND and inclusion

Keen to know how this works out in practice, I ask about the school’s approach to SEND. If a child was struggling with reading, say, how would they support that child without singling them out from their peers?

‘In that specific example, we would know very early on if the child was finding it difficult to show the early signs of reading,’ she replies. ‘If they were unable to focus on looking at something intently, if they weren’t able to join in with songs

and rhymes, if they were finding these fundamentals of language learning problematic, we would know long before we ever asked them to sit down and read something.

‘Everything we are doing in school is about knowing our children really well and trying to provide a curriculum that is rich enough and tailored enough to support anybody who is finding any aspect of learning difficult without seeing that as a deficit. The recognition is that we are all different and that we have to be constantly looking for ways to keep the door open for the child. The child who was finding reading difficult would get lots of practice in all the skills they need in order to learn to read within the context of a really rich curriculum. We wouldn’t be taking them out of class in order to remediate them. On the other hand, we would be closely monitoring that child and giving them every opportunity to achieve and take the next step. And we would be working with the family.’

The unintended consequences of grouping by ability

In her new book, *Assessment for Learning Without Limits*, Dame Alison cites a conversation with a pupil who didn’t achieve level 2 in Key Stage 1 reading and writing to illustrate why she is so adamantly opposed to grouping children by ability.

‘The child was nearing the end of Year 6 at the time,’ she explains, ‘and she told me, with a lovely smile on her face: “I think back to the days when I was little, in first year, and you know, I think we can all say, can’t we, none of us knew anything?”



Children circulate amongst the delegates to explain what they do at the school and how they learn

Her assumption was that everyone found it really hard to learn. And that is how the learning environment should be: every child should be challenged. That doesn't mean they will all be challenged in the same way, necessarily.'

She continues: 'The girl then went on to say: "Now I am in Year 6, and I see – oh, I can do this... and I can do this... and I can do this..." What she didn't say was: "In Year 1, Mrs Jones used to do all my work," or "I wasn't any good," or "I was in the blue group." She had that sense of overcoming difficulties because that is what you do when you are a learner, as opposed to "I'm no good," or "I'm the rubbish child."'

Growth mindset

The school's deep conviction that ability is not fixed and that every child has the capacity to learn and grow given appropriate support has a strong resonance with Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset.

'The notion of self-limiting behaviours is a really important one,' says Dame Alison, 'particularly with teachers. As a teacher, if you unwittingly have a self-limiting view of what it is to be a learner, if you look at a certain child and think: "They are only ever going to achieve this much," the chances are, they only ever will while they are working with you.'

'But equally, I am not naïve enough to believe that every child is capable of achieving the same things. Some children with profound difficulties and life-limiting challenges are actually deteriorating, so it would be really insulting to say to them: "Pick yourself up; give yourself a growth mindset and everything will be all right." What is very important for them – and for all children – is to constantly believe they should be able to surprise us. Even the child with life-limiting challenges should have the capacity to surprise us with what they are able to achieve. Otherwise, we could unintentionally stop that from happening. So, as always, it's about finding ways to keep the door open.'

The school's approach towards providing constructive feedback is another aspect of its work that dovetails with that of Carol Dweck. 'Even if a child is incredibly capable, Carol Dweck has shown that feedback which says: "Well done. You are really good at something," is also self-limiting because you can't afford to lose that label. Ironically, I think that is what happens to outstanding schools. You might think it would boost teachers' morale to be awarded an outstanding rating, but fear of losing the



Children at Wroxham School develop the ability to become independent learners

label becomes a stress in itself.'

What she advocates instead is very specific feedback, which highlights what the learner has done well, identifies challenges and outlines the next steps, with clear advice on how to set about achieving these. 'I am not a great fan of stickers and stars,' she says. 'I believe in fostering intrinsic motivation. We need to be giving those with profound challenges the space to have huge wins *for them*, not comparing them with others.'

“Everyone is engaged because they are working at their own level of challenge”

Alternatives to differentiation

Unsurprisingly for a school which doesn't favour grouping by ability, it also avoids setting differentiated activities. One of the strategies it uses in maths is for the teacher to offer the class a range of tasks of varying complexity and let pupils choose what they think is the right one for them.

'As pupils listen to the teacher explaining the work at the start of the lesson, they all have different feelings,' says Dame Alison. 'Why make the teacher second-guess that? Why not trust the children instead? One child might feel they need some more practice in something, while someone else might feel they have mastered it and want a higher challenge. Frustration arises from work

that is too hard, but it also arises when there isn't enough challenge.'

Another approach teachers use is to give everyone the same task at the beginning of the lesson, ask them to try it independently, and then confer with a partner to find out how the other person tackled it. Finally they share their conclusions with the whole class. 'No one sits with the TA,' says Dame Alison. 'If one child solves the problem but the other is struggling, their partner will explain how they set about it before they engage in the whole-class discussion. By working with each other and then with the teacher, misconceptions are revealed and explained.'

When this initial activity draws to a close, the teacher presents the class with a series of questions that become progressively more challenging quite quickly. Some children will whizz through them before they reach one that makes them stop and think; others might reach that point after just a few questions. 'Everyone is engaged because they are working at their own level of challenge,' she says. 'And they have the capacity, should they understand something today that was troubling them yesterday, to go further than the teacher might have thought. It is working really well, even with children who have quite significant additional needs.'

The role of the TA

In the scenario where children choose their own tasks, the teacher will work with the children who have chosen one level of difficulty, while the TA supports those who have opted for a different one.

Growth mindset

In the second scenario, where they work through a series of challenges at their own pace, the TA roams the room, looking for children who have laid a card on their desk indicating they would like some help. Meanwhile, the teacher will be working with a group of children who have requested to go through the questions with the teacher. 'One of the advantages of this approach is that the group has self-selected, they haven't been picked out by an adult,' explains Dame Alison. 'At the same time, the teacher is working with children who find the work challenging while the TA supports those who feel more confident, the reverse of what tends to happen in the traditional classroom.'

The same principle of self-selection applies to additional provision, whether it is a programme on phonic development, extra reading, homework club or any other intervention. Dame Alison draws the analogy of being given a recipe book as a birthday present. 'If I already have some cooking skills and I'm keen to learn more, I will use the book and gain from it; if I don't, it will sit on a shelf unopened. Children are no different from adults. So if we ask a child: "Do you think this would be helpful?" and they reply: "No, this isn't the right time for me," we respect that. Otherwise, the reality is they are not going to engage.'

Assessment and review

As part of the expectation that children will become active participants in their own learning, all pupils from Year 1 upwards write their own end-of-year reports. Younger children or those with writing difficulties might do it with an older child or an adult, enabling them to express their ideas more fully.

The child begins by recording their successes and things they particularly enjoy doing. The teacher responds in a similar vein, congratulating them very specifically on aspects of their learning where they have done really well. The second section, challenges, is where both the child and the teacher identify and elaborate on what they think the next steps should be.

As an extension to this approach, in years 5 and 6 family consultations are replaced by learning review meetings. These take place in the headteacher's office and are attended by the child, their parents or carers and the class teacher as well as the headteacher. The child leads the meeting, making reference to three or four PowerPoint slides they have prepared in advance to outline their



Collaboration and discussion are an integral part of the school's approach to learning



Two pupils discuss their ideas for the design of the school garden

successes and their challenges.

'By now, they have become very confident about talking about their learning,' says Dame Alison. 'It is very affirming for their family, who are often surprised and delighted. It is much more powerful and informative than traditional reporting. And we talk to the child, not about grades, but about next steps.'

Democracy at work

If children play a proactive role in determining the direction of their own assessments and reviews, they are equally involved in contributing to decisions that affect the school as a whole.

Once a week, school assembly gives way to democratic circle meetings, led by Year 6 pupils and attended by a group of children from years 1-6 together with members of staff. The aim is to provide a meaningful forum where all members of the school can share their thoughts and ideas. Subjects for discussion cover everything, from playground arrangements to issues concerning teaching and learning or wider aspects of school life.

'It provides an opportunity for the children to listen to the views of others and to recognise that the best solutions come about through consensus and debate,' says Dame Alison. 'The older children plan and facilitate it, and model how to hold a discussion where everyone shows respect for each other.'

For very young children, that can be quite difficult, however, and just before Christmas she attended a group where a child was trying to dominate the proceedings. 'Every time someone put forward a suggestion, he would call out: "I like that!" "I like that!"' she says. 'The children leading the group responded with patience and kindness. "Thank you very much. We understand you are excited. Just hold on a moment, and we'll get back to you." No one told the child to keep quiet, no one asked him to leave the room. This child will get there eventually – it might take a year, or even two – but one day he will understand how the group dynamics work and he will be included and valued. In the meantime, he was seeing how it should be done, but in a very positive, affirming way.'

'What was really nice was that this was coming from the children, not from us. Why would anyone not want to create conditions where children can surprise us?'

FIND OUT MORE

- **Learning Without Limits:**
<http://bit.ly/sc235-49>
- **The Chartered College of Teaching:**
www.collegeofteaching.org





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Every child deserves the best possible start in life

Two pupils from Aldermoor Primary School proudly show off their homework

Headteacher **Ann Stacey** explains how putting her school at the heart of the community has benefited everyone, pupils and families alike

Aldermoor Farm School is a large primary school serving one of the most economically and socially deprived parts of Coventry. Pupil Premium figures are well above the national average and we have a significant number of pupils with SEND.

We also have 44 home languages, and these have all arisen in the last eight or nine years. Where previously the area was almost entirely white British, working and middle class, it is now predominantly social housing and home to a wide ethnic mix, including families of black African heritage, new arrivals from eastern Europe and a growing number of asylum seekers.

That has caused certain tensions within the neighbourhood and sometimes we have the far right approaching our

parents. But there are no such tensions in school. We celebrate the differences and the richness that all these cultures bring into school. But the whole demographic has changed.

Supporting parents into work

What has also changed is the way we define our role. Together with the governors, we made the decision that the school was the focal point of the whole community and we would reach out to everyone. As part of that, we are supporting parents into finding employment or improving their own education on the premise that this can only be of benefit to our children. We have a pastoral manager and a family support worker who work with different agencies to put on courses to help parents in a variety of ways; in this case, with filling in application forms, writing CVs, getting interview practice and developing the skills they will need to secure work or a training placement.

We ran the first of these last term, and 50% of participants went on to find a job. Those who didn't are now our parent champions. We invited them to join us again in January so we could help them refine their skills, on condition they bring another parent along with them. That is the ethos underpinning everything we do. Our families know we will do all in our power to help them overcome the many challenges they face. But when things begin to improve, it is their turn to give something back.

Everyone who completed the course was presented with a certificate and we invited their children to join us for a celebration tea. Now we have pupils coming up to us to say: 'My mum wants to learn how to get a job as well.' So already it is having an impact. Meanwhile, our pupils are seeing that adults have to learn things and adults have to try. So it is encouraging them to adopt this attitude too.

Holding your head up high

Our pupils will go to secondary schools with children from leafy suburbs, whose parents will have taken them to all sorts of interesting places. Our children don't get these opportunities, so we have to step in. By the time they leave us, they will have been to a museum, they will have visited an art gallery and seen live theatre; they will have enjoyed classical music in a large concert hall and made music of their own; they will have grown their own food, been to the seaside, to the farm and the space centre. That takes a



The celebration of parents' successful completion of the Steps into Employment course is shared on Twitter

lot of organising and endless fundraising, but we feel it is hugely important, not only for its intrinsic educational value, but to ensure that when pupils start secondary school, they won't feel people are looking down on them because they haven't had those experiences.

At the same time, we work hard to raise their aspirations and boost their self-belief. Last year, for example, we had a Year 6 pupil with significant learning difficulties who struggled to write his own name but he was exceptionally talented at art. During our aspirations week, when professionals come in to inspire our children with ideas for their future career path, we made sure we included an artist and briefed him: 'When you work with this child, please don't ask him to write anything, but keep telling him that when he grows up he will get be able to get a job with his art skills.'

It's a message we are constantly reinforcing. We have a former pupil with us at the moment in his second year as a PE apprentice. He lives on the estate, so he is a terrific role model for our children. They know he attended our school, and now he is going to college and holding down a good job. We make a big thing of how much he is earning: 'This is how he is able to buy nice clothes, pay for driving lessons and get his own car. Work hard, and you can have that too.'

Addressing individual needs

We are quite focused on the principle encapsulated in the words of Ignacio Estrada: 'If the child can't learn the way we are teaching, maybe we should teach the way they learn.' For children who live mostly in high-rise flats, outdoor learning is a clear winner and we make extensive use of the school grounds, run a forest

school and regularly use the outdoor environment for curricular work because we know that is what will captivate them.

With regard to individual needs, every half term, following the children's assessments in reading, writing and maths, all the relevant people – myself, the deputy who leads on assessment, the SENCO, the pastoral manager, the learning mentor, the class teacher and the TA – hold a meeting to discuss each child in the class, and what intervention, if any, they are going to have over the next half term. In this way, we accumulate a growing bank of evidence to show what works, and what doesn't, for any given child or group of children, so we can continue to refine our system.

“ **For children who live mostly in flats, outdoor learning is a clear winner** ”

Sometimes it's as simple as having the learning mentor meet and greet a child for five minutes at the start of the day to help with the transition from home to school. Or it might be an intervention to support their emotional wellbeing. Or it might be something to bring on their reading skills.

We have a reading dog that comes in twice a week. For one of these sessions, we choose a particular group of children

we feel will benefit, but the other is currently being organised by a team from Coventry University who are using our dog to do some research into the use of reading dogs in school.

If anyone ever doubted the value of this, we have our own very powerful evidence. The year before last, a child who was a selective mute, speaking at home but not in school, read to our dog for six weeks in the run-up to Christmas. Not only did she begin talking in class, when the time came for our Christmas production, she was able to stand up in front of the whole school and say a sentence. There wasn't a dry eye from any member of staff in the room. Today, she chatters away like any other member of her class. It is just wonderful to see.

A wealth of in-house expertise

We are too big and have far too many needy children to let everything fall on the SENCO or any other individual, so we invest heavily in whole-staff development. There are different levels of training. For example, in the case of the Thrive Approach, which helps adults understand behaviour as communication, everyone, including dinner ladies and playground supervisors, does the initial training and a few people take it further. Likewise, although a speech and language therapist comes in to work with the children with the highest level of need, all classroom staff have been trained to conduct baseline assessments and deliver a programme which the SLT devises in



A child reads to the school's reading dog Lulu



Year 1 making elf and fairy houses during forest school

consultation with a higher level teaching assistant, who has trained to level 3 in speech and language.

Two members of staff have been trained in Lego® therapy, two others to deliver working memory programmes because we recognised that this was an area where many of our children needed more support. We buy in an art therapist for emotional wellbeing, but we also have two staff trained to deliver Talk and Draw, so that children can release their emotions in a positive, structured and safe way (see *Promoting emotional wellbeing* and *Tried and tested: helping teachers tackle pupils' mental health issues* in *Special Children* 232).

Meanwhile, staff are continually scouring Twitter and Pinterest for ideas we could adapt to our setting. If someone comes across something they believe will make a difference to a particular child or group of children, I will do my utmost to find the funding so they can be trained to deliver it. It could be anything. I have staff trained to deliver programmes in toileting and bedtime routine to parents. It is not our core purpose, but if it's another barrier that prevents children from learning in school, we have to remove it.

We are very proud of our school and very passionate about securing the very best outcomes for our children. And they are our children, all 520 of them. We celebrate their birthdays, we worry about them during the holidays, we lose sleep over them. I have people coming to see me to say: 'I was thinking about so-and-so last night and wondered if this might help him.' It's not always a

teacher or a TA; it could just as easily be a dinner lady or a member of the administrative staff.

Supporting families through a crisis

40% of our pupils are known to social care – they are not all open cases, but it is indicative of the experiences and trauma they may have faced. We have to be mindful of that and build up their resilience. We are not naive enough to think we can take away all the issues, but we do our utmost to try and help them in whatever way we can.

For that reason, our pastoral manager, family support manager and business manager have all had Citizens Advice

training in financial budgeting so they can support families who are struggling to manage their limited finances or who have been threatened with eviction because they haven't paid the rent. They will help them draw up a budget, go to court with them to present it and then support them afterwards to ensure they keep up payments whenever they are due so they don't risk putting themselves in that situation again.

“If it's another barrier that prevents children from learning, we have to remove it”

In the case of one of our immigrant families, it was a deterioration in the child's behaviour that alerted us to possible problems at home. It took a while to uncover exactly what these were, but eventually it transpired that his parents had been receiving letters from the Home Office informing them that their right to stay in the UK had been withdrawn. Their English wasn't very fluent, however, so their son had been reading these to them.

Once we realised what was happening, we were able to advise them: 'Don't give your son the letters. Give us the letters. We'll do the worrying with you. Let him be a child and concentrate on his school work.' Then we put them in touch with someone who could give them legal guidance, and eventually, by securing citizenship for their son, they were able



Children at the school get lots of opportunities to develop their creative skills

to piggyback on this and obtain the right to stay. In the interim, however, they had had to give up work and had no entitlement to benefits, so we kept them going by providing food bank vouchers, vouchers for electricity and other essentials. Once it was all sorted, they paid us back by helping us support other families who might be facing something similar.

Supporting the wider community

These are just some of the many ways we support, not only our own families, but anyone in the community, from teenage mums to pensioners. We know which charities have clothing for newborn babies, we help people fill in letters of application for accommodation and help them to furnish it when the tenancy comes through. We run food collections for the church that operates the food bank, and when families like the one mentioned above are back on their feet, they bring us contributions. In fact, our parents contribute to school life in so many ways. Last year we raised between £4,000 and £5,000 for local and national charities, which is remarkable when you consider the economic profile of the area.

Meanwhile, we have agencies asking us to help them put on events in the school rather than elsewhere because people trust us. HIV awareness workshops are one example. People at risk (and we have the highest rate of any residential area in the city) won't go to their GP, but they are willing to come here, which gives the local pharmacist an opportunity to do an HIV test. We are not involved in taking that further, but we have given the agencies the chance to connect.

Parental engagement

Back in school, it has taken time to build that trust, but today the vast majority of our parents are engaged and on board. That was corroborated recently in the comments they made when interviewed by the assessors for our Leading Parent Partnership award, where they were full of praise for the way we have worked with them in the interests of their children.

Yet, for some of them, taking that first step hasn't been easy, especially those who have unhappy memories of their own time at school. But through gentle perseverance, we have convinced them that we need their commitment, and that of their children, because no one can do it on their own. We draw the analogy of a three-legged school. If one leg is a bit shorter, or one part of the partnership isn't fully



Children relax on cushions to enjoy a good book

“The vast majority of our parents are engaged and on board”

engaged, it's not a very comfortable place to sit, or falls apart altogether.

Meanwhile their children love coming to school. Our attendance is over 97%, having been a serious cause for concern just a few years ago. That is not to say that we don't have wobbles in behaviour and some safeguarding concerns the week before a holiday. But whatever might be happening at home, children feel safe here, reassured by the calm and structured environment and boosted by our regular reminders: 'It doesn't always have to be this way. Get your qualifications, and you can do whatever you want anywhere in the world. That is down to you and how you work. Nobody will give that to you, you have got to do it yourself.' So we are not handing them anything on a plate. But we are trying to drill in that if you work hard, you get something back.

Nurturing talent

At the same time we go to extraordinary lengths to identify and nurture individual talent. Using our sports premium we pay for seven children to attend the local athletics club, because we recognised this was where their talents lay. Again, it is a three-way partnership. We pay the

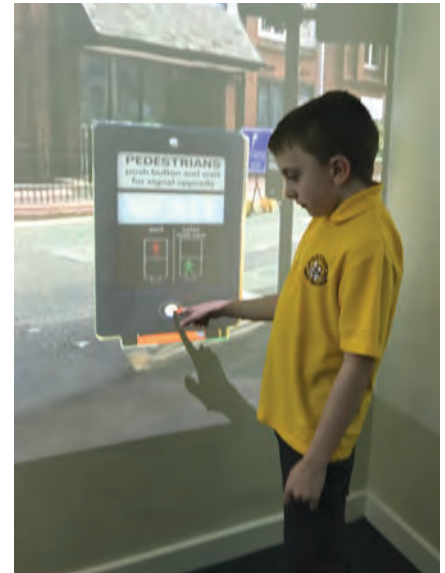
annual subscription, the parents commit to taking them there, and the children commit to trying their very best. For some children, that could be their passport off the estate.

In the case of another child, we are paying for her to go to theatre school. It doesn't have to be sport or the creative arts, however, and we have children who do bike maintenance, because it is something they are very good at. Whatever their talent is, we will help them develop it. If we've got their interest in that, they are more likely to engage in other things as well.

It is all about knowing the child, and being guided by them; not assuming, for example, that just because it's a boy, they won't be interested in reading. We have boys who love reading. We use Accelerated Reader, and the competitive element really appeals to them – the satisfaction of scoring 100% in a quiz, knowing that if they do that five times, I will present them with a certificate in front of the whole school and their families, and that afterwards they can put their picture on our Twitter page so families all over the world can see what they have achieved.

Perhaps the last word should lie with two pupils quoted in our latest Ofsted report. 'Everyone helps each other and we don't leave anyone out,' said one, capturing our inclusive ethos and the emphasis we place on kindness, understanding and mutual support, while the other summed up our work ethic: 'It doesn't matter where you're from or your background, you can succeed and be successful in your life.'

A panorama of the junction is projected on three walls. The coloured spots on the floor are beams of light projected from the ceiling. Each has an image attached, along with an accompanying sound where relevant. These are activated by passing a disc or wand across the appropriate colour to break the beam



A pupil learns how to press the button that activates the green man

Independence and functional skills

Headteacher **Ange Anderson** of Ysgol Pen Coch special school in Flint describes a therapy that helps pupils with autism learn to cope with the daily challenges of life

There are four sets of traffic lights on the walk into town from our school, so you can spend quite a long time waiting at pedestrian crossings.

But some of our autistic pupils get very anxious when they have to wait for long periods of time. Indeed, they find the whole situation very stressful: the noise of the traffic rushing back and forth, not being entirely sure about what they are supposed to do, worrying about what might happen if they do it wrong.

Our aim at the school is to support our students to become as independent as

possible, so what's the solution?

One answer we have come up with is virtual reality therapy.

Virtual reality and autism

Virtual reality immerses the user in an illusion which responds as the real world does. The human interaction with the imaginary world is not conducted by watching what other people do, but by making things happen through your own actions. Virtual reality allows individuals to explore new ways of responding and learning in a controlled and safe environment.

The potential benefits for students with autism are clear. Research by Newcastle University showed that cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) delivered in a virtual reality setting helped to reduce specific phobias and fears for people with ASD, leading to real-life functional improvements for activities that were previously not possible. Another study from the University of Haifa in Israel found that a month-long programme of virtual reality training designed locally helped a group of seven- to 12-year-olds dramatically improve their ability to cross the road safely.

It was the latter approach we decided to embrace, not just for road safety, but in other contexts that families told us their children found particularly stressful. Thanks to the support of the Friends of Ysgol Pen Coch, who worked tirelessly to raise the funds, in the summer of 2016 OM Interactive installed a virtual reality room at the school.

We have now started recreating situations to reflect the specific circumstances of our pupils' lives. Take the dentist, for example. Our virtual reality room won't be projecting generic scenes of any old dental practice; it will take children to the dentist down the road. They will become familiar with the setting and pretend to sit in the chair. No doubt they will still be anxious when an appointment is due, but we hope that we can ease that, at least a little.

Preparations

Setting up the scenarios proved more complicated than we had anticipated, but thanks to the determined efforts of class teacher Samantha Stenhoff (see box) we

are now successfully up and running.

Since then, teaching assistant Helen Wilson has been coaching a group of students in road safety, with excellent outcomes, and they are now preparing to address the challenges of a visit to the dentist. But I will let her explain.

Crossing the road

We identified 30 children we felt would benefit and I worked with them individually for 10 to 15 minutes a week for eight weeks. The intervention was divided into three stages.

- **Stage one: virtual reality.** A panorama of a pedestrian crossing we use regularly was displayed on three walls and we went through the whole procedure step by step. The children had to look for and listen to all the sights and sounds associated with using the crossing. They learned where to stand and how to press the button, and they learned to be patient and keep continually looking and listening until the green man appeared. This was activated by me, together with the sound of traffic coming to a halt and the bleeping noise indicating it was time to cross. In this way, they were able to experience what the crossing looked like and all the processes involved.
- **Stage two: practising with artefacts.** Once they were confident, we moved on to using toy traffic lights with an inbuilt timer which allowed us to create a delay between the lights switching from red to green and back again. We worked through the sequence once more, and the pupil had to stand still until the lights showed red and the green man came on, instructing them to cross the road. We repeated this for a couple of sessions.
- **Stage three: out in the real world.** The moment of truth had come. Would they remember what to do at the real crossing? Would they be able wait patiently without panicking until it was safe to cross? The answer for every single one of them was yes.

Preparing for the dentist

Since then, I have been down to the local dental surgery to take some pictures, and we are about to start all over again. This time, however, OMi has agreed to help us set it up as Ms Stenhoff and I simply don't have the time.

The dentist's nurse has also given me some artefacts. I have a chair that I will set up in the virtual reality room so the pupils can sit in it; I have masks, rubber gloves and other pieces of dental



The intervention has given pupils the confidence to cross the road safely

equipment, so they can get used to what they will see next time they visit the surgery. The only difference is that I won't be the person who goes with them to see if it has worked. We will have to rely on feedback from parents for that.

My advice to anyone starting out? Persevere. You can't tell in the virtual reality room if what you are doing will make a difference, but when you take the pupils out, the results speak for themselves. In our case, it actually happened before that. We used that crossing on a school outing one day and some of the children were in the group in front of me. There was no fuss or flapping, they just calmly walked across. So it was taking effect even before we had been through all the stages.

Ultimately you want pupils to be as independent as possible. Even if the

intervention helps them just a little, it has been a success.

FIND OUT MORE

- **Investigating the effectiveness of virtual reality treatment for specific phobia and fear in children with ASD, The Blue Room Project, Newcastle University:** <http://bit.ly/sc235-32>
- **Newcastle Blue Room treatment: CBT/VR treatment for specific phobia or fear is available to children with ASD nationally by referral through CAHMS, paediatric services or GPs.** <http://bit.ly/sc235-35>
- **Effectiveness of Virtual Reality for Teaching Street-Crossing Skills to Children and Adolescents with Autism, Haifa University:** <http://bit.ly/sc235-33>
- **OM Interactive:** <http://omi.uk/>
- **The Future of Special Schools and Therapeutic Intervention by Ange Anderson:** <http://bit.ly/sc235-34>

Practicalities – Samantha Stenhoff, class teacher

I took pictures of the crossing on a high-resolution camera to create a panorama and uploaded this on to one of the school computers, adapting it slightly so that it would fit on the three screens of the virtual reality room. I then transferred this to a computer in the room itself and began setting it up with the OMi the software.

It was a bit complicated but I managed to work my way through it. I had to overlay images of the little green man and the traffic lights onto the background, and adjust them so they were in exactly the right place. That's what took up most of the time and there was a lot of trial and error. Then I added the sounds and joined them to whichever beam was going to be broken. If that beam also activated a picture, I had to merge the two so they activated together.

Although OMi is setting up the next scenario, I will still be responsible for checking it regularly to make sure it's all in working order and dealing with any problems staff might have.

I initially took on the job because the school technician was busy and I'm quite good at ICT. However, I think it has helped to strengthen my relationship with Ms Wilson, who works in my class. It has become our project, something we discuss and work on together, which is rather nice. So although it was a huge learning curve and extremely time-consuming, it has actually turned out well.



The dynamic exchanges between the primary caregiver and a child are crucial for future child development. If a child turns away when an adult tries to play alongside them, or refuses to make eye contact or respond to encouraging gestures or smiles, what can the parent do to establish that oh-so-important connection? The aim of the PACT intervention is to give them some answers and support them to embed these in their daily lives

Empowering parents through video feedback

A parent-mediated intervention for children with autism has been shown to spark stable improvements in social communication skills and a reduction in long-term symptom severity. The approach is now being extended into schools, as **Alison Thomas** reports

The Pre-school Autism Communication Therapy (PACT) is a video feedback (VF) intervention that works with parents of young children with symptoms of core autism to help them generate early to-and-fro interactions with their child, enhancing the child's ability to initiate communication and improving their social communication skills.

The therapy was originally tested in a multi-site randomised controlled trial conducted between 2006 and 2009 by researchers from the universities of Manchester, Newcastle and King's College London. 152 families of children aged between two years and four years 11 months took part, randomly assigned to the intervention or treatment as usual.

At the 13-month endpoint, results showed that parents in the PACT group were able to pick up on their child's attempts to communicate, however fleeting or unusual these might be, and respond in ways that supported the

development of further interaction. This in turn had encouraged the child to initiate communication more often. Further analysis showed that these improvements had led to a reduction in the severity of children's autism symptoms, both in terms of impaired social skills and repetitive and restricted behaviours.

The absence of any direct therapist-child intervention indicated that these improvements were entirely due to their parents' altered style of communication. While this was a striking outcome, even more striking were the findings of a six-year follow-up study that showed that the reduction in children's symptom severity and the amelioration in their social communication skills had been sustained.

'Our findings are encouraging, as they represent an improvement in the core symptoms of autism previously thought very resistant to change,' noted Professor Jonathan Green of the University of Manchester when the study was published in October 2016. 'This is not a cure, in the

sense that the children who demonstrated improvements will still show remaining symptoms to a variable extent, but it does suggest that working with parents to interact with their children in this way can lead to improvements in symptoms over the long term.'

How PACT works

The PACT approach is founded on collaborative evaluation of videoed parent-child play interaction; the parent brings to the discussion their unique prior knowledge of their child and the therapist complements this with their theoretical and analytical skills.

The intervention runs over the course of a year and comprises 18 sessions, divided into six stages. Therapy goals are determined initially by the child's developmental stage, and subsequently by their levels of progress and those of their parents as the intervention continues. To reinforce and sustain impact, parents undertake 30 minutes of daily home practice, starting with natural play, and then progressing to embedding the communication strategies they have learned into daily routines such as snacks, bath and bedtime.

Dr Catherine Aldred, consultant speech and language therapist, honorary lecturer at the University of Manchester and one of the therapy leads describes a typical session.

'A range of developmentally appropriate toys, chosen in advance by the therapist, is placed in a clear plastic box in the centre of the room. The parent and child play with these just as they would do at home, while the therapist makes a 10-minute video recording.

'The adults then watch the video through, giving parents the opportunity to observe the whole interaction for themselves while the therapist makes notes and identifies suitable clips for review. Depending on the stage of the intervention, these clips might demonstrate the accomplishment of previous therapy goals, highlight successful episodes of interaction to help the parent reflect on positive ways of interacting with their child or be useful for introducing new strategies.

'In early sessions, parents identify enjoyable moments, activities that worked well and where shared engagement was achieved. In later sessions, the therapist guides a review of clips related to PACT-stage specific goals and strategies.'

The therapist starts the conversation off by eliciting broad observations from the parent, then gradually narrows the

focus, playing and rewinding a selected clip to explore what the child's signals and responses might mean and what the parent could do to establish a rapport and sustain the interaction a little longer. The therapist fosters a collaborative role, drawing on the parent's interpretation, thoughts and beliefs, whilst at the same time guiding them to gain a deeper understanding of their child and give them insights into approaches that theory shows might be effective.

'Besides efficiencies in therapist contact time, a potential benefit of working with parents in this way is that the intervention can be embedded 24/7 at home, where early social skills are mainly learned,' observes Dr Aldred. 'This in turn is likely to have a positive impact on other aspects of family life. Meanwhile, the reflective nature of the therapy boosts parents' confidence and morale, restoring their faith in their existing parenting skills and empowering them to engage in self-directed learning.'

“These improvements were entirely due to their parents' altered style of communication”

PACT-G

Another finding of the PACT 7-11 follow-up study was that, despite the undoubted improvements in children's communication skills and social functioning, there was less evidence of these improvements in contexts beyond the home. This is perhaps not surprising, given the difficulties children with autism have transferring learning from one context to another. It does, however, present a challenge if the therapy is to make a difference to wider aspects of children's everyday lives and development.

To address this, the research team has embarked on a new study which extends the parent-child therapeutic model to work simultaneously in education and in the home. Aimed at two- to 11-year-olds, Paediatric Autism Communication Trial-Generalised (PACT-G) completed its pilot phase in December 2016 and the main trial, which involves 250 families and runs for a year, has just begun.

'The aim is to generate the same benefits we achieved in parent-child two-way interaction and subsequent gains

in child communication into other key environments, working with adults who have a consistent relationship with the child, such as their TA,' says Dr Aldred. 'We're using exactly the same techniques of videoing adult-child play, immediate video feedback and supervision between therapist and adult, alternating visits between home and school.

'A new element is the use of Skype supervision between face-to-face sessions. The parent or TA is asked to practise the strategies they have taken away from the face-to-face session and send short video clips, which the therapist reviews before the Skype supervision. This use of remote communication increases efficiency whilst maintaining the same level of intensity of intervention.'

The researchers hope that the combination of home and school delivery will increase the impact of the intervention. The wider age range will also allow them to explore the effect of the PACT approach in middle childhood, an area of autism research that has received little attention until now, while the design of the trial provides a unique opportunity to investigate how these children generalise skills across contexts.

Meanwhile Dr Aldred feels that in schools it is releasing some hidden skills in the TAs.

'It is giving them permission to play or just have a more naturalistic social interaction with the child,' she says, 'and then set some goals around that and validate what they are doing in a more naturalistic way. It's not all about target-driven objectives.

'In addition, although still in the very early stages, the trial is also opening up lots of fundamental questions. What is the appropriate social environment for these children in schools? What social skills do they need for coping with the school environment? At the same time, further mediation analysis of the previous study is changing our whole understanding of what autism is, making us reconsider questions such as: what do we need to target, what do we actually need to address in our interventions? So it is giving us food for thought on many different levels.'

For insights into how an approach based on video feedback called Video Interaction Guidance™ (VIG) has been used in schools to support children who find it difficult to establish positive relationships, see The power of visual evidence, Special Children 233



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Reading for pleasure

Kenny Pieper offers some ideas to help struggling readers acquire the reading habit

Tom sits cross-legged in the library. He's not a reader, never has been, and I can see this is difficult for him. It's not only that he doesn't like reading or doesn't like this particular book; he finds reading difficult.

It's difficult because he really wants to please me, his new English teacher, in the first week of term in his new school. He wants to like it – he really does – and he concentrates hard so as not to move his lips as he reads. He wants to read *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket because his friend liked the books, and he watched the movie over the summer and quite liked it too. He can't do it though. He can't really read, you see.

Tom is probably representative of hundreds (maybe thousands) of kids going through the same thing that week. What have we done to him? He is 11 years old and has lost, or never discovered, the joy of submerging himself in a book. He's had seven years of school and is sitting and hoping forlornly that it will all click into place for him. Until that happens, he'll feel excluded from an amazing world: a world his friends inhabit comfortably.

A passport to everywhere

It was the desperate need to change the life chances of children like Tom that prompted me to write: *Reading for Pleasure – A Passport to Everywhere*. My intention was to share some of the strategies I've used in classes over the years; but I also wanted to raise some issues about the manner in which we, as teachers, help to create, even embed, negative attitudes to reading. Lack of choice, lack of good books when there is a choice, lack of time to read in school and lack of care together with a culture where reading for pleasure has become an extravagant extra in the classroom.

Meanwhile, the correlation between poverty and low literacy levels is well documented. Amongst the sobering statistics highlighted by *The Read On. Get On* campaign is the fact that over half of children from the most deprived areas of Scotland leave primary school not reading well.



The link between poverty and low literacy levels is decisively broken at Alder Moor Farm School (see pages 16-19), where children 'develop a love of reading very early in their time in school, and are able to read fluently and with evident enjoyment by the time they leave.' (Ofsted 2015)

You have to wonder about a system that, after 50-odd years of free compulsory education, has failed to narrow the literacy gap between the rich and poor. Despite the necessity of schooling in their lives and the teachers who tell them education will help them get a better job, young people often see older brothers and sisters ending up in the same low-paid jobs as their parents and grandparents. And the cycle continues. What could reading give them that would change that?

That is why I think it is essential that we devote more time to promoting a love of reading at the expense of almost everything else we do. This doesn't necessarily have to mean a love of fiction. Every subject teacher needs to encourage kids to read about their

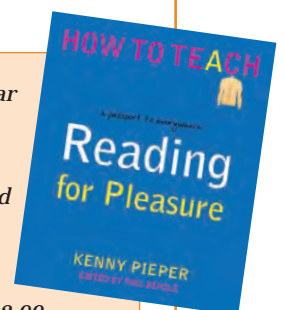
subject and to provide high quality materials that interest them. Kids who read well across the curriculum are in a more advantageous position to succeed in school and in life outside school.

Reading as a habit rather than an imposition gives us the opportunity to build up our background knowledge and develop those reading skills, increase our understanding of the world and move on to more challenging work. It becomes part of what we do.

I really believe that those who see themselves as readers – and I make the distinction with those who merely read – become active students, and will become more active citizens and, one fine day, the thoughtful, intelligent, hard-working people we want them to be.

Kenny Pieper teaches English at Duncanrig Secondary School near Glasgow and blogs regularly at <https://justtryingtobebetter.wordpress.com/>

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Ten minutes



The authors of the *Read On. Get On* report (Scotland) believe that 'as little as 10 minutes [of reading] a day can make a big difference in a child's life'

Like teachers everywhere, I'm required to cover all the content and tick all the boxes of the curriculum. So to commit time to allowing my students to read for pleasure – free reading, if you like – is a big commitment. But what do I expect back?

Ten minutes. Every lesson. I see all of my classes up to S4 (Year 11) four times a week. Four times 10 minutes makes 40 minutes. If they do 10 minutes of reading homework as well, the figure doubles to 80 minutes, and in some cases more. I don't expect to get an immediate return for this effort, but as the habit begins to take hold, good things start to happen.

The environment in the classroom has to be conducive to reading, however. At the beginning of every lesson, my students enter quietly – often they will meet me standing at the door, reading. They quietly get their books out and start reading too. There are no questions. They must not interrupt my reading or anyone else's. Silence. Ten minutes every day. If they have forgotten their book or finished it, they can get another one from the class library (see right) or update their dialogue reading journals. Either way, they must not interrupt the reading of others. That's my starter. Every time.

It can be a slow process, but they

get the hang of it. The younger ones, especially, need the time to develop and grow into this habit: they can arrive from primary school with a continued need for attention and validation from their teacher, so ignoring them for ten minutes can be a challenge initially.

If at first you don't succeed...

A young boy I taught a couple of years ago failed an assessment I knew he was capable of passing. He was a disengaged kid, likeable but uninterested. Nevertheless, he had made some great progress that year, yet he barely completed half of the questions. What I later discovered was that he had been secretly reading Nick Hornby's *Siam* under the desk.

Should I have been more observant? Probably. Should I be proud of him? Definitely. And while he may never become a professor at Highbrow University, this boy is a reader.

The class he belonged to was challenging for many reasons, but I had persisted with 10 minutes of reading every lesson, even when resistance from some and open hostility from others made it extremely tempting to give up and do something else. If I didn't make the extra effort to persuade them to read, who else was going to do it? If it didn't happen now, then when?

A quality class library

When I was first given my own classroom, it had a bookcase filled with books: some classics, some unheard of, some brilliant, some awful. A good start? Not really. They were in a dreadful state: dog-eared, graffitied with every bodily part you could imagine, and scrawled with the sorts of insult only teenage boys can dream up. The covers were ripped or ripped off. Faced with this second-rate selection, is it any wonder that pupils didn't want to read?

So here's your choice. You could persist in attempting to convince Year 11 that, despite their looks (and remember what you don't judge a book by), these are great books. Or you could do what I did: get a big black bin liner, dump the sorry broken specimens and start again. It's the only way.

I've made a point of never offering up something to a student that I wouldn't want to read myself, and I wouldn't have picked up those tatty old books. Of course we judge books by their covers. Always have, always will. So, even if your departmental budget won't stretch to new books, start to pick up the odd second-hand one here and there. I've even bought them with Christmas book tokens. It builds up – and you can choose the titles you want on your shelf. Get them wherever you can, but get them.

Interest inventory

I got the idea of an interest inventory from *Igniting a Passion for Reading: Successful Strategies for Building Lifetime Readers* by Steven Layne.

It allows me to tap into the prior knowledge and experiences of my

students, at the very least providing me with a foothold onto something that might begin to build a reader.

My list comprises a series of questions which ask students to tell me about their lives – their hobbies and passions, favourite movies and books,

their dreams, but it can be anything you think might be interesting; it's totally up to you.

I hand this out during the first week of term and, when completed, I keep them in a ring binder to which I can refer throughout the year.

Interest inventory

| |
|---|
| Name |
| 1. What do you like to do in your spare time? |
| 2. Do you belong to any clubs or teams? If so, what are they? If not, why not? |
| 3. What kinds of movies do you like? Why? |
| 4. What are your favourite sports? Why? There can be more than one if you like. |
| 5. If you had three wishes, what would they be? |
| 6. What kinds of books do you own? |
| 7. If you had a surprise day off school, how would you spend it? |
| 8. If you could transport yourself to any time or place in the past, where would you go? |
| 9. If you had the chance to meet any famous person, living or dead, who would it be? Why? |
| 10. If you could pick any three books from a bookshop for free, what would they be about? |
| 11. If you could go on a trip to any place in the world today, where would you go? |

These pupil profiles prove to be useful in lots of ways throughout the year. They can be your best friend at moments of the greatest resistance, when you feel that you are making no progress at all and are about to give up on that difficult

pupil with whom you are struggling to connect. The knowledge that they like Superman comics, or surfing, or ponies could be a little conversation piece that helps you begin to build a relationship. And, of course, it allows you to go

hunting for a book, a magazine or even a newspaper article that might excite their interest. If you can get just one piece of writing into their hands that they actually want to read, then you have made a start.

The school library

I try to ensure that my classes go to the library at least once a week. Many of the pupils are seasoned readers and library rules are second nature to them. But some have never been to a library before and don't know how to behave or what to do.

By the end of the first visit, I have already recognised four or five 'Toms', not all of them boys. One of them picks up a 700-page novel, the others pick up books without even looking at them. This is why a teacher talking about books, every day, whenever possible, is so important. These guys need to hear what books can do, recognise what they can find in them, talk about what they might discover. They need to see us reading, picking up a book, carrying one around, being readers.

So discussing books becomes the device I use as I model the life of a reader. When we're in the library, I tell them about my reading: what confuses me, what entertains me, what makes me laugh. And I ask the same of them. Back in the classroom, telling others about what they have read becomes part of everyday life. Recommendations fly

round the room. We have book speed-dating (see below) and other activities that get them talking. When teaching language points, I reach for my current novel and discuss a particular image, the use of contrast or an effective use of the colon. As a result, Tom starts to see

that reading is useful to him. He begins to enjoy his 10 minutes at the beginning of every lesson. Sometimes he will even read for 10 minutes at night and come in and talk about it. Excitedly.

As the year progresses, the library becomes his space too. He is included.



Picture: the National Literacy Trust

Sharing books and telling others what you find interesting, entertaining, or perhaps confusing, is part of the joy of becoming a 'reader' as opposed to someone who just reads

Book speed-dating

Students sit in two rows of 15 facing each other. I ask them, very quickly, to think about how they might 'sell' their current book to their partner. Not an easy task, but they usually scratch something together.

On the first bell, the 15 on the left start talking about their books. They summarise, they sell and they repeat. After 30 seconds, I ring the bell again. The group opposite start up.

After another 30 seconds, I ring the bell again and those on the left move along one seat. Bell. Go again. The 15 on the left repeat their 30-second sales pitch, perhaps slightly more confidently this time, slightly more assured and

focused. They get better each time they do it. Meanwhile, the room seems to get noisier as they begin to relax and enjoy themselves, starting to understand the rules. They are moving, talking, having fun.

By the time they've been all the way round, 15 minutes have passed. They have repeated their talks 15 times. They have heard another 15 short book talks. I give them a heart-shaped sticky note and ask them to go and find the book they fancy most.

This provides a few more minutes of chatter about books, reminders and confirmations. We leave the sticky notes on the board for a day or two, so they can check out other students' choices, as

can other classes. They leave the room talking about books. The next time they go to the library, they take their sticky notes with them.

Book speed-dating is great fun, but it also allows you to nurture several skills: the nature of multiple talks ensures that your pupils are learning to summarise properly and make decisions about what is important; they hear 15 other reviews, so they can no longer employ the excuse that 'they don't know any good books'; they may well be fulfilling any assessment for talk outcomes that you have to cover; most importantly, you are embedding a culture where books are something we share and enjoy and have fun with.

FIND OUT MORE

- **Read On. Get On.** There are two separate but related campaigns, each launched by a coalition of partners.
- **Scotland:** <http://bit.ly/sc235-40>
- **England:** <http://bit.ly/sc235-41>

Out in the woods, students always find plenty to do



Finding my voice

Mike Baldwin outlines a project he is working on that improves the communications skills of pupils with learning difficulties

There's something magical going on in the woods behind Belvue, a special school for children with moderate and specific learning difficulties aged 11 to 19 in Northolt, west London. Children who formerly found communication difficult are finding their voices.

It all began six years ago with Zainab, a girl with autism and limited functional language. She struggled following her transition from primary education and found changes to her routine and the busy secondary school environment extraordinarily hard to cope with. As autumn progressed and the days became shorter, she took to screaming for her father as dusk fell – the changes in light level were confusing and incomprehensible to her.

Zainab moved into my class in Year 8. My TA and I believe in the need to explore the world with our students, so we took Zainab for a walk in our newly acquired wood next to the school – she instantly ran away from us. We knew she couldn't get far, so rather than causing her alarm by chasing after her, we waited. Five or six minutes later, we heard a voice call excitedly from the other side of the wood: 'Mr B, Mr B, where are you? Where are you?' We were astonished. Something had happened in those few minutes that had helped Zainab find her voice.

“ Each day the students developed a little more language, confidence and independence ”

Inspired, we were soon exploring the wood. Our students love it there; they are more proactive than they are indoors, where the nature of the typical classroom limits the scope of what they can do, and perhaps even their expectations of their own capabilities. We laid out paths, lit fires, cooked soup, made tea and toast, built a woodland garden (for which we received a gold award in the Ealing in Bloom competition), climbed trees, and planted thousands of bluebells and snowdrops. Each day the students developed a little more language, confidence and independence. The wood became the heart of our curriculum.

The context

Belvue School is in an area of high social deprivation with a significant number of immigrant families, many of whom face multiple challenges as they strive to nurture their children. They do the best they can, but few have gardens, fewer still get to explore the natural world, and limited independence makes typical teenage exploration very challenging.

When we first take a class to the wood, some children are scared. They worry that they will get dirty or hurt or that the resident fox will eat them; they do not know what to do. Once they begin to relax a little, they realise that they can explore and begin to have fun. Then suddenly, there is a moment when they let go and immerse themselves in all the woods

have to offer. At this point, their ability to communicate often begins to improve, and they start to make connections.

Let me give you two examples.

Interpreting the natural world

Like other secondary special schools, we have always had difficulty finding age-appropriate texts, so we write our own. Based on the weather, the seasons and aspects of nature, these help students to develop an understanding of a small part of the world that they inhabit. We may read the story every day for weeks or months, initially led by adults, but as the students become familiar with it, they take over. We always hope that they will connect new vocabulary with meaning. One rhyming story about a snowy London winter includes a repetitive chorus, which reinforces key vocabulary.

A winter dark and a winter deep,
A winter cold with snow;
A winter wet, a winter freeze,
A winter from long, long, ago.

One snowy day we took the class to the wood. A student with Down syndrome came up to me with a look of bewilderment and surprise on her face. She signed: 'Snow cold.' She had connected the story's refrain with the world around her and it was a revelation.

This is typical of the breakthrough moments we have in the wood.

Communication and creativity

Another example concerns a student with significant and life-impairing sensory-seeking behaviours. His sensory diet provides him with lots of opportunities for proprioceptive and vestibular movement to help him learn to meet his own sensory needs. Working in the wood lends itself to this. If the group decides to build a fire, he collects the firewood, repeatedly bending down and straightening up to put logs into the wheelbarrow – this helps him to be calm and still, and replaces an aspect of his therapy-room-based sensory diet.

This student has by far the most language of those in the class, but is least able to use it due to sensory overload. Learning is very hard for him. By giving him strategies to meet his own needs, we have enabled him to interact better with the world and to begin to learn.

He recently wanted to climb a tree. Together we chose one and set a safe climbing limit (as a precaution, I removed the branches immediately above this height). Up he scrambled while I watched from a discrete distance.



Students learn practical skills, like sawing safely

“ **She had connected the story's refrain with the world around her and it was a revelation** ”

I later found him lying on a branch with his arms wrapped around it. When I asked if he was OK, he immediately responded: 'Yes, I can see the hills.' Then he started shaking the branch up and down. 'I'm riding a horse,' he exclaimed, suddenly able to put his mind into a creative place where he could begin to role play. The woods had worked their magic once again.

The impetus to find out more

So what is the secret? At my headteacher's suggestion, I applied for a grant from SHINE (an education charity that focuses on teacher- and school-led innovation and replicating success) to do some research into why our pupils' communication skills improve when they are in the woods.

When my bid was accepted, we sat down together to restructure my timetable. I gave up teaching design and technology to move to the wood, where I now teach communication-based activities to Key Stage 3. I've also become the school's education researcher: if there is an aspect of school practice that merits investigation, I gather and read the academic literature to see how we might

apply the findings to our setting.

Since my first walk in the woods with Zainab, the school has embraced outdoor learning. We have created several learning spaces including a yurt (where we can work if it's really wet), a Celtic roundhouse (built last February) that we are in the process of roofing, and two fire pits with story circles (where pupils light fires, cook and take part in stories and music). The construction of a pair of innovative, architect-designed, woodland classrooms, which are linked by a barn that functions as a gatehouse, is nearly finished. There is something of Narnia about these, with their triad of sweeping curved roofs, floor-to-ceiling picture windows, and wood-burning stoves.

SHINE project goals

Our SHINE project is about understanding what constitutes best practice in this field with a view to creating more opportunities for students with communication difficulties to learn language that will help them in life.

I am supported by Sara Longman (a remarkable teaching assistant), an occupational therapist (who has helped me apply OT programmes to a woodland context), and two speech and language therapists. Together we are compiling evidence to help us understand the relationships between the wood and improved communication.

We have teamed up with the School of Social Sciences at London Metropolitan University who will help us analyse the video footage we take to capture progress. The outcomes of our research will help us to develop a curriculum that can be used in inner-city and rural schools alike.

Not every school is fortunate enough to have woodland, but some have a green space. At the very least, they will have a playground, which could be turned to advantage by installing some earth-filled troughs around the edge where teachers could bury interesting items for students to discover. Digging around in the soil to see what they might turn up is an activity our students just love.

Schools can also look for opportunities beyond the school gates. We have a nature reserve nearby where our post-16 students spend three or four days a week on work-related learning.

Language supports independence

Without functional communication, life is impaired. Without the capacity to think in structured language, it is very hard to do anything for yourself. Once we have understood what is improving our



Mike Baldwin (left) receives a grant to fund Finding My Voice research

students' communication, we would like to address other aspects of students' lives.

This year it is Finding My Voice, next year we might add Finding My Independence, which will help students to explore what independence means for them. In some ways, this is already happening. For example, at the start of the year, one student with Down syndrome was beginning to speak at the two-word level. Back in December as he was toasting some bread in the flames of the fire, I asked him what he wanted on it and he replied: 'My toast I want chocolate.' Delighted with this response, I helped him restructure it using Makaton so that he can now say: 'On my toast I want chocolate.' If he can make toast, he can learn to make simple meals.

“Without functional communication, life is impaired”

Of course, without a control group running alongside the project, we have no definitive proof that our children's achievements have been facilitated by their experiences in the woods. However, as a teacher of 16 years, ten of which have been in special schools, I have never seen language skills develop so readily in so many pupils in any other setting – anecdotally, being in the woods seems to support the process of language acquisition.

Developing life skills

For us at Belvue School, these advances have resulted in a general expansion of the school action plan and this year learning outside the classroom is on our School Improvement Plan. Together, all members of staff are beginning to consider how we can use our grounds and

locality to support and promote learning, and we are extending our already comprehensive education of students in the real world.

We've been working towards this for many years. For example, every week, one class is timetabled for a Foody Friday with their teacher. They sit down together to plan a meal, go to the supermarket, buy the food, bring it back, cook it and eat it together. A number of classes have now taken the concept a stage further, and go into the woods to cook on an open fire.

Meanwhile, more and more staff are planning trips to places they perhaps would not have considered before. By working in the woods, we have developed our own confidence as practitioners; we now recognise that play (formerly the preserve of primary schools) can be age appropriate, and that it is a vital tool in the development of communication, social skills and wellbeing.

Quality of life

Most of our pupils will need supervision in adulthood. Many will always have very limited communication, despite all of the work we put into this. Some do not have the capacity to write, or to count beyond three, let alone understand what a number represents. For them, this is about enriching the experience of learning whilst developing wider communication and understanding, and developing lifelong interests and skills.

Many of our more complex students go on to college when they leave us, but after that there is little provision for them. They may occasionally access a day centre, and their families will always do their best to support them with little help. Unfortunately few will find employment or have a role in society.

By showing them that they can get enjoyment from being outside, whether it is gardening or walking in the woods, hopefully we're setting up lifelong interests, hobbies and practices that will support healthy living, whilst continuing to find their voices.

Mike Baldwin is the education researcher and a Key Stage 3 teacher at Belvue School in Northolt, London

FIND OUT MORE

- SHINE: <http://bit.ly/sc235-28>
- The curriculum will be published via the Belvue School website towards the end of the summer term. www.belvueschool.com

You are caught by the meal-time supervisor because you are mucking about in the toilet.

DO YOU

Run off?

Blame it on someone else?

Say the truth?



Thinking not reacting

John Galloway outlines a game that helps pupils become more reflective about impulsive behaviour

‘Why did you do that?’ is the sort of question that can often be heard in schools, frequently in a despairing tone, sometimes in an angry one, but usually with a genuine desire to understand why a child might behave in a way that is likely to get them into trouble.

You know the sort of thing: poking a friend in the break time queue having just been asked to stand quietly, giving a flippant response in the middle of a telling-off, or maybe refusing to comply with a very reasonable request.

Children with challenging behaviour sometimes react impulsively, making a situation worse through their response, when simply doing what they are asked would lead to a speedy resolution. But they can seldom tell you why they behaved as they did.

Executive functioning

We might try to understand this by thinking about their executive functioning, their ability to make reasonable, rational decisions, to act in their own best interests and in ways that solve problems rather than exacerbating them. However,

for many of the children who get into trouble in schools, this just isn't working as it should. Where their peers might say 'sorry', pick up some dropped litter or shake hands and make up, these learners just don't seem to get it.

We might try to talk to them about it later, when they have calmed down, but even then they might feel got at and respond defensively, starting off another cycle of confrontation with no happy ending in sight.

One way to address this is to depersonalise it, to make it one step removed, and to test different behaviours and responses by creating a game, here using PowerPoint.

Exploring different responses

Apart from helping to get our point across, PowerPoint can be used to make multidirectional stories. Rather than clicking through one slide at a time, users can go off in different directions using the hyperlink facility – much as on the internet, only here the embedded links can take you anywhere in the set of slides.

For example, working with learning mentors from six local schools, each with

a group of six Year 5 pupils – almost all boys, all thought to act impulsively and make situations worse – we created a multidimensional activity to explore their responses in different situations.

Each group was asked to think about an example of when they might get into trouble with a member of staff, then to think about different possible responses. These were then explored further by considering whether they made the situation worse or better. If the former, then what responses might arise in this developed scenario? The underlying message was one of choice and control, that the situation changed depending upon the choices they took.

Hyperlink leaps

From here the groups used PowerPoint and the hyperlinks facility to model their scenarios. The first slide outlined the situation with three possible ways they might respond. Clicking on any of these options would move to another slide, with either a reinforcement if the chosen option resolved the problem, or a fresh set of choices if it made things worse. By working with several groups, when pupils landed on a 'success' slide, this could provide a link to a fresh scenario to explore that had been created by another group.

Throughout the activity it was recognised that the groupwork element

of describing areas of potential problems and exploring different responses was more important than the creation of the game itself. However, the complete piece of work was seen as a useful tool for prompting discussion, one which could be edited and added to, perhaps to more closely reflect individuals' choices or the sanctions imposed in different schools.

Extending the programme to secondary schools

With older learners we used a multimedia authoring program called Hyperstudio, again using the paradigm of creating a game. Players were helped to think about conflicts that arise during the school day, and then the roles of the various characters in the game and how they respond. In this way, students were at arms length from the problem – observers rather than participants – and therefore, hopefully, more able to be objective.

The activity was entitled: *Your choice: will it be a good day at school today?* Working both in small groups and as individuals alongside behaviour support staff, students thought about the critical points in the day when people get into trouble, what happens, and what the

options are. The underlying message was that, whilst you can't change other people's behaviour, you can do something different yourself. By responding less impulsively, more reflectively, players would get through the day without getting into trouble, and even earn praise along the way.

“ Children with challenging behaviour sometimes react impulsively, making a situation worse ”

The scenarios ranged from the trivial, such as tightening a tie or queuing in an orderly manner in the dining hall, to the serious, such as answering back to teachers and fighting in the playground. Whilst some of these might involve a perceived loss of prestige in front of others, or compliance with a member of staff considered to be 'picking on' them, the understanding of their response would change to one of personal choice rather than reflexive reaction.

Looking at things in a different light

Whilst a long way from a therapeutic intervention, the approach has shades of cognitive behavioural therapy to it, a treatment that aims to help people develop coping strategies, reformulate how they understand problems and adapt their behaviour. This does not always change an individual's behaviour, but it does help them better understand that their behaviour is their responsibility, and that if they do not like the outcomes, this might be down to them.

Although it is hard to measure the impact of such interventions, there was a consensus that this was a useful tool in the staff toolbox, and that pupils became more reflective and less likely to dig themselves into ever deeper holes.

It also gave staff a fresh question to pose. They no longer ask: 'Why did you do that?' but: 'What do you think will happen next?'



John Galloway is a consultant and writer. He advises on ICT, SEND and inclusion in Tower Hamlets

The screenshot shows a game interface with a green background. On the left, a large text box asks: "A teacher caught you fighting in the playground with another kid." Below this, it asks "DO YOU" and lists three options: "Argue with the teacher?", "Ignore the teacher and keep fighting?", and "Tell the truth?". In the center, there is a photograph of two boys in a school hallway, one with his hand on the other's shoulder. On the right, a vertical column of five panels shows the consequences of each choice:

- Panel 1: "You're sent to the headteachers office. She didn't do anything but told you off and let you go." (try again)
- Panel 2: "The teacher tells you to go to the headteacher's office. DO YOU? Refuse to go? OR Listen to the teacher and go straightaway?" (Go to the headteacher's office right now)
- Panel 3: "Your teacher phones your parents and they come and pick you up from school. You are suspended for a week." (Why did I have to do it? try again)
- Panel 4: "You and the kid are sent to the headteacher's room for the rest of the day. That was a big mistake ignoring the teacher." (start again)
- Panel 5: "You and the kid were off the hook but you only had 15 minutes detention. It was good telling the truth the situation was finished." (Finished)

The game helps pupils understand the consequences of their actions in an impersonal way



Helping young people to THRIVE

Annie Grant finds out how THRIVE, a new approach to CAMHS, puts children and young people at the centre of provision

It's lunchtime in a secondary school in Waltham Forest, east London. In the canteen, Ayesha (not her real name) is typing a message on her phone.

She received a detention this morning and needs to tell someone that she won't be able to meet them after school. She presses 'send' and the text goes off... to her mental health worker.

My Mind

Ayesha is using My Mind, a communication app developed in close partnership with local youngsters by Waltham Forest Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), part of the North East London NHS Foundation Trust (NELFT).

'We knew that young people found getting in touch with clinicians really frustrating,' says Emma Selby from the emotional wellbeing and mental health service. 'Either the clinicians would be busy, or the young people would be in lessons or with their friends. Then the clinicians would have to talk to parents, and the young people didn't like that. Clinicians were spending up to six hours a week on unsuccessful communication.'

'Plus,' she continues, 'we found that young people didn't like talking on the phone. They preferred other means of

communication, such as BBM, texting or Whatsapp.'

My Mind, which is aimed at young people aged 13+, works on smartphones or computers and is available at two levels. The light version gives universal access to a resource library, signposting users to helpful mental health apps, websites and downloadable resources.

But where someone is accessing mental health services, a clinician can activate appropriate features of the full version according to the young person's needs.

Improving communication

Users have their own profile page, which can be updated as often as they like. 'This is really useful,' says Ms Selby, 'as young people tend to change their mobile number a lot.'

Each profile links straight to the young person's patient record and all the clinicians in a young person's network can be connected to that individual. 'A lot of young people are supported by psychiatrists, CAMHS, the home treatment team, inpatient wards, youth offending teams or substance misuse services, and with My Mind they can work with them all through one interface,' explains Ms Selby.

Clinicians will often have a profile page of their own, which includes their picture.

'It makes us more approachable and helps build rapport,' says Ms Selby. 'One young person told me how reassuring it was to see my picture, because she thought I'd be really old and wouldn't understand her.'

Both users and clinicians can add notes to the app. For example, clinicians can view a young person's feedback after a session, or gauge how they are feeling before a session takes place. Similarly, young people can alert clinicians about particular issues they want to talk about. They can also set and record goals and track their progress towards them visually, through a range of graphics.

In addition, there is a chat facility, where young people can create groups that include all the clinicians in their network. Push notifications remind them about appointments, and an administrator function enables them to let clinicians know if they are going to be late, or, like Ayesha, they are unable to attend.

The app also reduces the possibility of paperwork going astray as care plans, medication plans and letters can be sent digitally.

Reforming CAHMS

NELFT is a member of the i-THRIVE Community of Practice, a group of 44 CAMHS providers from across England

who are working together to improve mental health provision for children and young people by implementing THRIVE, a new framework for structuring mental health support and treatment. The My Mind app is part of NELFT's response to this challenge.

The THRIVE conceptual framework was developed by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. At its core is a commitment to putting children, young people and families at the heart of mental health provision, and ensuring they are involved in decisions about their care.

'In practice, that means that the support and treatment that young people receive is based on what they want and need, rather than trying to fit them into available services and traditional pathways,' explains Emma Louisy, programme manager for i-THRIVE, which supports providers and commissioners to reorganise mental health services according to THRIVE principles in a way that fits their local context. 'The idea is that if young people are more engaged in deciding what their care is, they are more likely to achieve better outcomes.'

Five categories of need

The THRIVE framework is based around five groupings, reflecting the different types of supportive activities available to children and young people with mental health issues.

Thriving

In the THRIVE model, the majority of the population, who do not require individualised mental health advice, support or treatment are considered to be 'thriving'.

The Department of Health's 2015 report *Future In Mind*, which kick-started the current CAMHS reforms, identified child mental health and wellbeing as 'everybody's business', not just the concern of CAMHS. THRIVE supports this view, emphasising community responsibility for supporting all children and young people to maintain mental wellness through universal and targeted initiatives aimed at preventing mental illness and promoting resilience.

In schools, such initiatives might include Personal, Social and Health Education for all, Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) and nurture provision for specific groups.

“When you make your own choices, you're more likely to follow them through”

Getting advice

Instead of being referred automatically for treatment, it is estimated that 30% of young people with mental health issues could benefit from simply 'getting advice' from a trained practitioner about ways to manage their mental health condition.

'Some young people with mild depression will want treatment, but others may prefer to be given guidance on how to manage the condition themselves,' explains Emma Louisy. Local databases, such as the one available via the My Mind app, can help point such young people to useful community and digital resources to assist self-management.

Getting help and getting more help

Of course, some young people with mental health issues will want and require treatment from specialist practitioners. For THRIVE's 'Getting help' group and those who might need longer, more extensive treatment – 'Getting more help' – the emphasis is on focused, evidence-based treatments with clearly identified goals and end points.

'Sometimes endings can feel quite sudden and that can be very hard for some young people,' explains Emma Selby. 'In NELF we considered ways to provide clarity on endings for this group. The goal-tracking function within the My Mind app helps a young person to be in control and to prepare for treatment to end.'

Getting risk support

The final grouping comprises young people with the most complex and severe needs, who are at risk of going 'into crisis' or self-harming, and where evidence-based treatment has proved ineffective. Because such young people often have serious family and life pressures compounded by mental health issues, THRIVE proposes a shift of emphasis from specific mental health treatment to close inter-agency collaboration, aimed at keeping families safe and helping them to identify and prioritise their own needs.

Sharing successful initiatives

My Mind is just one of the creative solutions that have emerged as CAHMS practitioners from around the country have explored ways of implementing THRIVE to address issues of concern in their local context, and then shared these with the rest of the i-THRIVE community.

Another is Next Step, developed by





Wirral CAMHS (part of Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust) in partnership with young people and families. This comprises a pack of 52 cards designed to act as a bridge between adults and young people when talking about mental health and emotional wellbeing, and to facilitate goal-focused conversations.

Next Step

The first element of the resource is a set of 12 'life cards', with headings such as Home, School, Friends, Mood, and Safe, which are used alongside three traffic light cards (red, amber and green). The young person sorts these according to how they feel things are going for them at that time. For example, they might place Home under a red traffic light if this is an area of concern for them.

'Even without eye contact or words, you can quickly establish what a young person is feeling about their current situation,' explains Fiona Pender, clinical director of Wirral CAMHS. 'The life cards are not about symptoms, they're about areas of a young person's life. And so they can sometimes elicit what's really bothering them in a way that a more symptom-focused conversation may not.'

After this initial activity, the young person is prompted to select a card representing one area of their life that they would like to be different. Using an approach from solution-focused therapy, the adult then uses cards numbered 1-10 to help them set a goal to help bring about that change. The adult asks: 'If we could make this area of your life as good as it could be – a 10 – what would that look like?' Once this goal is established, the young person sets a baseline by identifying where on the scale they would place the

area for change.

Finally, 'steps' cards (with actions such as Let Go, Relax, Stop or Choice) are used to prompt the young person to consider what they might do to move their baseline score just one step up the scale towards their goal. The young person decides on up to three actions.

'Sometimes setting goals can feel a bit daunting,' says Dr Pender. 'This approach breaks the process down and makes it feel more manageable. But the whole point is that young people are choosing what they think they need to do, as opposed to having an adult telling them: "I really think you need to go to bed earlier" or "You need to stop going out with those friends." When you make your own choices, you're more likely to follow them through.'

A picture of the relevant 'steps' cards, taken on the young person's phone or emailed to them, provides a simple visual record of the choices they have made as they try to put them into practice.

'They go away with a sense of being validated and listened to, not being told they're wrong or criticised in any way,' observes Dr Pender. 'It's about supporting them to take that next step towards their personal goals, and that makes them feel more positive and confident.'

A system where everyone works together

Wirral CAMHS hopes that Next Step will provide an important bridge between CAMHS and the rest of the children's workforce.

'Implementing THRIVE means creating a more cohesive system, and Next Step works particularly well for both the Thriving and Getting Advice areas of the THRIVE model,'

says Dr Pender. 'Some young people want to talk about their emotional wellbeing, but they don't always need or want a trained mental health worker for that. They want someone they know and trust.'

'We did some research in Wirral, and one of the things young people told us was: "If we've chosen an adult to talk to, please don't pass us on." They'll have thought long and hard about who they're going to approach, and if that person says they can't help, that's the end of that and they close down. We need to respect their choices, but we also need to support the people who are supporting them.'

'Adults in schools or social care sometimes feel a bit hesitant about discussing mental health with the young people they work with,' she continues. 'The Next Step cards are intended to be accessible to people who aren't trained therapists by scaffolding those conversations, so they feel more confident in helping young people to talk about their emotional wellbeing, and then to set their own goals and move towards achieving them.'

Wirral has had an almost universally positive response to the resource. The cards (also available as an app) and associated training are now available commercially. Schools that have received the training have reported that using the cards to initiate conversations has sometimes removed the need for referrals to CAMHS.

'A lot of CAMHS have increased their threshold, and children have to be quite severely in need before they get help,' says Dr Pender. 'That means there's a significant gap that has to be filled. These children may not need full-on therapy for six months or whatever, but they need more than they are getting now. That's why we're focusing on getting the cards used in as many schools and community settings as possible.'

Annie Grant is a freelance consultant, producer, writer and editor

FIND OUT MORE

- **The THRIVE framework (2016):** <http://bit.ly/sc235-29>
- **THRIVE and i-THRIVE:** www.implementingthrive.org or contact Emma Louisy: ELouisy@tavi-port.nhs.uk
- **My Mind app:** contact Emma Selby: Emma.Selby@neft.nhs.uk
- **Future In Mind report:** <http://bit.ly/sc235-31>
- **Next Step training and cards:** contact Fiona Pender: Fiona.Pender@cwpa.nhs.uk

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Powerchair football

Sophie Chalmers finds out more about a sport that enables children in powered wheelchairs to play ‘the beautiful game’

The Paralympics have inspired many disabled people to take up team sports, and everyone is familiar with the rough and tumble of wheelchair rugby and basketball, where the athletes taking part normally have strong upper bodies. But what about young wheelchair users who may have no upper body strength?

Enter powerchair football. Sam Bull, the national development manager at the Wheelchair Football Association (WFA), himself a powerchair user, says: ‘Powerchair football is designed for those who may not be able to compete in wheelchair rugby or basketball because they haven’t got the strength or mobility. As such, it is designed to be non-contact – a lot of our players have muscular dystrophy conditions and would not necessarily be able to lift their hand back to their powerchair controller if it slipped off in the fray.’

In fact, this year the WFA is sponsored by the charity Muscular Dystrophy UK. This is partly because 55% of players have some form of muscle-wasting condition.

Adam McEvoy is the community sports development officer at Valence School, a special needs school and sports college in Kent, where powerchair football is one

of the after-school activities on offer. He explains: ‘Contact with any part of the chairs or ramming are classed as fouls and not allowed. Ramming is when a player deliberately drives into an opponent.’

‘When it comes to contact, you obviously do get some because disabled players are as competitive as anyone else and can become a little overeager in their determination to get the ball. But referees are there to ensure that nothing is too aggressive and will penalise foul play by awarding a free kick to the opposing team.’

Making the most of local clubs

Between 18 and 20 students at Valence take part in powerchair football training and games every week – about 20% of the students – and the school also has a squad of players who play at a regional and national level.

Valence, however, is unusual. Most schools don’t have enough wheelchair users to field a team, in which case students can join one of 55 clubs around the country, like the one in Sevenoaks, near Valence, which was set up by Mr McEvoy. ‘When I arrived at the school five years ago, there was nowhere for players to practise the sport once they left us,’ he says. ‘So I founded the Sevenoaks club to enable them to continue playing into adulthood. Meanwhile, I encourage all current students to join the club as well. It meets on Sunday afternoons and has two teams, with 12 or 13 players regularly attending, of which three quarters are current or former students.’

Practicalities

There are four players in a team – a goalkeeper and three outfield players – and up to four additional players, who

act as rotating subs. Depending on their condition, players may not be able to play for long before they need a break, so coaches can rotate players as much as they like. For example, it is perfectly normal for someone to come on for five or six minutes, have a rest for a couple of minutes, and then come back on again.

In terms of facilities, you need access to a sports centre with a basketball court that has a hard, smooth, level surface and some run-off area around it. However, for training purposes, you can make do with a court with very little run-off space by moving the lines in a little.

When learning the basic skills, most players start off in their everyday chair, fitted with a special striker attachment that acts as their feet. Striker attachments fit most powerchairs and students use them to ‘kick’ the 33cm ball, aiming to score a goal by shooting between posts set six metres apart. Later, if they want to play at club level, many clubs will work with their families to help them raise the money for a sports powerchair – you wouldn’t want people potentially crashing into your everyday chair.

Valence, on the other hand, is in the fortunate position of having quite a few wheelchairs specifically designed for powerchair football.

Mr McEvoy says: ‘I endeavour to put every student in a sports chair so that they can experience what it’s like to use the proper equipment – sports chairs are a bit more powerful and considerably quicker than normal chairs, so it is more exhilarating and more fun.’

Finally, some students have moulded body supports for their everyday chair, and these can be transferred to the sports



Players vie for the ball in a league match

chair. In addition, some families raise money to invest in a second moulded backrest or seat to give their child extra support for the purposes of the game.

Skills development

Players can be of any age or gender, and mixed teams are the norm. 'When they start, students have different levels of experience with powerchairs,' says Mr McEvoy, 'so the after-school club is where they learn advanced driving skills as well as how to play football.'

'We start by working on driving skills because players need to get used to the extra speed and acceleration sports chairs provide. They also do a lot of practice on reversing – many young wheelchair users always manoeuvre their chair forwards, and reversing is an important skill in football. For players with restricted head or neck mobility, rather than fixing a mirror to their chair, we encourage them to infer what is behind them by considering how many players are in front of them and how much of the court they can see. These skills and practices, as well as driving at high speeds, often help their day-to-day driving skills.'



Mr McEvoy coaching at the Sevenoaks Powerchair Football Club

'And of course we work on traditional football skills: dribbling the ball, passing it, shooting, tackling and goalkeeping. I try to adhere as closely as possible to the game our young people watch on television. Many of them are football fans and want to play – and this way they can.'

Staff training

Mr McEvoy had never taught powerchair football before he came to Valence. He had, however, coached mainstream teams, had some experience of football coaching for the visually impaired, and had occasionally coached players with cerebral palsy.

He learned on the job, using his existing knowledge and skills. He later attended a one-day coaching course delivered by the WFA.

'The course is open to anyone,' says Mr Bull, 'but ideally we want delegates with either some experience of football coaching or teachers who know how to work with children and plan sessions, because there is a lot to cover in a day. Course content includes how to play the game, the equipment required, what players may and may not be able to do due to their disability, the basic skills they need to learn and how to set up a team.'

After the training, Mr McEvoy was better able to combine his prior experience with his new insights to deliver activities and training sessions specific to powerchair users.

The WFA also runs a two-day referee course which qualifies successful delegates to referee games.

Competing at a local and national level

'There are not many special schools for

students with physical disabilities,' says Mr McEvoy, 'so Valence tends to play against club teams rather than school teams. We regularly play against Invicta PFC, who are based in Gillingham, and have travelled to Greenwich and Brighton. Meanwhile, the Sevenoaks team plays competitively through the WFA competition structures.'

Mr Bull explains. 'There are two top-level national leagues: the Premiership and Championship. In the Premiership, 12 teams compete over six weekends in Nottingham, playing four or five games over the course of the two days.'

'The Championship is the next level down and operates in exactly the same way, with another 12 teams playing over six weekends. The Championship and Premiership combine forces on the final weekend, at which point the bottom two teams of the Premiership are relegated and the top two teams of the Championship are promoted.'

'Below this there are six regional leagues, which provide opportunities to compete locally and perhaps progress to the national leagues. Because anyone of any age can play, a student might start off playing at Valence and end up playing in the Premiership. In fact, four players from Valence are part of the Sevenoaks squad that plays in the South East League.'

'I'd say, if you are a powerchair user, find a club, come along and have a go.'

FIND OUT MORE

- The Wheelchair Football Association: www.thewfa.org.uk

Attachment disorders arise when infants fail to establish any emotional connection with their primary caregivers. This means that the child's emotional needs of love, comfort, care and nurturing are unmet and their brain develops accordingly



Why you shouldn't treat all children the same

Nicola Marshall outlines how to identify and support children and young people with attachment difficulties

There are many children and young people in schools and colleges who struggle to learn. Some have diagnosed special needs and learning difficulties. Others may have undiagnosed emotional impacts resulting from early trauma.

The impact of trauma is not something you can see. Affected children look like their peers, may have subjects they excel in and can be articulate at times.

Meanwhile, a common myth is that children are so resilient that they can bounce back from living in a chaotic environment. For many that is just not true. In fact, they may spend most of their lives dealing with the fallout of early experiences, which can hinder their emotional development and their ability to learn.

One size does not fit all

Teaching professionals need to be aware of the issues, and approach children with attachment difficulties differently from the way they approach their peers. This is because the tried and tested techniques of behaviour management will not work effectively on children who do not have a strong foundation to receive it.

One size does not fit all, especially when they have not had the same start in life. As children's author Rick Riordan said: 'Fairness is not giving everyone the same but giving everyone what they need.'

The impact of early trauma

If children have not had a good attachment cycle in their early years where their needs were met in a consistent and reliable fashion, then a sense of shame, not trust, develops. These

children feel that they are bad and they internalise this into toxic shame. This manifests itself through their behaviour, which we will look at briefly later.

Meanwhile, their brains do not develop in the same way as a child who has had a healthy attachment cycle. Human brains do much of their developing in the first two years of life. What we experience in those early weeks and months helps to develop the three main sections of the brain.

The first area to develop is the back of the brain, known as the reptilian brain. This is concerned with survival. Our heart rate, respiratory rate and the fight, flight, freeze mechanism live here.

Then through repetitive, patterned activity the rest of the brain develops. The second section, known as the emotional brain, develops, and finally the frontal

cortex, which we call the thinking brain.

All three sections are connected, but what is interesting in terms of learning is that the front and back sections cannot work at the same time. This enables us to react quickly to danger. Instead of thinking through the options, our front brain shuts down and we react: fight, flight or freeze.

For most people, the three sections are adequately balanced, enabling us to respond when we need to if there is danger, but we can also think through and process things and reflect on our actions.

However, for children who lived in a chaotic home environment as babies, or who have not had their needs met for whatever reason, the back part of their brain is overdeveloped. In other words, they are very sensitive to perceived danger and, as a survival strategy, the front of their brain (the thinking part) shuts down so that they can react.

You will see this in the classroom: someone looks at them in a funny way and they swear at them; someone pushes past them in the corridor and they punch them; they can't find a pencil and it is as if a volcano has erupted.

The only way we can get pupils like this to be able to access the front part of the brain is to help them feel safe and calm. If we do not, they will not be able to learn.

Three manifestations of insecure attachment

There are three styles of insecure attachment. Sometimes these are clear and you can identify children affected through just knowing what the styles are; other children are a little harder to identify.

- **Avoidant** – for this child, their main aim in life is *not* to be noticed. They tend to be withdrawn, quiet, compliant and helpful. They are highly anxious but if they were to let you know this, then they feel they might be in danger, so they hide it well. They have learned phrases to make it seem as if they are OK. They do not trust, and so have very superficial relationships. They are very vulnerable and you have to get close to them to see what is going on.
- **Ambivalent** – for this child, their main aim in life is to *be* noticed. They are in your face, loud and highly spirited. They will know names and places and what is going on. They are endearing, but can also become aggressive quickly. They are attention-seeking: if they are not highly visible, then they may not get their needs met.

- **Disorganised** – for this child, there is no strategy to cope. They are confused and confusing. Sometimes they are shy and quiet, at other times in your face. They have come from unpredictable backgrounds, and so struggle to know how to act and how to understand what your response means to them.

What to watch out for

- **Hypervigilance** – these pupils cannot sit still, fidget, turn around and watch others. Remember that their fight, flight, freeze response is hypersensitive. In the classroom they may watch the door, be jumpy when there is an unexpected loud noise, be distracted by the slightest thing around them, or forever worry about survival.
- **Lack of empathy** – they really do not understand how others might be feeling and show an inability to take responsibility for their actions. Empathy is something that starts to develop early in life through mirroring. If babies have not been able to work together with parents to understand that they have an impact on the world and that there is something outside themselves, then they do not develop empathy.

“The front and back sections of the brain cannot work at the same time”

- **Lack of self-regulation** – they are unable to control impulses, change behaviour if needed, or soothe their own emotions. Children learn self-regulation early in life through being co-regulated by their parents. When a child has not experienced this, the ability to self-regulate is not there. In the classroom, they will act impulsively with others and react quickly. They seem to have no control over their emotions, they can become overwrought very quickly and then it takes a long time to calm them down.
- **Shame-based behaviour** – they believe that they are bad and do not deserve to be treated well. They feel useless, unworthy and unlovable. In the classroom, many of the behaviours you see will be shame based: lying, blaming others, minimising, rage,

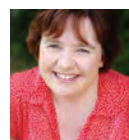
running away, hiding and overreacting to criticism. All of these indicate a child riddled with shame.

- **Emotional age** – children who have experienced a difficult start in life are often emotionally younger than their chronological age. This becomes more apparent as they move up in education where more is expected of them, and they may not be able to meet these expectations. They will often regress when particularly stressed, so a 16-year-old may start to act more like a 10-year-old.

Supporting pupils with attachment difficulties

- **The starting point is to be aware that these children are different.** Although they may look the same as their peers, emotionally and cognitively they may be operating at a much younger age or be impaired in some way.
- **Relationships are key.** Trust is the bedrock of being able to function in life – to hold down a job, to be in a healthy relationship and to raise children well. Showing them that they can trust us and others will help them break the cycle and start to develop.
- **Behaviour communicates a need.** The ambivalent child craves attention and fears not having their needs met. The avoidant child is in a heightened state of anxiety around not getting their needs met. The disorganised child is in a state of complete confusion and does not know how to get their needs met. The common thread is getting their needs met.

If, as educational practitioners, we can move away from behaviour modification to relieving anxiety and fear in children with attachment difficulties and make them feel safe, then we will be able to meet their needs and help them to develop into emotionally resilient, capable people who can contribute to society.



Nicola Marshall founded BraveHeart Education, which trains and supports those working with vulnerable children,

whether they are looked after, adopted or in challenging home environments. She has created a free downloadable booklet entitled: Attachment & Trauma Issues in Educational Settings.

www.bravehearteducation.co.uk

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★ **Star Letter:**

Bringing a marginalised community in out of the cold

Following your article on Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) children in *Special Children 234*, I would like to share our experiences of supporting the integration of Slovak Roma children in Sheffield.

In some respects we face the same challenges, including low attendance, lack of engagement and poor academic outcomes. However, unlike Surrey's long-established GRT communities, Slovak Roma families only started settling here recently, following the accession of Slovakia to the EU in 2004.

To fully appreciate the extent of their wide-ranging needs, you need to understand what life was like for them back home. Some 17% of Roma in Slovakia live in segregated settlements on the fringes of non-Roma towns and villages with little access to basic utilities; 11% of Roma homes have no access to running water, 45% are not connected to a sewage system. Roma unemployment is up to 100% in some areas. In education, 28% of Roma children commence primary education and only 50% of Roma children across all age groups have some school experience (EU statistics 2014). It is clear therefore that some Roma children will arrive here with very few basic school-ready skills.

Language is another key issue. The first language of the Slovak Roma community is Romani, a mainly oral, non-standardised variety of a language that itself comes in many variations. For school practitioners this means, firstly that there will not be a Romani dictionary available (no Google Translate) and obtaining official translators will be virtually impossible. And secondly, due to the oral nature of Romani, early literacy skills in Roma children are lacking. Even those children who were fortunate enough

to attend primary school will have started out on the back foot because education in Slovakia is delivered through the medium of Slovak. Taught in one language at school and immersed in another at home, there is little chance for literacy skills in any language to take root.

Poor English skills and low literacy levels amongst some of the parents compound the situation. And, of course, identifying a specific special need is exceptionally difficult when language is a barrier. The figures we have for 2016 in Sheffield indicate that 28.3% of Roma primary pupils had some form of special educational need, but who knows what the true figure is?

Finding solutions

One school that is passionate about improving outcomes for this marginalised, largely misunderstood section of their school community is Firth Park Academy, which has engaged my services to help them identify how best to address educational, linguistic and social integration.

Measures we have taken include the following.

- Moving the induction base for Roma pupils from an off-site location into the heart of the school within the MFL department.
- Taking proactive steps to engender a positive, open outlook amongst staff and pupils.
- Increasing flexibility in curriculum planning, adapting lessons to consider and meet Roma pupils' needs and sharing good practice across departments.
- Raising the profile of Roma culture and language.
- Providing Inset days and on-going CPD to raise staff awareness of

EAL issues and equip teachers with strategies to make learning more accessible.

- Encouraging Roma pupils to participate fully in extracurricular activities. Their football team was shortlisted for the *Sheffield Star* newspaper's Sports Team of the Year award, while our Roma dance classes attract non-Roma pupils too, further promoting cultural and social integration.

Perhaps most importantly, the school has engaged Romani-speaking staff, including a qualified ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teacher, a Romani-speaking teaching assistant and two Romani-speaking student support workers. Not only do these adults support pupils in language learning, behaviour management and promoting attendance, they provide positive role models and are an invaluable link between school and home.

We are constantly evaluating what we do in the light of feedback from pupils, staff and outside observers and tailoring provision accordingly. We still have a lot to learn, however, and are now embarking on a further five-year longitudinal study to better understand the drivers of integration and educational success.

In the meantime, academic outcomes show that our Roma pupils are going from strength to strength. They also positively enjoy coming to school and have good relationships with staff. We may not have all the answers, but we are off to a good start.

Dr Mark Payne, lecturer in language education, University of Sheffield.
mark.payne@sheffield.ac.uk

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An overview of SEND

Rona Tutt's Guide to SEND & Inclusion

Rona Tutt

Published by Sage Publishing

ISBN 9781473954809

£23.99

Reviewed by Cate Wood

Rona Tutt takes the reader through a brief history of special needs and looks at different models that have been applied over time. She takes the key benefits of the latest reforms and outlines the positives, before considering the environment and systems, the current situation and possibilities for the future.

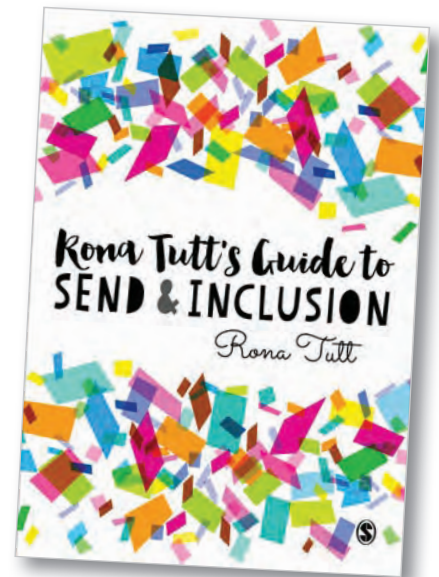
This book is clear, well written and easy to read. There is no waffle, just a well-argued narrative that cuts through the middle and gives a clear resume of SEND as it is today.

There are some nice case studies backing up points in every chapter. Key information and explanations are put in boxes making them easy to pick out. Dr Tutt explains that the book can be used in a variety of ways: some readers may prefer to dip in for a quick answer, while, if time allows, a more leisurely, detailed read is stimulating and informative, but not difficult or time-consuming. I like the *Questions for Reflection and Activities*, inviting the reader to reflect on their own

practice. Alternatively, a SENCO could use these in a training exercise, as they are suitable for a range of needs and appropriate for all levels.

The use of the grey and white layout is easy on the eye and looks professional. The font is of a good size – not so tiny that a bright light is required but not so large that everyone on the No 9 bus can read over your shoulder. Meanwhile the book is small enough to fit in a work bag and not too heavy to carry around. At the front, there is a useful list of acronyms – helpful for anyone who does not have a special needs background – the SEND community uses an awful lot of acronyms!

Dr Tutt is no sycophant to the powers at Westminster. She does not flinch from pointing out where opportunities were missed, such as the lack of definition for inclusion and the failure to clarify the situation regarding SEN and SEND. Here, for me, is the only (slight) shortfall. Although in the final chapter she cites examples from other countries, including New Zealand, and makes suggestions for a



way forward, these are almost a footnote. I would have been interested in a deeper, more detailed development in this area. The author has a lot of experience and expertise – I would have loved to have read more of her ideas and suggestions.

Having said that, I enjoyed this book and recommend it to all, including those who have the power the change things at Westminster, without hesitation.

Cate Wood worked in SEN for almost 30 years as a teacher and a trainer. She now offers training around all aspects of special needs, and works for a children's charity

Fear of speaking

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual (second edition)

By Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens

Published by Speechmark Publishing

ISBN 9781909301337

£49.99

Reviewed by Saira Pester

Previously known as elective mutism, revisions in classifications refer to this condition as selective mutism (SM) and, after years of misunderstandings, SM is now recognised as an anxiety disorder.

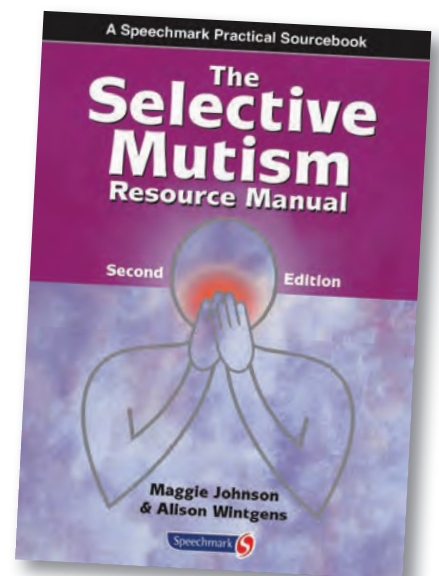
This change in thinking means that it is even more crucial to recognise and understand SM at the earliest opportunity so as not to unintentionally cause further anxiety in a child with the condition.

With speech and language therapy and CAMHS waiting lists at an all-time high, however, and the Code of Practice's emphasis on early identification, it is

often SENCOs on their own who find themselves having to respond to pupils with SM. This is exactly what happened to me when faced with a child with complex SLCN and a six-month wait for a speech and language therapist.

Knowing of Maggie Johnson's expertise in the area, I swiftly ordered the first edition of this book and it did not let me down. I was able to assess the pupil, draw up a programme and skill up all the staff involved. Now with material aimed at adolescents and adults, this new edition should be in every school's SEND toolkit.

The manual is divided into four



sections. Part 1 focuses on improving the reader's understanding of SM and includes the latest research together with examples from the author's extensive clinical experience. Particularly useful

here are the FAQs, which are invaluable in dispelling the myths around SM and which could easily be used for whole-school training.

Part 2 includes detailed information on the identification and assessment of SM. This will empower schools in collecting relevant background information, categorising whether a child has 'pure' SM (high or low profile), and assessing whether there are co-existing difficulties. The authors include additional indicators which schools will find helpful in ruling

out SM. Although speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and other health professionals are ultimately the ones to diagnose SM, the authors also highlight the importance of a lay diagnosis (i.e. from a parent or teacher when there is agreement between school and home), the rationale for this being that there are no unnecessary delays in starting an intervention.

Having provided all the information needed to assess for SM, Part 3 provides the tools to plan a tailored programme

and manage SM in the home, community and school. Supported by a wealth of activities, examples and case studies in Part 4, as well as resources online, this really is the only book you will need to support anyone with SM.

Saira Pester is a specialist teacher with eight years' teaching experience in mainstream and special schools. After 14 years as a learning needs teacher for her LEA, she set up her own company providing specialist teaching and advice

Getting literacy off to a good start

Engage Literacy Teacher's Resource and associated books

Published by Raintree Publishers

Wonder words pack of 24 books + Teacher's Resource Book

ISBN 9781406248692, £79.99

Reviewed by Helen Punter-Bruce

Engage Literacy is a guided reading programme from Raintree which comprises a comprehensive set of banded reading books and accompanying resources.

The scheme introduces key words (which it calls wonder words) through simple and interesting storybooks graded according to the popular Reading Recovery colour book bands, used by many schools to ensure children are reading books suitable for their age and ability. There are 200 books in the series (with more coming soon), which range from levels 1-30 – emergent, early, early fluent, fluent level – and cover a wide range of subjects.

I have used a selection of these with various groups of pupils, and found the children engaged well with them. A useful section inside each front cover outlines curriculum links, key vocabulary or high frequency words used, text type and example questions. This ensures teachers can quickly identify suitable titles for each reader.

The books in the emergent and early bands focus on introducing wonder words (first 100 key words) using repetition and rhyming, with good illustrations and a clear font in an appropriate size. As children's reading becomes more fluent, some stories are thematically linked with non-fiction books to offer variety and promote reading for pleasure.

Complementing the books are Teacher's Resource books which are extremely detailed in their support of

each text. These include example lesson plans, step-by-step guides to small-group work, independent and guided reading activity plans, photocopiable resources and a running record for assessing progress. I feel that these should be read before using the storybooks, as they are comprehensive, and full of ideas and activities.

I have used the guides with both teaching assistants and teachers and everyone found them useful, although perhaps too detailed at times. Because of the nature and extent of the information, they would perhaps suit an NQT or less confident practitioner. For more experienced staff, they provide new ideas.

The photocopiable worksheets in each Teacher's Resource are extremely useful and enable children to consolidate and practise the skills they have gained from reading the texts. They include crosswords using key words, comprehension questions with multiple choice answers, sequencing pictures and sentences, and creative drawing opportunities. I have used them with individual children, heavily supported, and in groups as independent activities.

Additional components to the reading scheme include posters, CDs, comprehension kits and big books



designed to be used in pairs or small groups.

It has been a delight to have these books in school and I am confident our pupils will continue to benefit from them.

Helen Punter-Bruce is a specialist leader for additional educational needs and an inclusion manager at Parkside Primary School in East Sussex

Reviewers wanted: If you would like to review books for *Special Children*, please contact Sophie Chalmers: sophie.chalmers@optimus-education.com

Touchscreen adaptive maths – Marie Jackson



How do you get pupils to regard maths homework as fun? One way is to get them to ‘play’ DoodleMaths, which is based on the National Curriculum.

EZ Education offers three engaging apps: one for four- to seven-year-olds, another for seven- to 11-year olds and a third for children aged 12 and over. There is also an app for times tables practice. They all run on Android, Apple or Kindle devices and there are PC versions too. You need a wifi link to sign in, but you don't need it again to play, so there's no excuse for pupils not to use it anywhere, even on the bus home.

I first came across the resource when I was looking for something that would really motivate the small groups of pupils from years 2 to 6 I tutor every day. I liked the interface and the fact that it uses touch-sensitive screens, which, of course, children now consider the norm. I tried the basic version, which is free, and I found it clear, concise, fun and punchy.

The children work through quick and engaging tasks. ‘This is the number seven. Trace it with your finger.’ Or they see a picture of a basket of apples below a tree and the instructions say: ‘You have two apples in your basket. Add [drag] five more from the tree.’ They earn stars for every correct answer and exchange these for accessories for their pet avatar in the game, an activity they find very appealing. When tackling complex calculations, they can either use a scrap of paper for their workings, or there is a transparent ‘overlay’ that they can swipe up to do their doodlings on screen, and then swipe away.

The school now runs weekly timetabled DoodleMaths sessions for most of our

classes: one group will be working independently on DoodleMaths while the other does guided reading, and then they swap over. Having enjoyed the app at school, we hope that the children will be more motivated to use it at home too.

“The app adapts to their needs, carefully balancing reward and challenge”

A huge advantage of DoodleMaths is the way the adaptive technology moves pupils on to new topics when they are ready, so it's not up to me to choose content for an individual unless I wish to. It does this by getting each child to do a number of seven-a-day exercises, tracking the areas they find difficult until the system has enough information to construct a personalised programme of work. At



this point, the child's DoodleMaths age pops up on the Teacher Dashboard. From then on, the app adapts to their needs, balancing reward and challenge, and asking the same kinds of question in many different ways until they have grasped the key principles.

The topic index is excellent and there are good written explanations, with an option to use the audio button for pupils who prefer listening to these. They can also use the audio playback in the main questions, which means that children with literacy difficulties are not held back because they don't understand what they have to do.

When it comes to homework, we focus on just three things: maths, literacy and spellings. Sometimes for maths, we ask pupils to do their seven-a-day at least two or three times a week. Because parents have a corresponding app, they can encourage their child to keep this up – if the child hasn't done their daily session, the app sends their parent a prompt. For pupils who don't have access to a smartphone or ICT at home, I run a DoodleMaths club on a Tuesday.

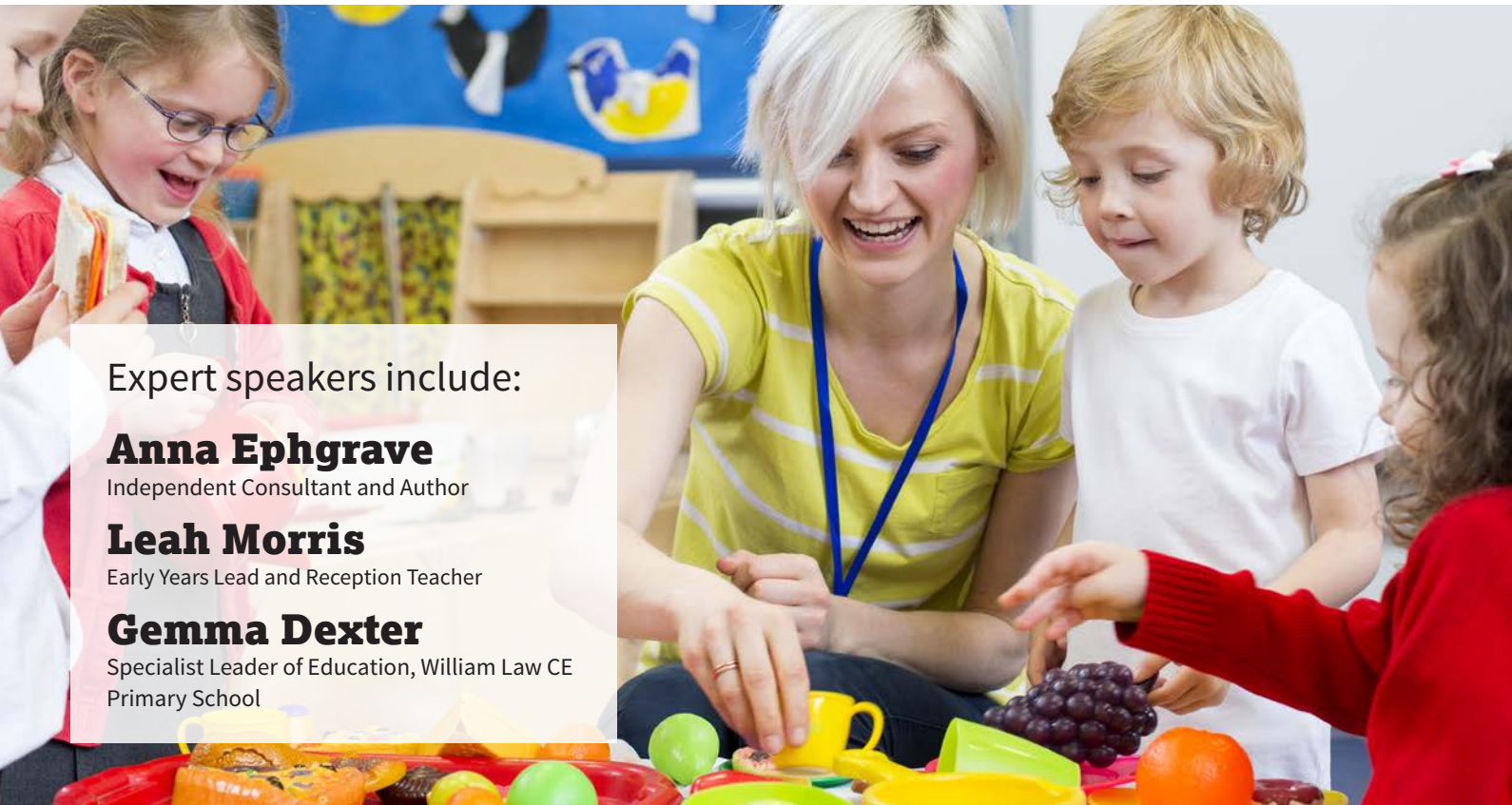
Our school has been using the 7-11 premium version since April 2014 and the 4-7 version since it was launched in April 2016. The extensive Teacher Dashboard (which is quite limited in the basic version) allows me to track progress as well as letting me see who has been using it and for how long. I can even watch pupils answer questions in real time; if they've been inactive for more than four minutes, their name turns red, and I can wander over and give them some individual help. The analytics use a traffic lights system to highlight gaps in each

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pupil's understanding, which informs my planning. Meanwhile, the developers are working on an upgrade that will allow me to show progress in line with National Curriculum requirements, which will make my life very much easier.

The premium version also has sets of extra sessions. This means that if we are working on shape, I can go into the app and set extra tasks for pupils.

Last June, we hosted an evening for the parents of children who would be joining the school in September, and set them up with individual logins for the 4-7 version of the app so that they could try it out with their child over the summer. Some of them did, even though the children were only three or four. The thinking behind this was partly to engage parents early with a fun maths app, and partly to start the habit in

children of doing a little every day, just as in literacy.

Around the same time, Bath University worked with our pupils to do some research into the app. Researchers found that children using the app for just 20 minutes a week during July and August were four times less likely to exhibit summer learning loss than pupils who did not.

The only downside for me is when the app receives updates. We use Android tablets, and I have to update each tablet individually; I do not have this problem on iPads, as these seem to update automatically.

Despite this extra work (DoodleMaths is looking for a solution), I love this app and really hope the PTA will continue to pay for the annual licence. I would thoroughly recommend it to schools and individuals alike.

In the free DoodleMaths basic plan from EZ Education, up to 30 students can each earn up to 15 DoodleStars a day and the class teacher can see areas of the curriculum where individual pupils are strong or weak. With the premium plan, which costs £4/pupil a year, there is no limit to the number of DoodleStars a child can earn and teachers can access individual, group and whole-class progress data over any period.
www.doodlemaths.com



Marie Jackson is lead teaching assistant at Whitehills Primary School, Northampton

Creative play – Katerina Giannadou

The Cosmo system from Filisia Interfaces comprises six bright, touch-sensitive, bun-sized buttons. These have built-in LEDs and sensors, and are controlled by an iPad app that offers a comprehensive suite of games and music designed to help improve functioning in children with ASD and other learning difficulties.

The system uses light, colour and sound to attract the user's attention and to train cognitive, communication and physical skills using a set of therapist-designed activities on the iPad. You can change the songs and backing tracks or set the units to play games and individual notes when pressed. There are no speakers in the units. The sound comes out of the iPad or you can link the device to external speakers for extra volume.

Pupils with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism are hard to engage, but playing with Cosmo seems to overcome this. Let me give you an example. We conducted some research at the University of Birmingham under the direction of Dr Lila Kosyvakis looking into the use of Cosmo in the classroom. During one of the sessions we observed, a therapist showed the Cosmo units to a child with autism, selected an activity from the iPad and started playing a tune on it. When the child's attention started to wander, the therapist changed the music and the child immediately turned back to interact with her and the device



Alex plays the Reaction to Stimuli module

“It helps children acquire important skills regarded as developmental milestones”



Dimitri concentrates hard as he plays the memory game

without any prompting, demonstrating that the system could be used successfully to increase spontaneous communication.

Cosmo helps practitioners develop pupils' social, communication and emotional regulation skills, such as emotion and intention sharing, collaboration, waiting and turn-taking. In the course of using it in one-to-one sessions, some pupils started to engage with the teacher or TA and even initiated social interactions.

The system can be used to help children acquire important skills regarded as developmental milestones, such as understanding cause and effect,

and helps develop their creativity as it allows them to explore sounds and make music. In addition, the units can be placed just within reach to encourage movement in children with mobility difficulties. I find that it is a good tool to use for children with high-functioning autism as well as those with more profound learning disabilities. The great thing is that you can incorporate its use into any intervention.

The developers advise that practitioners assess children and then choose appropriate activities for them from the iPad menu – it is easy to navigate your way around the various options and settings. The units can be used in whole-class situations or during free play in a one-to-one context. They can be personalised to individual pupils, are well organised, well structured, and



Students from Charlton Park Academy interacting with Cosmo units

ensure predictability, so they can help schools demonstrate good autism practice for Ofsted inspections.

Clearly a lot of research went into designing the product and the developers kept the needs of teachers in mind by providing a framework to measure progress – it collects data on physical

and cognitive skills. The team is also in the process of developing guidelines for school staff.

Cosmo from Filisia Interfaces comprises the Cosmo buttons and the platform with 12 activities. Available at £880 + VAT or by subscription at £80/month. <http://filisia-interfaces.com>



Katerina Giannadou, formerly a teacher, is doing her PhD in autism at the University of Sheffield and the Sheffield

Autism Research Lab

Time matters – Jan MacMillan

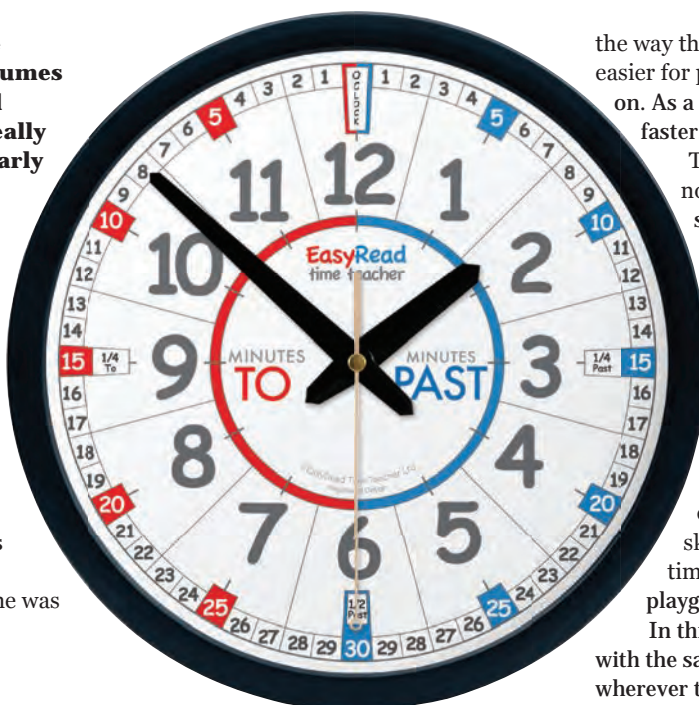
Around the school we have analogue clocks, which assumes that all our pupils can read them. Yet some children really struggle with this, particularly if their parents gave them a digital watch when they were little.

This inability to tell the time impacts their ability to plan and be organised, as well as their self-esteem. Most of them get it eventually. However, one particular pupil has a very slow processing speed and a poor working memory, and although we had tried lots of hands-on strategies to help him, including moving hands around on an old clock, he was still at a loss.

“Some children really struggle to tell the time”

Then I came across the EasyRead Time Teacher. When I showed it to him, everything just clicked because the layout is so clear. Now he can tell the time on any analogue device.

I've been using EasyRead clocks for two years. They have coloured sections for past the hour and to the hour, and



the way they are designed makes it much easier for pupils to work out what is going on. As a result, they grasp the concepts faster.

The clocks are silent – there is no loud, distracting tick and the second hand sweeps smoothly round the face, rather than jerking forwards, staccato fashion.

Teacher's notes are printed on the back with instructions explaining the two-step and three-step teaching system for telling the time. The range includes 12- and 24-hour clocks to support the essential skill of reading a bus or train timetable and large clocks for the playground.

In this way, pupils are presented with the same model for telling the time wherever they go.

EasyRead Time Teacher wall clocks start at £24.95 and watches are £19.95 inc VAT. <http://easyreadtimeteacher.com>



Jan MacMillan is head of learning support at Thorpe House School, an independent school from nursery to Year 11

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ThumbJam made easy – Andrew Cleaton

The Improvise Approach is an ebook that explains how to deliver creative music-making opportunities for people with special needs using an app called ThumbJam.

ThumbJam is a well-developed app for iPhones, iPads or iPods (iOS 7.0 or later, £6.99 from the App Store) that has been around for a while. I would call it a musical instrument rather than a game or toy because the sounds it produces are beautiful and give the user the opportunity to be very expressive. For example, I've found that when you give children the cello sound, they start to explore it in a musical way, rocking their fingers backwards and forwards to create a vibrato, which is completely different from the way they might approach a drum or electric guitar sound.

As the app is set up in musical scales, children are free to wiggle their fingers around in any way they like and ThumbJam will always produce a harmonious sound – there is no possibility of introducing a discordant note. This gives them the chance to stamp their own mark on music-making. The app is very simple, but can also be quite sophisticated; for complete beginners, it is immediately accessible, yet for seasoned musicians it has hidden depths that repay a great deal of study and practice.

In the same way, Carrie Lennard's ebook is perfect for practitioners with no music background and equally valuable for music teachers. Beautifully designed and clearly written, it introduces users to what is possible with the app and then shows them how to use it to create musical activities for classes, week after week.

The author starts by helping you download and set up the app. She then leads you through some techniques that make the difference between delivering an OK music lesson and something quite transformational. It is possible to read a chapter and plan a good lesson for the next day, enabling you to learn alongside the children. It avoids being too prescriptive; it does not tell you how to play music but helps you master the app quickly, upskilling you rapidly with techniques you can adapt to your setting. By the time you reach Level 4 of the book, you will be right into the detail of ThumbJam, tweaking it and devising your own activities.

You can tell that Mrs Lennard has



Andrew Cleaton training a group of educational professionals, many of whom have no music training, to deliver effective and creative music sessions in their settings

This ebook is perfect for practitioners with no music background

used the app in educational settings because she talks about the importance of having a loudspeaker and turning off the overhead light in the classroom to stop this reflecting on the iPad screen, enabling children to see and engage better with what is on their device.

In addition, she provides 10 good backing tracks in different styles, including jazz and reggae. When you click on the associated picture, it pulls up the track and the child can start playing as a soloist, backed by an amazing band. Mrs Lennard also gives good guidance on the best ways of getting players to take turns, or perhaps have several pupils play together as a group. The emphasis throughout is on unlocking creativity and having fun, as reflected in comments like: 'Have a go at playing this and carry on for as long as you enjoy it.'

ThumbJam is a good app and this excellent ebook opens the door to its effective use while demystifying some of the process of using improvised music within educational settings. It is certainly something I will recommend in my workshops.

The Improvise Approach by Carrie Lennard, an interactive guide with music tracks, is £29.99.

www.improviseapproach.com



Andrew Cleaton is a composer and music consultant who has worked in the field of SEND for 27 years. He delivers training for educational

practitioners who have little or no musical experience to enable them to use sound and music more effectively and creatively in their setting.

www.epiphanymusic.co.uk

Step together

Elizabeth Smith talks about her school's experience of an inclusive dance workshop

It was very moving to stand on the sidelines and watch our students take part in the Step Together workshop run by Step into Dance.

Greenvale School in Lewisham, London, is a community special school for children aged 11 to 19 with severe learning difficulties, including autism, PMLD and complex needs. Throughout the year, staff work hard with our students to enable them to communicate with different people and go out into the world. Seeing them perform dances they had created themselves in partnership with a group of mainstream peers was like watching the culmination of all our efforts.

The workshop

Step into Dance is a fully inclusive programme led by the Royal Academy of Dance and funded by the Jack Petchey Foundation. Aimed at 11- to 16-year-olds, it runs for a year and comprises heavily subsidised, two-hour weekly classes in a genre of the students' choosing. Step into Dance staff have been facilitating classes in our school for several years, supported by school staff.

Participating schools can also take advantage of Step Together workshops. These are about inclusivity and integration into the community, bringing together as they do two types of school – a special and a mainstream school – to collaborate in a 90-minute workshop in any style, whether this is contemporary, street or jazz dance. We applied again this year and were once more teamed up with St Matthew Academy in Blackheath, who were wonderful.

The logistics for the workshops are simple. The two schools agree the type of dance their pupils will perform together, when the workshop will take place, who will host it and the number of students involved. This year, 10 of our Key Stage 3 students took part, along with 13 Year 9 students from St Matthew Academy.

Many of our students normally need a lot of support in the weekly Step into Dance sessions. However, in the inclusive



Students from Greenvale School and St Matthew Academy enjoying dance together

environment of the workshop they blossomed, throwing themselves into the activities and venturing to give their opinions, even if this might be as simple as a yes or no. In short, they were so independent, it was a joy to watch.

Gaining confidence

As a warm-up activity, the students formed a circle and, one by one, everyone came into the centre to perform their own dance movement or jump before returning to their place. The students

from St Matthew Academy were friendly and lively, and happily initiated conversations with our students, which gave our young people a lot of confidence.

After that, they split up into groups comprising students from both schools to work out a routine on the theme of stars. Each person received a star sticker, placed on a different part of their body. One student might have a star on their hand, another might have one on their foot, and between them they had to create a movement culminating in a pose that linked everyone's stars in the group.

This allowed our students to be creative and independent away from their usual support staff, and to work and communicate with people outside their normal circle. For students from St Matthew, the workshop helped them develop the skills to interact with people who communicate in a different way from them.

At the end of the session, each group shared their dance in an informal performance lasting about 30 to 60 seconds. One of our young people was fantastic in rehearsals but too shy to perform, even though the atmosphere was very supportive and every group got a massive round of applause.

Sue Goodman, Step into Dance artistic and programme director, summed up the experience when she said: 'When a SEN and a mainstream school dance together something quite transformative happens. Both sets of dancers discover a way of relating to each other which is exceptional. Whatever the difficulties, they seem to overcome them.'

An amazing opportunity, Step Together is something I would recommend other schools apply for next year.



Elizabeth Smith is assistant headteacher at Greenvale School in Lewisham, London

FIND OUT MORE

- **Step into Dance:** www.stepintodance.org
- **Jack Petchey Foundation:** www.jackpetcheyfoundation.org.uk

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