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Aims and Scope

ReflectEd provides a forum for the publication of interdisciplinary articles that celebrate the challenging and changing nature of educational research and practice. It is published by the School of Education, Theology and Leadership to encourage, celebrate and disseminate research, scholarly activity, and exciting pedagogical practice that is in keeping with our mission. This mission is to advance education through continuing reflective practice and professional development in diverse schools.

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Editorial: It's Good to Keep Talking

Christine Edwards-Leis
Editor, *ReflectED*

I recently attended a conference at Brunel University on the project “Enhancing Mathematical Learning through Talk”. Several keynote speakers and all of teachers who participated in the project held a unanimous belief: different contexts of talk enable individuals to better develop conceptual understanding. The message is not new to this era or to classrooms around the world. But, having the opportunity to sit and discuss the value of discussion with colleagues and to hear the inspirational stories from teachers of children in the early years prompted me to revisit how teachers engage their students in sharing their ideas and experiences. I was also prompted to review the value of dialogue in learning when compiling the submissions for this edition of *ReflectED*.

This, our sixth edition of *ReflectED*, celebrates the diversity of education and the opportunities that arise to share experiences. It opens with a story of adventure in the woods in the Cotswold countryside as a group of young teenagers share a week of exploration. Jo Wiley, their teacher, not only lead their adventures but supported them when back at school to record them through image, video and words. Their faces show their joy at learning new skills and finding emerging talents while their words communicate clearly the benefit that such excursions can bring to children of all ages. I went to meet them a little while ago to gain an understanding of what such an adventure really means for children who usually spend most of their time in the city. Their gracious welcome and willingness to share experiences from their trip as well as thoughts and hopes for their forthcoming ‘work experience’ was enlightening and a real joy.

This edition also hosts three PGCE students’ masters’ work. When undertaking the second module of the PGCE masters, students are encouraged to commence a research project that explores the literature around an area of interest. Kathryn Mullens, now teaching at St Michael’s RC Primary School in Ashford, critiqued the value of using the process of social stories to help children with autism to form friendships. It is an intriguing study of one approach to learning and Kathryn’s work reveals the benefits and issues around such a method of learning. Jubilee Williams, a secondary PGCE masters student also had an interest in autism and shares her journey as a student teacher to gain a greater understanding of how to ensure she included all children in learning in her classroom. She reveals her hard-won understanding of the need to engage all children and how the use of drama can enable inclusive approaches to be more successful.

Andrea Tucker’s interest in cross-curricula approaches to learning is evident in her masters’ work focussing on meeting the needs of all children but particularly those that are ‘unseen’. She writes critically about the use of a cross-curricula approach couching the energy and excitement that connected learning opportunities can bring with the need to plan for, monitor and evaluate each child’s progress. Matt Shurlock, an ex-PGCE student of St Mary’s and currently teaching at Beavers Community School, Hounslow, shares his thoughts on his NQT year. Matt’s month-by-month account of the highs and lows, challenges and celebrations of this exciting year is a thoughtful personal story of learning. It may enlighten a new cohort of students as to the joys that lie ahead.

Freda Rockliffe writes an account of St Mary’s Mathematics Education Teaching and Research Enterprise’s first conference, Page 99 Conference that was held on Tuesday 23rd June 2015. She outlines the purpose of the event and a description of the keynotes and workshops that delegates shared. The conference was yet another format for the sharing of ideas and the exploration of the challenges and opportunities that arise every day in every classroom. Teachers spend a great deal of time alone with their students and having an opportunity to talk about those experiences with others is valuable.

It is good to keep talking. I look forward to visiting the children at Brent Knoll in September to deliver their copies of this journal. They will, I’m sure, enjoy the opportunity to relive their exciting experiences at Noah’s Ark Venture and to share their words and pictures with friends and family. I also look forward to sharing ideas with colleagues and students who value the contribution that talking makes to their learning journey – and to their lives.

ReflectED Report

Noah's Ark Residential May 2015

Jo Wylie and Year 10
Brent Knoll School, Lewisham, UK

My name is Jo Wylie and I am a Special Needs Teacher at Brent Knoll School in Lewisham, South East London. Every year we take our children on a residential holiday to a place called Noah's Ark Children's Venture which is also known as Macaroni Wood. Noah's Ark provides low-cost, high-quality residential accommodation for groups working in the voluntary, community and statutory sectors of youth and community provision. The Centre is in a safe and secure woodland environment in the beautiful Cotswold countryside and offers a wide range of challenging and stimulating activities both indoor and outdoor.

Most of our children come from poor socio-economic families and many of the children have never been away on holiday or left their parents before. The wonderful, relaxed, rural environment allows the children to have a break from the pressures of city life, whilst also learning new skills and a sense of responsibility as children are expected to take part in the daily feeding, cleaning and caring for the chickens, pigs, rabbits, and goats on site. The children also get to hold chicks and care for baby animals. Many of our children have never realised chickens lay eggs or pigs provide bacon and sausage so it is wonderful to see their faces when being allowed to care for them. There are no street lights so many children see stars in the sky for the first time as the evenings provide total darkness and the 'night walk' experience provides shrieks of laughter and screams of fear as children walk around in darkness.

The children also experience a sense of freedom to explore and play which is very rare in city life these days. There is a large selection of bikes on site as well as a large woodland play area with rope swings, trampolines, slides and zip wires. Staff can monitor children without interfering with their freedom. The other crucial part of the whole experience is catering for everyone. Children have to plan their menus and work in teams to provide meals for everyone. They also have to clear and wash dishes – all crucial life skills many of our children lack. All food is cooked from scratch which is a shock for many children whose diet is mainly processed foods.

As a Staff member I find the whole residential experience rewarding, challenging and exciting and I absolutely love seeing the children relax and enjoy being children again with no worries transferred from their city lives. Here are some pictures and comments from the children.



My name is C Jay. I like the freedom and playing with my friends at Macaroni Wood. I also like the trampoline and going to bed late. I didn't see the animals much but I really liked the rope swings.



My name is Yoliba and I like the bikes and rope swings the best. You are never bored at Macaroni Wood.



My name is Deshaun. I like doing stunts on the bikes and going fast on the tracks in the woods. I like going to new places and exploring the woods in the dark.



My name is Kirk and I love to collect the eggs, feed the chickens and pigs and look after the animals. I was responsible for making sure the animals went to bed safely and woke up in the morning. Sometimes I went on the swing and swung very high.



My name is Jake and I'm on the rope swings with C Jay. These rope swings are scary but great fun and we like doing acrobatics. People thought I was a good musician and dancer.



Mark and Israel went walking in the freezing water. Mark thought it was very cold but he stayed in for a long time and went for a long walk down the river. Israel thought they were magicians because their feet went numb with the cold; he walked the farthest!



Lauren really liked the baby chicks and had a chance to hold them.



My name is William and I just like being away from home and having a good time.



Our group picture but it's the last day – so feeling a bit sad. Our week was wonderful – our stay was quiet, like a village, with no work but lots of bikes, animals and rope swings!

Social Stories™ Can Help Children with Autism to Build Friendships in the Classroom

Kathryn Mullens, St Michael's RC Primary School, Ashford Surrey, UK
PGCE Student 2014-15, St Mary's University, Twickenham, UK

Introduction

In the United Kingdom 47,000 children with statements of special educational needs are listed with Autism and 70% of these children are currently being educated in mainstream school (Department of Children's School & Families, 2008). Unfortunately a staggering 40% of these children are currently being bullied due to their condition, significantly higher compared to other groups (National Autistic Society, 2015). Reflecting on this my time within school and my learning journal, it is apparent that compassion, support and commitment are the core values that underpin my teaching pedagogy. These values are essential to determining my practice, the learning environment I create and the relationships I build with my students. However, during my first school placement undertook whilst studying for my Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) it became evident that central to these was the value of inclusion. As a result of my time in a year one class, I found it was important to create a learning environment in which every child, regardless of ability, was valued and appreciated. Over time in several educational settings, different behaviours have been evident in children with autism, particularly those recently diagnosed at a young age. Some struggle to form relationships with peers and it is clear that this has a significant impact on their time in school (Rubin & Clark, 1983). There is no primary focus of research prior to composing this essay but I have had a variety of experiences that inform my understanding.

Providing appropriate coping strategies and effective interventions for children with autism ensures they build supportive relationships with their peers and begin to understand how to empathise with others. A report by the Autism Education Trust (2014) highlights that there are identifiable gaps in teacher expertise and a lack of support in providing such interventions. As class teachers we are responsible for understanding and implementing suitable and effective interventions for children who require additional support. This relates to the Department of Education's standards of teaching, which state that class teachers should be able to 'adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils' (Teachers Standards, 2011). All teachers should have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs and should be able to identify a range of factors that can inhibit their learning and should know how to best overcome these. However when these training and resource needs are not met, the value of inclusion becomes undermined. Indeed, the Special Educational Needs and Disability code of practice (2015: 93) highlights the importance of ensuring equal opportunity within the classroom and states that inclusion is the 'school's responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to prevent children from being at a substantial disadvantage [and] to foster good relations'.

Upon consideration of relevant literature and reflection on my own classroom experience I put forward my current position: The Social Stories™ intervention can help children with Autism to build supportive friendships in the classroom. The primary implication of this affirmation is that learning should not be dominated solely by assessment of intelligence but as teachers we should consider the holistic development of the child that develops morals, intellect, emotions and social awareness, an essential requirement of every state-funded school in England according to the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014). I strongly believe that each aspect of the child must be developed in order to contribute to their overall development to ensure that all children become effective and active members of society. The principle objective of this essay will be to critically evaluate the outcomes of an inclusive environment that utilises Social Stories™ to improve social functioning of children with Autism and to examine how this affects their relationships with their peers. To verify the validity of this claim I will firstly examine relevant literature with reference to evidence from my own practice. I will then identify theorists who present counter-arguments and I will evaluate their contention in regards to my school experience and relevant literature. However before examining the validity of this position, the terms that are central to our affirmation must be defined.

Terminology

Autism can be defined as 'a life long developmental disability that affects how a person makes sense of the world and how they communicate with and relate to other people' (National Autistic Society, 2015). It is often referred to as a spectrum condition to indicate that whilst people with autism share certain difficulties, manifestations of the disorder will vary greatly depending on developmental level and chronological age (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However one common feature of autism is lack of social functioning, 'a lack of impairment of the social instinct is the single feature that is the basis of all autistic spectrum disorders' (Gould, 2011: 9). Wing and Gould (1979) created three categories of social impairment that they identified to be present with all children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These three constructs are described as the triad of impairments and include impaired functioning in areas of social interaction, social language and communication and social imagination (Wing & Gould, 1979). Social Stories™ directly address the nature of the disorder, which impacts social awareness and interaction, language and communication, and lack of imagination and rigidity of thought.

A Social Story can be defined as a short yet highly personalised narrative, which shares information with a child about what to expect and what constitutes as appropriate behaviour in a specific social situation, which may previously been experienced as problematic (Gray & White, 2002). By sharing accurate information meaningfully and safely, a Social Story promotes true social understanding and provides clear information about appropriate social responses (Gray, 2010). Whilst other interventions address social functioning, Social Stories™ are unique as they accurately describe a situation, skill or concept according to ten defining criteria for how they should be written and implemented. 'These guide the Story development to ensure an overall patient and supportive quality and a format voice' (Gray, 2010: xxx).

Discussion

Social Stories™ have become a popular and widely used intervention: they are frequently recommended by children's services professionals (Styles, 2009) and the National Autistic Society lists them as an effective strategy for promoting inclusion of children with ASD (National Autistic Society). A study by Reynhout and Carter (2009) found that ninety three per cent of teachers working with children with ASD perceived it to be a successful and efficient intervention for increasing social awareness. Barry and Burlew (2004) found that Social Stories™ increased four positive social behaviours: greeting behaviours; requests for participation in play; asking for the play preferences of another child and choosing a play partner. I was fortunate enough to assist in implementing several Social Stories™ during my first school placement on my PGCE course. This illustrates the importance of a teacher's commitment to identifying and providing appropriate interventions in order to create a positive learning environment.

Studies have confirmed that due to their misunderstanding of certain social cues children with ASD may behave inappropriately and may be aggressive toward or withdraw from others (Church, Alisanski & Amunullah, 2000). Upon reflection of my time within school several scenarios were commonly noted as being problematic for children with ASD, for example playing group games during free play and turn taking during speaking and listening activities. As a result of this Social Stories™ were implemented to help understand how to appropriately interact with others during break times and during speaking and listening activities.

As previously stated children with Autism have difficulty understanding and empathising with others and therefore often have problems forming friendships (Wing, 1992). There is a growing concern from parents and the Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO) that children diagnosed with ASD are regularly isolated and struggle to build any close relationships with their peers. Rubin and Clark (1983) found that socially withdrawn children and children who exhibit extreme behaviour are often rejected by their peers. Peer rejection is highly correlated with lower school performance, aspiration level and participation in social activities and in turn this ultimately leads to a negative attitude towards school (Ladd, 1990). Upon reflection of my time in school, it is clear that a child's attitude towards school is heavily influenced by their relationships with his peers. It has been suggested that children who are unable to communicate effectively tend to be withdrawn because the negative relationships that are formed cause them to view social interaction in a negative light (Coie, Dodge & Kupersmidt, 1990). This is similar to Crick (1994) who states that it is the expectation of being disliked by peers and being excluded from activities that causes the negative view of social interaction. Therefore improving social functioning is one of the most important intervention outcomes to build relationships for children with autism (Delano & Snell, 2006). Social Stories™ address the social understanding deficit associated with ASD by providing the information that to non-autistic individuals would seem obvious (Gray, 2004). It has been suggested to improve overall social functioning of children with ASD, we need to explicitly teach children the cues and behaviours they need to know to interact with others in a socially appropriate manner (Styles, 2009).

Positive Impacts

I will now explore the positive impact that Social Stories™ have on relationships within the classroom by examining how they address the social deficits of children with autism. Gray (1995) proposed that Social Stories™ are consistent with 'Theory of Mind' (Baron-Cohen, 1995) accounts of autism, which suggest that individuals with autism have difficulty understanding that others have perspectives different from their own (Leslie, 1987). The difficulty in attributing thoughts to others may make interpreting social information problematic for individuals with autism. Social Stories™ address this by encouraging understanding of social perspectives to help children interpret social cues and identify social responses.

In addition to this, 'Weak Central Coherence theory' by Happe and Frith (2006) supports the underlying theory of how Social Stories™ are appropriate and effective strategies for children with Autism. The theory states that children with a strong central coherence have the ability to 'intergrate information in context for higher level meaning' (Booth & Happe, 2010: 378), which infers that with a strong central coherence we are able to understand information as a whole without focusing on the minor details. Children with Autism however have a weak central coherence, which suggests they will focus on minor details and fail to process information as a whole. Therefore in regards to social situations individuals with ASD focus upon irrelevant details of the situation as opposed to understanding the meaning of the situation (Kokina & Kern, 2010). Social Stories™ help children to understand the overall meaning of the situation as they present a structured framework with relevant details to interpret the problematic scenario.

One main advantage of using Social Stories™ to increase social awareness is their presentation and format. Researchers have shown that individuals with ASD process visual support more easily than other modes of communication (Quill, 1995). Social Stories™ use a visual script to clarify the social topic and these have proven to be particularly useful in promoting social skills with children who display social avoidance, social indifference and social awkwardness (Gray & Garand, 1993). Dettmer, Simpson, Myles and Ganz (2000) found that by combining visual and verbal cues children with autism can understand the behaviour skills described in the language. In addition to this it is supported by Gray (1995) that using written text as a model for teaching social skills, allows other people's perspectives, thoughts and feelings to be included. This illustrates how the format and presentation of the Social Story supports children with ASD to effectively communicate with their peers as it provided challenging instructions without the complexity of interpersonal interaction, one of the biggest barriers for children with autism to build friendships (Scattone, Wilczynski, Edwards & Rabian, 2002). In addition to this Smith (2001) asserts that Social Stories™ are permanent and therefore allows the child to access the Social Story repeatedly. Prompting the child to review the social story when an inappropriate behaviour occurs or when an appropriate behaviour is absent provides corrective feedback for the child (Lorimer, Simpson, Myles & Ganz, 2002). My value of support is emphasised here: by employing appropriate strategies and interventions children can actively be included in the classroom. However I believe this is only possible when a teacher and their support staff are committed and consistent in their feedback to the intervention put in place.

Issues and Concerns

Despite the evidence presented in this essay that for children with autism Social Stories™ are an effective intervention to build relationships with their peers, there are several arguments that have been put forward to challenge the intervention as an effective approach to improving social functioning thus forming positive relationships with others. In regards to the intervention itself, Baron Cohen (2008: 111) labels the method as restrictive as the 'rigid use of social skills are hard to specify in a way that covers every instance'. Instead he proposes that to ensure children develop a theory of mind, an understanding that individuals have perspectives different from their own, we should teach children about mental states as opposed to common social situations. It has been illustrated by Baron Cohen (2008) that children with autism can be taught to understand the basic principles relating mental states to behaviour including explicit teaching about beliefs, thoughts, intentions, desires and emotions. Emotion recognition tasks have proved to be very successful in providing children with ASD an ability to empathise with others as they encourage children to recognise and respond to the mental states in facial expressions. An example that I have encountered used across several educational contexts is a matching card game whereby children must allocate the correct emotion to a series of familiar faces (Baron Cohen, Golan & Ashwin, 2009). However I feel the effectiveness of this approach is not supported by my experience within the classroom environment.

As outlined by Gray (2010) in her guidelines of delivering the intervention, it is imperative to inform the child with ASD that their behaviour can be generalised to other situations. This emphasises the transferable skills used within the Social Story as opposed to confining the behaviour to one situation. Gray (2004), the creator of Social Stories™, stipulates that the flexible and practical nature of a Social Story is at the heart of its effectiveness and therefore devised the Social Story ratio to prevent the child from experiencing the intervention as too restrictive. To do this, she maintained that the intervention should describe the situation as opposed to directing one: for example within the ratio, she puts forwards that for every directive or control sentence there should be a minimum of two descriptive, perspective, affirmative or cooperative sentences (Gray, 2010). By providing a specific and personalised instruction that has been written based on the child's assessed needs, Social Stories allow the child to correctly read social cues and elicit an appropriate social manner.

In addition to this Kalyva (2011) highlights that one limitation to consider when conducting Social Stories™ is the risk of creating children who depend on Social Stories™ to such an extent that the stories become stereotypical behaviour. A way in which to overcome this issue is to expand the use of Social Stories™ in every aspect of the children's lives and not just at school. Thus a Social Story does not simply provide children with an understanding of a problematic setting but allows children to master certain skills that can be generalised in a variety of settings.

Whilst Social Stories™ are an effective intervention to improve the socialisation of children with Autism, it has been argued that the intervention method Circle of Friends is more effective in promoting the inclusion of children with behavioural and emotional needs (Carter, 2004). This method is popular in mainstream schooling and works by using a group of children to provide support and engagement with the child/individual in difficulty. The child will receive positive feedback within a supportive network in their own environment of the child, which represents the framework they need to take initiative and communicate with another person (Newton, Taylor & Wilson, 1996).

During my time in school 'Circle of Friends' was implemented for children with ASD in addition to the Social Story intervention. However whilst children effectively participated in the intervention, the behaviour and the positive relationships supposedly built between peers did not seem to apply to other school settings. It has been suggested that as children with ASD largely depend on prediction of the surrounding environment, the abrupt interruption of their routine and the relative absence of predictable language becomes disruptive to the child's progress (Jordan & Powell, 1995). Therefore whilst Circle of Friends provides a supportive setting for the child to come into regular contact with more socially able peers, the relationships that are created are not reciprocal. Whilst the child with ASD will receive continuous support and help from his peers it provides the child with impractical ideas of real-life relationships (McDonald & Hemmes, 2003).

Even though the intervention that is provided is fragmented and impractical, any opportunity to interact with peers of varying ability in a structured environment is generally beneficial to improve the socialisation of children with a social deficit. Delano and Snell (2006) highlighted the benefits of peer involvement in a Social Stories™ intervention and found that the rates of social interaction increased when a peer received the Social Story intervention with the child with Autism. Therefore in my future practice I will consider the involvement of peers when applying such interventions, as it has proven an extremely beneficial method in modelling and creating positive relationships within the classroom. In addition to this, Lorimer, Simpson, Myles and Ganz, (2002) found that whilst Social Stories™ decreased aggression during their implementation, the amount of inappropriate behaviours increased when the intervention ended. Staley (2002) reasoned that it is not the actual Social Story that is motivating but the positive reinforcement that is associated with the positive behaviours. One way to overcome this issue is to provide the child with consistent and structured positive reinforcement to ensure that the Social Story becomes a part of a 'regular instructional routine' (Kalyva, 2011: 56). In regards to my future practice, I strongly believe it is important to be aware of the effect that positive reinforcement has on individuals, particularly if they have experience with a behavioural intervention such as Social Stories™. My value of commitment is emphasised here, as it is my belief that children will only achieve their full potential if a classroom teacher is fully committed to the unique needs of every child and the methods to ensure their inclusion.

Conclusion

In light of this research it is important to reflect upon my initial position and consider how this discussion has impacted upon my affirmation in utilising Social Stories™ as an inclusive method for children with autism. Whilst I strongly believe that Social Stories™ are an effective approach to support children with Autism to build friendships within the classroom, upon consideration of my research it is clear that there are many factors that should be considered when creating, implementing and reinforcing a Social Story intervention in the classroom today (Reynhout & Carter, 2009).

To conclude, I believe that Social Stories™ are an effective intervention method that can help children form friendships within the classroom. The Social Story provides a specific and personalised instruction that teaches children to understand others' perspectives. This allows the child to correctly read social cues and practise an appropriate social manner. As the central diagnostic feature of Autism is the impaired development of social interaction and communication, improving social functioning is one of the most important intervention outcomes for children with Autism to form supportive friendships. The Social Stories™ intervention provides a practical, engaging and effective method that identifies and addresses the social needs of children with Autism. Despite constructive criticisms put forward to discredit the Social Story intervention, it is clear from my experience and relevant literature that Social Stories™ were effective in their purpose for the classroom in which I was based. Also I believe that the intervention should predominantly be designed and adapted to support the child in any classroom context. My position regarding Social Stories™ has been highly influenced by my values: commitment, compassion and support and these have all contributed to the core value I feel has been most influential to my pedagogy: inclusion. It is my belief that it is the responsibility of the teacher to be aware, understand and evaluate beneficial interventions and approaches to ensure full inclusion within the classroom (DfE, 2014). Social Stories™ provide a method whereby children who lack social awareness are given the structure and support to build their social skills that in turn support them to form positive relationships.

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Planning Cross-Curricular Learning Can Provide an Enriched Learning Experience for Unseen Children

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Introduction

The government is continuously concerned with raising academic achievement across the United Kingdom. Through higher expectations, increased levels of success are hoped to be achieved (Department for Education [DfE], 2013a). This, combined with the more challenging framework laid out in the recent national curriculum reform, evidences the government's central concern regarding academic achievement (DfE, 2013b). Having been identified as a group who need targeted strategies to ensure they succeed, disadvantaged children are a key priority within this effort. Specific government initiatives, such as the 'closing the gap' (Laws, 2013) initiative and Sir Michael Wilshaw's work on the 'unseen child,' are working to close this economic achievement gap (Ofsted, 2013a). Wilshaw argues that 'as a society we have to create a culture of much higher expectations for young people both in our homes and in our schools' (Wilshaw, cited in Ofsted, 2013a:5). Although these high expectations for children are undoubtedly important, my primary concern is that they are largely focussed on academic achievement. Education has become restricted by the targeted pressures of attainment and the need to inspire and instil a love of learning in the next generation has become secondary. In order for children to want to further their education and gain the necessary qualifications for successful careers, schools need to provide enriching experiences that teach children more widely about the world, engaging them in their learning. Such sentiments are also advocated by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (2008) in their commentary: Enriching the experience of schooling (Hofkins, 2008). Wilshaw further identifies that 'unseen children' are arguably most at need in this context, as they may be lacking enrichment outside of school. A love of learning and self-directed ambition is one that can help to break this 'poverty of expectations' (Ofsted, 2013a:5).

This article will examine how this concern developed and argues that cross-curricular learning is a useful tool in re-addressing the balance between attainment and an enriched education. In doing so, this article will begin with a consideration of my personal philosophy of education and core values in relation to this context. I will then go on to examine the impact planning cross-curricular learning can have on enriching the learning experience for unseen children. Within this discussion, I will highlight the counter-arguments and ways in which these can be overcome.

Values

My contention that the heavy focus on attainment has detrimental impacts for the learning lives of unseen children stems from my core values and reflection upon my personal philosophy of education. Reflection is highly valuable within teaching and I agree with Pollard (2008) that reflective practice can lead to an increase in the quality of education, as through reflection a teacher develops professionally and such reflections inform future actions. Reflecting upon my experiences, I have been able to identify important values that both consciously and subconsciously underpin my practice. The most prominent of these values are equality, freedom and creativity. My value of equality, which I understand as a universal right to access high quality education despite socio-economic barriers, has been reinforced through my experiences of teaching practice. These have taken place in two contrasting schools in southern England, one being in an affluent suburb (school A) and the other in a disadvantaged area (school B). I have seen the valuable benefits that effective teaching has on children regardless of their economic background, but there was a stark contrast in the difference in home support. School B played an invaluable role in providing these children with the enriching learning experiences that were lacking at home. The value of freedom has an important role to play in this, by which I mean schools having opportunities to tailor education to the needs of the children without restrictive boundaries. Freedom for schools to provide such significant opportunities and bring creativity into teaching is something which can subsequently raise aspirations and thus academic achievement (Ofsted, 2010). In this context, I take creativity as being the implementation of a variety of learning explorations, skills and senses. The core values central to my practice, combined with my educational concern, has led to the formulation of my position: planning cross-curricular learning can provide an enriched learning experience for unseen children.

The term 'unseen children' is one which is loosely used to classify children who are not picked up within the education system, often drifting through, not achieving academically. 'They coast through education until – at the earliest opportunity – they sever their ties with it (Ofsted, 2013b).' On Thursday 19th March 2015 I wrote in my learning journal that 'the unseen child is hard to define as it is a term so widely used to classify children from different ethnic minorities, social class and family situations.' Wilshaw (2013a) discusses in his report that there is a large proportion of children who underachieve including children from low income families, children with special educational needs, looked-after children and children from traveller communities. Within this article the term 'unseen children' is representative of children from low income families.

Similarly, the term cross-curricular has also been used loosely around a number of different educational approaches and has a number of different interpretations. Cross-curricular work has also been termed “‘project work’ or ‘project-based learning’, ‘topic’ or ‘thematic work,’ ‘integrated learning’ and ‘interdisciplinary learning’” (Kelly, 2013:3). My understanding of the term cross-curricular learning aligns most strongly to that of Barnes (2011) and is the combining of skills and knowledge in an experience in order to teach and for children to learn based on a focus.

My Position

Nearly fifty years ago Plowden (1967:203) stated ‘that children's learning does not fit into subject categories’. I agree that learning should be viewed holistically and not restricted by categorisation. The Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on Evidence report (Ofsted, 2013a) discusses unseen children's learning and achievement but only in light of English and mathematics. I acknowledge that skills within these subjects are extremely valuable but measuring the achievement within just two subjects is a narrow representation of achievement as a whole. The use of restrictive subject boundaries gives an added importance to English and mathematics. I have seen in schools the significance placed on certain subjects over others, creating a hierarchy of worth within the curriculum. Kerry (2011) critiques subject segregation and argues that a cross-curricular approach promotes the worth of knowledge. The value of knowledge is crucial to portray to unseen children in order to instil a positive outlook on learning. Gardner (2011)'s theory of Multiple Intelligences places value on different types of intelligence. He argues that intelligence is not a fixed singular concept but one consisting of multiple intelligences and these areas of intelligence grow depending on experiences. During a school experience, a child from a low-income family had a low linguistic intelligence and struggled with communication; on the other hand he displayed high bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence when creating an English-based dance suggesting he had strength in that intelligence.

Gardner (2011) has also advocated that discipline knowledge and skills are important in order to form a base to enhance understanding. A cross-curricular approach could foster this development by teaching the framework of the curriculum, but in a cross-disciplinary method, thus creating effective and enriching learning. Due to the less structured nature of intelligences Gardner's (2011) theory has been criticised for ambiguity and that the intelligences are difficult to form assessment around (Pound, 2006). However, the idea that everyone has a range of intelligences is one which I feel is applicable to learning; Gardner's approach parallels the learning of adults in ‘real life.’ Barnes (2011) supports this position and argues ‘our experience of the world is cross-curricular’ (Barnes, 2011:1). Once leaving school the boundaries of subjects are non-existent but the mind is still developing, building on the basics learnt in education and learning through experience. Through the use of cross-curricular learning the pressure of subject-driven academic achievement for unseen children is reduced. They are able to focus on experiential learning that is applicable to real life whilst learning the necessary basics to support their developing understanding of the world.

Cross-curricular learning offers new experiences that enrich the lives of unseen children. Dewey views experiences to be essential within education (cited in Macblain, 2014). The experiences created nevertheless need to be meaningful. Barnes (2011:9) describes a meaningful experience as ‘an encounter that emotionally engages and drives a child ... to want to know more’. Reflecting on my childhood education, a meaningful experience was one which excited and engaged me within the learning. Many of my memories are from school trips, visitors, outdoor activities and activities that were out of the ordinary routine. These memorable experiences can be created and benefit unseen children through cross-curricular teaching and learning. With the targeted pressures of academic achievement it is vital not to forget the importance of inspiring and motivating children to want to learn and to be inquisitive about the world. A study conducted by Horgan (2007) found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to describe learning as fun. Schools hold a powerful responsibility for influencing children's perceptions of learning and education in a positive way.

After talking to many of the children in school B, it became apparent they had little experience of enriching activities outside of the classroom. A number of these experiences were created through cross-curricular activities. Whilst on placement I planned a lesson during the school's cross-curricular project ‘Wonderful World Week’, focusing on bread from around the world. The lesson's outcome resulted in children making pizza in groups and had cross-curricular links with design and technology, geography and mathematics. During my introduction and assessment of prior knowledge it became apparent that the children had had very little exposure to the different types of food. One child said, “I have never cooked before.” This statement shocked me and emphasised the valuable learning that had occurred during my lesson. Throughout the lesson, the children worked as a team and were engaged in the different cross-curricular aspects. The children presented their creations to their parents at the end of the day and showed an increase in their sense of achievement. Research conducted by Barnes (2006) showed that during cross-curricular activities both teacher and pupil motivation is increased. My experiences illustrated this and sparked enthusiasm that is crucial to enjoying learning.

Cross-curricular approaches provide a beneficial social context for unseen children that facilitates effective learning. I agree with Hofkins (2008), that learning should be a social process and children should be encouraged to share their ideas and work collaboratively. Developing these skills through education equips children with the necessary understanding of how to approach society in their later lives. Society is based around social constructs and children need to develop their ability to make social connections between people, ideas and places (Barnes, 2011). A goal laid out in The Children's Plan was to get ‘all young people participating in positive activities to develop personal and social skills, promote wellbeing and reduce behaviour that puts them at risk’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007:20). Planning cross-curricular learning provides such opportunities.

Children participate in exploratory group work where they investigate and experience collaboratively. Macblain (2014) argues that children from low-income families miss out on the opportunities that children from more affluent backgrounds have to develop language and engage in higher level social interaction with educated adults. From my experience in schools, I agree with this idea as a number of children had a lower ability to communicate using standard of spoken English, as a result of it not being modelled at home.

Planning cross-curricular learning, which is often associated with constructivist approaches (Kelly, 2013), facilitates social development for unseen children. Ofsted (2010) acknowledged that in successful schools cross-curricular projects helped children develop the necessary social skills for their future success. The constructivist approach outlines that learning is made through the connections of experience, prior knowledge and the acquisition of new ideas (Kelly, 2013). Vygotsky's (1962; 1978) social constructivist view emphasises the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. He argues that learning is parallel to the development of communication skills where there is a direct relationship between thinking and language (Pound, 2006). I agree with his idea that verbal interaction is key to learning. In practice I have observed the use of discussion being highly valuable in the classroom, as children can verbalise their ideas in a process of exploration, thus learning from one another. Alexander and Hardman's (2008) recent work on dialogic teaching supports the value given to discussion based learning. Alexander's current collaboration with Hardman aims to improve the quality of discussion within the classroom to increase engagement, learning and attainment for low income children (Education Endowment Foundation, 2015). I agree that discussion based approaches to teaching and learning will improve engagement, as verbal communication is a natural process for children to undertake in which they engage continuously in their everyday lives. Vygotsky (1962; 1978) argued that through peer interaction children are scaffolding (a term coined by Bruner, cited in Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) the learning of their peers. Scaffolding is a concept developed around Vygotsky's (1962; 1978) work on the Zone of Proximal Development; the gap between what a child can achieve independently and that with the aid of someone more experienced (Pound, 2006). I have seen this used within the classroom in cross-curricular based learning where the children work in mixed ability pairings. The more-able child supported the learning of the less-able child, whilst consolidating his/her own understanding. The level achieved collaboratively is greater than what the children would have achieved independently. Although I agree with the importance of collaboration and facilitating the vital high quality interaction unseen children need, the theory places little emphasis on the child's crucial role within their own development (Pound, 2006). This development is reliant on the child's interactions and does not acknowledge development independently such as learning through self-discovery.

In addition to the social development facilitated by cross-curricular learning, the personal experience children also gain, enables the development of skills central to their future lives. For unseen children it is important for them to develop aspirations and high expectations for themselves. Cross-curricular work can help children to develop a 'positive sense of self' (Barnes, 2011:32). My understanding of this is for children to enjoy the learning process whilst having the confidence and skills to approach new life situations. This consideration of the individual is promoted in the government's former Every Child Matters initiative (Boateng, 2003). The initiative strived to ensure each child has a happy, enjoyable experience where they can develop skills and make a positive contribution to their society without being restricted by socio-economic disadvantage (Boateng, 2003). Group work, which is often utilised in cross-curricular approaches, can help raise self-esteem (Lawrence, 2006). On 4th February 2015 I wrote in my learning journal 'group activities in the 'cake sale project' provided opportunities for quieter members of the class to become more involved and to contribute their ideas.' In a smaller safe environment I agree that children's self-esteem is raised through taking small but important risks. The child-led nature of cross-curricular approaches (Kelly, 2011) helps to develop learner autonomy for unseen children, taking more responsibility of their futures. Through the direct experiences created, children re-construct their understanding of the world in a self-led discovery (Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2011). I agree with Claxton (2008) that children need to learn how to learn and how to love learning in order to have ambitious and inspired children of the next generation. By facilitating a development of skills and abilities to learn that are applicable to life-long learning we are fulfilling our responsibility of preparing children for life beyond the classroom. Claxton (2010: unpaginated) has created four learning-power dispositions: 'resilience,' 'resourcefulness,' 'reflectiveness,' 'reciprocity.' During my previous role as a teaching assistant I have seen the four R's used in practice where children were praised for their risk taking, perseverance, questioning and independence. This was evidenced in a visual working wall within the classroom. A quotation from a child was placed on a post-it note explaining how they had achieved one of the four R's. I argue that cross-curricular facilitates opportunities for this to occur and creates a positive classroom environment.

Counter-Arguments

Despite the numerous benefits of enriched cross-curricular learning for unseen children outlined above, it is not without contention and a number of counter-arguments have been raised. It is contended that it is advantageous to teach subjects discretely. Even though Plowden (1967) argued children's learning cannot be categorised, the report did suggest that for older primary children discrete teaching would be relevant. It could be suggested that this is a result of learning in both secondary and higher education being categorised into subject areas, therefore the lack of subject boundaries in primary school would not prepare children for further education. Ofsted (2013a) also promotes discrete subject teaching and discusses academic achievement for unseen children, on the basis that the discrete subjects of mathematics and English require basic skills to be grasped and mastered. Wilshaw's stance on academic achievement and meeting the needs of the children is for these essential skills to be taught by subject specialists. Although I agree with Wilshaw that gaining necessary subject specific skills in mathematics and English is extremely beneficial, particularly for unseen children, I feel his stance is concerned primarily with the target of 'closing the gap,' which is similarly driven by targets and percentages and not the individual learning experience. He does acknowledge the lack of

enrichment children from disadvantaged backgrounds experience but only as a cause of low achievement on test scores. My position is that cross-curricular is particularly valuable and a combination of discrete subject teaching and cross-curricular approaches can be achieved. Rose (2009) argues that high expectations are best attained through essential knowledge and skills are taught through high quality discrete subject but applied through a cross-curricular approach. I would argue that an effective balance can be achieved; the necessary skills and knowledge can be taught in a combination of discrete and cross-curricular approaches – fostering an effective and relevant learning environment.

Similarly, it has been argued that using a cross-curricular approach can cause superficial learning (Alexander, Rose & Woodhead, 1992) and tenuous links between subject areas (Laurie, 2011). Alexander et al. (1992) claim that much cross-curricular topic work is undemanding with children undertaking unstimulating activities and being limited by the need for work to fit under the topic umbrella. This results in little subject coherence where schools are not teaching the specific subject-knowledge and skills outlined in the national curriculum. Laurie (2011:128) discusses that schools are making tenuous links by using a 'key word approach' – the content taught is decided based on whether there can be a connection made with the key term for the topic. In doing so, the subject content taught often resulted in teachers planning occupied with irrelevant subject content. In addition to this, Alexander et al. (1992) claim that cross-curricular learning can result in collaborative projects that waste pupils' time. However, Laurie (2011) does acknowledge that many of these concerns can be addressed through thorough planning of effective cross-curricular learning. In line with the approach taken on the cross-curricular project carried out at my university, Barnes (2011) highlights the necessity to keep subject links to three or four subjects. It is my contention that having specific subject foci and effective planning, the problems raised can be overcome.

By implementing cross-curricular learning there have been concerns over the progression children make (Alexander et al., 1992) and the ability to assess this (Barnes, 2011). Alexander et al. (1992) argued there was limited progression made in certain subjects and particularly as children progressed throughout the school. Actively using assessment is crucial in ensuring progression (DfE, 2011). Barnes (2011) outlines that the difficulties with assessment occur due to the number of levels on which learning occurs. The creative nature of cross-curricular practice is one where assessment proves challenging. I would reason that this argument lacks some depth as teachers continuously assess utilising a range of strategies in a varied environments. This assessment can be on a number of levels including the assessment of knowledge, skills, mood and the classroom environment. Taylor (2011) argues that assessment can be achieved using a number of different methods within cross-curricular learning. As cross-curricular work often facilitates self-led discovery, self-assessment allows for children to take control of their learning. This building of responsibility can help unseen children to become more autonomous in their learning experiences and future ambitions. Assessment of the development of skills can help to promote the 'positive sense of self' (Barnes, 2011:32) as discussed previously. Taylor (2011) argues that Assessment for Learning (AfL) can be utilised in cross-curricular approaches to help children progress. The teacher can assess the prior knowledge and scaffold the learning in order for the children achieve within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This assessment is necessary to consider in order to have the effective planning and teaching of cross-curricular learning that, as discussed throughout this article, benefit unseen children on a number of levels.

These counter-arguments are perhaps also guilty of taking too fine a focus on subject-content in their assessment of cross-curricular approaches. A central argument of this article is that education is about more than educational attainment and there are many other factors by which to assess approaches. For example, I have discussed throughout this article that cross-curricular approaches lend themselves favourably to group work; which has a number of beneficial outcomes, including the progression of learning through sharing ideas and scaffolding achievement but also the vast social value of developing skills that are crucial and relevant to later life.

Kelly (2011) raises the concern that, from a teacher's perspective, the planning of cross-curricular teaching and learning can be a strain on time. As a new topic is planned for there is the need for time to be spent researching subject knowledge as subject content needs to be addressed and meaningful links made across the curriculum. In order to ensure enriching and inspiring experiences, teachers would need to gather, make and differentiate resources to meet the needs of the individual children. In addition, organisation needs to be considered to plan and allocate time within the busy school schedule to create effective learning experiences. There are many ways to make adopting cross-curricular approaches simple and reduce time demands however. Cross-curricular maybe a whole school approach which happens weekly or it could be planned for in block timetabling. The DfE (2015) conducted a report into the workload of teachers, and planning was highlighted as a large component of teaching workload. One strategy to overcome this is to ensure professional development and training of teachers on how to implement cross-curricular learning effectively. By having the knowledge and skills to pass on to other practitioners, an improvement in practice can be achieved. I would also argue that managing work-load is a concern for all teachers, not just those who plan cross-curricular learning. The strategies suggested by the DfE (2015) such as utilising shared planning and having blocked protected preparation planning and assessment time will benefit teaching as a whole. In my opinion, the time spent planning learning experiences that are enriching and inspiring are most worthwhile – they provide children with valuable skills and the enjoyment in learning that encouraged me to enter the teaching profession altogether. I believe we have a responsibility to ensure children are ready and prepared for life after education and that planning for cross-curricular learning can provide enriched learning experiences for unseen children that will aid their experience of learning and ambition whilst gaining the necessary skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has drawn upon my classroom practice and reflection on my core values and philosophies to establish the idea that education has become too narrowly focused on academic attainment as a chief concern. During my experiences and wider reading of government initiatives, it became evident to me that there is a strong emphasis on academic achievement within schools. Having experienced a school environment where a number of the children were from low-income families, the huge impact the school had on their lives was apparent. Providing unseen children with an enriched learning experience can affect their future perspectives not only on learning but on themselves as successful people. I would argue that through planning for cross-curricular learning, unseen children are able to make meaningful links between their learning in a way which is relevant and applicable to learning outside of the classroom. It offers opportunities for enriching experiences to be planned for which the children may never experience in other circumstances. Using this approach has many opportunities to facilitate the improvement of different necessary skills including social interaction and personal development. Despite there being a number of concerns highlighted regarding a cross-curricular approach I have discussed how these problems can be overcome and the benefit of incorporating cross-curricular opportunities have been brought to the forefront.

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Creating an Engaging Learning Environment Can Facilitate the Inclusion of Students with ASD in the Secondary School Setting

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Introduction

As I evolve in my role as a reflective practitioner, I have been able to identify emerging areas of my practice that I wish to develop, synonymous with the teaching values that underpin my practice. Within my first masters module “From Values to Vocation” emerged a research question:

How can I construct a classroom environment which is conducive to learning but also upholds my values of care and compassion?

However, as I continue my journey as a trainee English teacher, my evaluations too have developed, based on my classroom experiences. A common theme emerging throughout my second school placement was how I could effectively create a sense of inclusion for a student diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It is commonly cited in the literature that an increasing number of students with ASD are being included in the general education setting, and teachers are faced with the task of determining strategies that will help students with ASD succeed in the classroom. (Grandin, 2006). Furthermore, many professionals do not believe enough attention is being given to the social and emotional needs of children with ASD in the school setting (Bryson, Rogers, & Fombonne, 2003). Indeed, I found myself in this exact situation; one which I had also discovered was extensively discussed within the literature. As Loreman (2003) points out, the inclusion of ASD students at the secondary level has often represented a significant challenge for educators.

As a result of my research and an emerging area of interest, I have extended my original research question to focus on a more specific and prevalent area of my practice. Within this paper I present the position that creating an engaging learning environment can facilitate the inclusion of students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in the secondary school setting. My current position has emerged from the reflections and values of my practice as a trainee English teacher. Reflecting upon my teaching, I sought strategies and methods which would enable me to facilitate the learning of ASD students, as based upon my teaching values of care and kindness, I want all students to feel included. In order to appropriately present my position, it is first imperative to provide a definition of the Special Educational Need (SEN) I have focussed on. Autistic Spectrum Disorder, commonly referred to as ASD, is a highly complex condition that affects different people in different ways. Those diagnosed with ASD often display elements of one or more of the ‘triad of impairments’ (Wing, 1992) affecting social interaction, communication and imagination. Autistic disorders can occur in widely varying degrees of severity. Each aspect of the triad can be manifested in different ways, in different individuals and at different ages in the same individuals (Wing, 1992). Therefore, it is important to make clear that whilst many of the strategies discussed throughout this paper are documented as successful for ASD students all students should be educated in the manner that is most beneficial to the individual.

Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) emphasise that teachers learn, develop and modify their pedagogy skills through their reflective practice, therefore the first section of this paper will discuss the experiences which prompted my position using my reflections linked to my teaching values. The second section will discuss the most effective teaching strategies for engaging ASD students; these findings will be discussed and explored within the context of the literature and in relation to my own views as an English teacher. The final section of this paper will critically analyse questions posed against my position, within the broad spectrum of ASD research that exists and is constantly growing. This will place my position in its greater context thereby providing an overarching perspective.

Emerging Reflections

Reflection has been salient to my practice and learning journey as a trainee teacher. Adopting Schon’s (1983) approach, I have used reflection-on-practice and reflection-in-practice to develop my teaching and learning strategies. Alongside my values, my reflections have provided stimulus for my research into effective teaching (Hayes, 2006). Through research and application of different approaches to learning and varying lesson styles, I have been successful with most of my classes in creating engaging lessons which allow students to make progress, and furthermore apply their knowledge to an external setting. However, through self-critique I was able to note that a student diagnosed with ASD was failing to make rapid progress within my lessons. Prior to teaching the class, I had studied this student’s (henceforth student X) individual education plan and conversed with his learning support assistant everything that was suggested of myself as a trainee English teacher. However, Student X displayed disruptive behaviour within the lesson, including minor misdemeanours such as shouting out, and making irrelevant comments. Whilst I was able to reflect in action (Schon, 1983) in order to differentiate my dialogue for student X to avoid high levels of disruption, I was not adopting a ‘liberating’ (Hayes, 2006) approach to my pedagogy. I had not accounted specifically for student X within my planning and therefore I had not considered how to overcome the barriers to the student’s learning. In this way, I have since recognised that I was not effectively and appropriately catering to the diverse needs of all the students within my care. Whitehead (1989) argues many teachers must avoid

becoming a living contradiction between their values and their practice; such was the case for myself at this point in my teacher training year. An extract from my learning journal reflects this:

In a lesson with Class A, Student X was quite disruptive and thus I found it difficult to maintain the attention and engagement of the whole class. Over the next week I should consider how I am able to combat this. I could use a variety of activities which cater to all learning styles in order to help students keep focused.

Whitehead's (1989) resonant statement provoked further self-critique via reflection. As Glackin (2014) discusses, this is a fundamental process required for 'pedagogical authenticity', to which I am constantly striving. Adopting this process, I identified a recurring weakness within my teaching. Indeed, I was failing to provide an inclusive environment for another ASD student (henceforth Student Z) in my low ability year 8 class. In one particular lesson, students were required to empathise with a character from the novel we were studying. Whilst differentiation was employed throughout the lesson based on target grades, I had not differentiated specifically for student Z and this was evidenced by her disinterest. Within the typical triad of impairments associated with ASD, many individuals cannot always conceive of hypothetical situations or empathise with another point of view, an impairment referred to by Murray (1992) as monotropism. Indeed, it would seem that this kind of criteria was evidenced within my lesson; I now recognise that I was ultimately failing to cater for student Z's specific educational needs through my very general approach to the whole classes' learning.

Through critical reflection then, I was able to identify an area of my pedagogy which I wanted to develop; an impetus to alter my original research question. As Ghaye and Ghaye (1998:40) state, critical reflection "has the power to change something that we might not fully understand or have control and influence over, into something with more personal clarity, coherence and meaning." Acting upon this form of critical reflection, I began to research strategies which would result in the full inclusion of ASD students within my care. Using Hayes' (2006) liberating approach to my craft, I have sought to employ these strategies which focus on engaging ASD students.

Inclusive learning environment

Inclusion is the resolution that this paper strives for, and seeks to work towards. Consequently, it is necessary to first consider and understand this broad concept in the context of ASD students. In his discussion of the characteristics of effective teachers, Hayes (2006:23) notes that "pupils are attracted to teachers who have open faces, a pleasant manner, and a helpful attitude." Indeed these are characteristics I have actively sought to embody as they link to my key values. Certainly, these attributes contribute to provide students with motivation and can enhance self-esteem without a fear of failure; elements which Atkin (1994) notes as key psychological characteristics of an effective learning environment.

Price (2002:20) states that 'inclusive learning and teaching environments will demonstrate flexibility and differentiated learning in order to respond to individual needs', a statement which is particularly resonant in the context of my position. Thus, whilst I consistently employ differentiation within my practice, it is imperative that I have a thorough understanding of how to support ASD students specifically, given my experiences thus far in my training year. As Daily (2005) points out, inclusion does not mean that children with special needs should be placed into a general education setting just like a typical learner, rather, a variation of special education supports should be provided to create a successful engaging environment for ASD students. In this way, careful planning is essential, and it is often necessary to provide modifications in order to situate a child with this disorder in what is considered the 'least restrictive environment' (LRE).

Using my lesson evaluations and reflections I have been able to identify elements of my practice which have been successful with the ASD students in my care, and were therefore creating a more inclusive learning environment for these students. The following section postulates an array of teaching strategies which have been discussed within the pedagogical literature as successful for engaging ASD students, thus lending to their inclusion. These strategies are also considered within the context of my own teaching.

Strategies for the engagement of ASD students

According to Keen (2009) the successful inclusion of students for ASD requires active engagement in instruction, social interaction and a range of other meaningful activities throughout the day. My position is in agreement with Keen's (2009) suggestion, as without a high level of engagement, students with ASD are unlikely to have the same learning opportunity as their peers. Within the educational literature, there appears to be a general agreement that engagement is a multifaceted construct which includes behavioural, cognitive and emotional components (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Keen, 2009). Therefore, when seeking to create an engaging and inclusive classroom environment, it is important to be wary of the varying levels and types of engagement. Moreover, we must also be mindful that ASD is a very diverse condition and as such it is highly difficult to specify one unique strategy which will cater to each individual student. Nonetheless, it is my position that the active engagement of students with ASD can facilitate their inclusion within the secondary classroom context.

In order to create the inclusive environment that I recognise within my teaching values, it is important that I am able to cater to all styles of learning. The VARK model proposed by Fleming (2001) suggests that there are four learning styles: visual learners, auditory learners, read/write learners and kinaesthetic learners. Therefore, the integration of different learning styles allows educators to cater to the varied needs of children and thus create an effective and inclusive classroom environment for all students (Alfrey & Durell, 2003). It is widely documented by medical experts and within the educational literature, that varying learning styles can assist the understanding of students with a SEN. Within the triad of impairments present in children with ASD, difficulties with language and communication are often evident within the classroom setting. For instance, whilst higher functioning ASD students may possess a highly developed vocabulary, they will often still maintain problems with the use and understanding of language, including misinterpretation of literal meaning and lack of appreciation of the social meaning or function of communication (Wing, 1992). Quill (2000) notes that a large majority of students with ASD are categorised as visual learners as they are better able to process and remember visual information given their receptive language difficulties (Hodgdon, 1994; Quill, 2000). Using visual cues has therefore become a regularity in my teaching. Using thought-provoking images or videos at the start of a lesson can be used to 'hook' students into the lesson content, generating a stimulating learning environment.

Ball-Erickson's (2012) research on the use of computer assisted instruction (CAI) as a method of developing reading comprehension in ASD students also has relevance to my own practice. Within this study, students with ASD showed most improvements in their concentration and reading for meaning skills in the CAI and visual cues condition. When reading a narrative text, I incorporate accompanying visual cues for student X, who appears to possess 'hyperlexia' and has shown difficulty with the skill of inference. Using images as prompts and highlighting key words within a text can reduce the demand on the working memory. In addition to this, visual schedules are easily implemented into my lessons, and can often benefit children without disabilities who prefer this learning style.

Reading for meaning and providing alternative interpretations is a fundamental component of the national curriculum across all key stages of English, as students must be able to demonstrate they understand there may be more than one idea represented in a text. I have employed a range of strategies in order to allow this pupil equal opportunity to progress within my lessons. One such strategy is the use of drama to encourage imaginative thought in students with ASD. Kempe and Tissot (2012) note that drama can be a flexible pedagogy that is highly responsive to setting and context. Through reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983) concerning student Z's monotropism and difficulty with imagination, I have incorporated a range of drama based activities into my lessons. One particularly successful example was the use of 'conscience alley', an activity which requires students to speak aloud what they imagine the thoughts of a character to be. Student Z demonstrated high levels of emotional engagement alongside enjoyment; this was also documented by her accompanying learning support assistant. Further to this, student Z's written work evidenced that she had accepted the fictitious character she has studied to such an extent that she made rapid progress alongside her peers. I had successfully assisted this pupil in overcoming what was previously a barrier to learning. In agreement with Kempe and Tissot's (2012) findings then, drama can provide a context in which skills can be practiced and learned, understanding fostered and, confidence heightened.

The development of socialisation in students with ASD is another benefit of drama-based activities in English lessons. Rogers (2000) notes that social dysfunction is perhaps the most defining and handicapping feature of autism, and within the literature, it is widely recognised that that social engagement directly affects other important behaviours like language, even when these behaviours are not specifically targeted by the teaching program. As such, developing the socialisation skills of students with ASD has often taken precedence across both of my teaching practices, given its importance both within the school setting, and in the wider community, a view which is similarly outlined in my pedagogical creed: "I believe that the classroom is a microcosm of society. It is part of our duty as teachers to begin to prepare children for life outside the classroom" (see Appendix 1: Pedagogical Creed, 2014). One such strategy I have recognised as effective is the use of Kagan's (1994) cooperative learning strategies; a learning style where students work together towards a shared learning goal. Research by Dugan, Kamps, Leonard, et al (1995) has shown that using cooperative learning in the classroom has positive effects for all learners, including: academic achievement; the development of English proficiency; self-esteem; acceptance of mainstreamed SEN students and attitudes towards school and teachers.

The cooperative learning method often referred to as the 'think-pair-share' discussion technique has been successful in my classroom, where ASD students have demonstrated high levels of behavioural engagement. The task requires students to consider their own response to an open-ended question followed by an extended discussion with their partner, before finally sharing their ideas with the rest of the class. This has proven to be an excellent strategy for engaging ASD students as it encourages the development of empathy and understanding; skills which pupils with ASD can typically struggle with. Implementing this scenario on a regular basis has provided a sense of familiarity, which means that ASD students benefit from a structured learning environment; a concept which will be discussed further as this paper progresses. With reference to the positive outcomes that Dugan et al (1995) discuss then, ASD students in my care have developed increased self-esteem and have also benefited from the development of positive relationships with their peers, all of which contribute to creating an inclusive classroom.

Constructivist theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner 1996) also support the use of group work strategies. According to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of Social Development, students are capable of performing at a higher levels when asked to work in collaborative situations, rather than individually. Additionally, research by Scruggs (2007) has suggested that a successful inclusive classroom should make use of peer mediation, as it offers the opportunity for a discourse which facilitates higher level understanding. As such, pairing an ASD student with a 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO) in order to promote peer to peer interaction is a strategy I have found to be advantageous, as the MKO acts to break down the information for the ASD student. The type of practice that I have used within my lessons supports the findings of Wolfberg and Schuler (1993), who explored Vygotsky's MKO theory in a study which focused specifically on children with ASD. They found that when children with autism played in an 'integrated play group' with more 'competent' typical peers, they demonstrated remarkable improvements in their social interaction.

The social development approach to educational theory is one I have accordance with as, like Vygotsky (1978), I believe that social interaction is a fundamental part of learning, and this is reflected in my pedagogical creed. However, it is equally as important to recognise that some students with ASD may find group work tasks difficult, given the unique criteria of each student on the Autistic spectrum. Within my practice I have endeavoured to alleviate this barrier to learning by creating what Crosland and Dunlap (2012) call a 'structured learning environment', as students with autism benefit from consistency and predictability. Heflin and Alberto (2001) postulate that 'defining' specific areas of the classroom and school settings can assist in structuring the environment for ASD students. Through collaborative planning with a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) and consideration of the students specific impairments in their individual education plan (IEP), I have been able to create a differentiated seating plan for the ASD students within my care which reflects their unique capabilities and also encourages peer learning. During group work scenarios, I pair ASD students with a regular partner, as this assists in creating a sense of familiarity. Carnahan, Musti-Rao, and Bailey (2009:41) define a structured learning environment as one which "promotes a clear understanding of the activities, schedules and expectations for both the individuals with autism and their caregiver or teacher." This is a strategy that has been widely discussed in the literature as fundamental for many ASD children, for instance, Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, and Kincaid (2003) suggest that individuals with ASD thrive in well-organized, highly-structured environments. Thus a comprehensible environment can be viewed as conducive to an actively engaging classroom. Using a 'learning journey' is just one method I have employed in order to allow students with ASD to contextualize their learning by providing them with a schedule of activities (Myles & Simpson, 1998). Students have responded positively to this resource throughout my teaching practice, providing further support for Crosland and Dunlap's (2012) suggestion.

Counter Arguments

Due to the complex nature of ASD, opposing views to my position are offered extensively within the literature. Certainly, it is important to consider that no one child is the same, and that some children may have interrelated needs. Within this context it has often been argued that children with ASD in particular, given the ranging severity of students on the Autistic spectrum (Hamilton, 2000) may benefit from attending a school which caters to their specific needs and ultimately enhances their progression. Children, who are considered moderate to severe on the Autistic spectrum, may not perform as well in an inclusive classroom due to their diverse requirements. Dybvik (2003) supports this view, suggesting that inclusion can be negative in its effects upon the student if, for the practitioner, inclusion means little more than having the student physically present in the mainstream classroom. Thus, the inclusion of ASD students in mainstream secondary schools has often been the subject of intense debate, and indeed this is reflected in the pedagogical literature. Daily (2005) comments that many students benefit from and demonstrate a preference for smaller class sizes and self-contained, specific educational programmes. Certainly, specialist schooling can provide a highly-tailored learning environment including facilities which lend themselves to the child's educational requirements. Similarly, teaching staff have been trained within this area specifically, and are experienced in working to ensure progression with students and their particular area of need (Wiele, 2011).

However, in the contemporary educational system, an increasing number of mainstream schools now possess their own SEN department which can be used to provide specialist support to students. In this way, ASD students have access to constant support, but also benefit from an inclusive learning environment. Wiele (2011) advises that mainstream school settings have proven to be effective locations for the development of both behavioural and social skills evidence of which has also been discussed throughout this paper. Further support is provided in Koegel's (2013) findings, which document that that without systematic social development adolescents with ASD can exhibit limited or non-existent initiations toward typical peers which can lead to reported feelings of loneliness. Moreover, Simonoff, Pickles, Charman, et al (2008) present empirical evidence which finds that these social impairments increase the risk of adolescents with ASD developing co-morbid disorders, most commonly anxiety or depression.

Although Tornillo (1994) argues that the time and effort required to engage ASD students can decrease the amount of time and energy directed toward the whole class, evidence from my own practice suggests that liaising with the student's learning support assistant can play a critical role in combating this particular type of scenario. It is evident then, that the concept of inclusion within mainstream school is a highly extensive and open-ended discussion, which differs based on each individual child. We must also be aware of the existence of external variables concerning inclusion which have not been discussed in this paper, such as intervention, ASD awareness, and appropriate professional training. However, regardless of whether a student with ASD is educated in a fully-inclusive or a self-contained classroom, the ultimate goal should be to give the student the tools needed to be successful in their chosen future. As such, it is my belief that for the students with ASD that I encounter in my teaching career, I must facilitate their inclusion through the creation of an actively-engaging learning environment using the strategies outlined in this paper.

Conclusion

My current position argues that creating an engaging learning environment for students with ASD can facilitate their inclusion in the secondary school setting. I have asserted my position throughout this paper through the critical consideration of extensive evidence within the pedagogical literature, complemented with examples from my own practice. Engaging learning environments for ASD students will make use of cooperative learning strategies, drama-based activities, and cater to all learning styles within the context of a structured learning environment. Adopting these pedagogical approaches will allow for the productive inclusion of these students on the spectrum. Embracing students with ASD as able, active participants in the classroom alongside their peers also develops their socialisation skills, and this is clearly supported within the literature.

My position will impact my own future practice as in order to continually improve my craft, it is important that “I continue to make the most of every learning opportunity” (Pedagogical Creed, 2014, ¶1) and through consistent reflective practice use my insights to improve my teaching (Newton, 2005). As such, I hope to continue to explore and understand the role of engagement in creating an inclusive classroom for ASD students. Indeed, as Stenhouse (1975:143) states, “it is not enough that teachers’ work should be studied: they need to study it themselves... [in] the role of the teacher as researcher.”

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Appendix One

Pedagogical Creed

As a teacher I value learning as a lifelong process. Therefore I believe it is incredibly important that as a learner myself, I continue to make the most of every learning opportunity, from within and outside of the teaching profession, in order to ensure I am always progressing and always improving my craft. In this respect, I also consider reflection to be an essential component for teachers and all educational practitioners.

I believe the role of the teacher is to ensure students intellectual growth. In this way, teaching not only facilitates the acquirement of knowledge, but also inspires creativity and intrigue. It is a fundamental tool which we, as teachers, must use to invoke passion and to motivate. As such, I believe that it is my responsibility as a teacher to show a commitment to all students and foster their knowledge through stimulating and thought-provoking lessons. I believe that the most memorable and effective style of teaching is that which captures students imagination and engages their thought process. In the same respect, not every student is the same. Therefore I believe it is highly important that as teachers, we work hard to ensure that each student is appropriately supported or challenged based on their needs.

Every student within a school should feel part of a wider community where every student is valued. The school itself should be a welcoming community; a place where children can truly feel safe, communicating with their peers and building relationships with others in a friendly and unique environment. For many young individuals, school may be the only constant within their lives, and so it becomes a place they treasure and often learn to love.

As such, I cannot understate the importance of creating an inclusive learning environment for all students. An inclusive learning environment is one in which all those participating feel able to actively engage, feel safe and feel welcome. An inclusive learning environment fosters and embraces diversity, incorporating the needs of all pupils.

I believe that the classroom is a microcosm of society. It is part of our duty as teachers to begin to prepare children for life outside the classroom, as well as educating them to the best of our ability in our specific subjects. Therefore I will strive to constantly exhibit the positive values of the community and reinforce these within my practice and myself as an individual.

As a teacher, it is not only my duty to enrich students with fundamental skills and knowledge documented in the national curriculum, but also to encourage them to achieve their lifetime goals and ambitions. It is my responsibility to gift them with the confidence, belief and strength to reach their full potential. I believe that in my role as a teacher, I should emit a caring, thoughtful and dedicated sense of self, in order to facilitate students' discovery of their own identity. Therefore, I value these type of characteristics: kindness, passion, and care, and judge them to be central to my own teaching values and beliefs. Through the practice of these characteristics, students are provided with a safe and warm learning environment in which they are able to maximize their learning. They are able to share ideas and opinions, make mistakes, and develop as individuals, without worry or fear of failure. It is my duty as a teacher to appropriate praise and recognize students' achievements, and their efforts, in order to support their growth.

It is the role of the teacher to motivate all young individuals, to build their confidence, and help them to become independent learners. Education should encourage students to make their own decisions, by providing them with the skills to form opinions and develop critical understandings. In this way, it is the duty of a teacher to encourage a passion for knowledge and promote a love of learning.

ReflectED Reflection

The Call – an NQT Year

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Suddenly the door closes. You open the online register software and, for the first time, you say, "Good morning" to your own class. A long journey will have got you to this point, perhaps through the PGCE, Undergraduate or Teach First programme. Regardless of your route, it has all been leading to this. Your NQT year has just started. You relax slightly, as 30 voices chant back, "Good morning everybody!"

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to tell the story of my NQT year within a 3-form entry Primary School in West London. By charting the challenges, approaches and demands of the first year of teaching, I hope to show an understanding of what it means to undertake an NQT year. A month-by-month account is provided; a high- and low-light reel that summarises the year. I will explain some of the decisions I took and reflect on whether, if I were to undertake the year again, I would do the same again.

September: Setting Up Your First Classroom

Having secured an NQT post, I was ready to start planning how I wanted to set out my first class room. I wanted to draw on all I had learnt during my training – what I liked and what I wanted to avoid. I was surprised at how much I was left to get on with this on my own. Although keen to offer their support, the other teachers had their own classes to set up. I was left to get on with it. I put up wall displays for different subjects and the freedom to make my own decisions was refreshing, having spent so long in other peoples' classes during teaching practice.

My aim was to create a friendly and calm atmosphere. Some of the children in our school come from challenging backgrounds, where life at home can be chaotic. With this in mind, I arranged the tables in small groups and assigned each pupil somewhere to sit. This gave order to the class and established a process of how I wanted things done from the first day. I then rotated the seating positions each half term. On reflection I think I will keep these changes to once a term, rather than half term; particularly in the short spring term, it meant too much disruption for the pupils, getting used to a new seating plan. However, I consider it to be a useful approach as it sets a structure to the class and ensures pupils work closely with different peers throughout the whole year.

What felt like very early on in the term I undertook my first observation from the Deputy Head. All staff members were observed in the same week due to Ofsted being guaranteed to visit before Christmas. I prepared for the session, (English – Extended Writing, Character Description), as I would have done during placement. A lot of time went into the planning. It paid off as the observation went well. However, I was starting to realise how impossible it would be to maintain the same amount of preparation time for one lesson as I had done during placement. Whilst a PGCE student teacher, the most I ever taught was 70% of the timetable. Now faced with full responsibility for a class I had to find ways to make things easier to manage. Sharing some of the planning load with colleagues and 'maggie-ing' (stealing) ideas from the internet, books and twitter were simple ways to keep in control.

The school does not use schemes of work for English or Maths, which you may or may not agree with. But without them, time is rapidly absorbed by planning everything from scratch. Colleagues were always happy to offer to help, but as I mentioned before, everyone is constantly busy so I would rarely feel confident to take them up on their offer.

October: The Call

The early observation by the Deputy Head was justified. Five weeks into the first term we were called into the staff room at lunch. We had had 'THE CALL!' Teacher training prepares you for many things. Seeing adults physically wilt at the prospect of an inspection is not one. There were tears and fears. The school was currently classed as Requires Improvement and had undergone a number of brutal inspections recently.

Throughout the short preparation for the inspection I tried to stay calm and strike a balance between getting myself in order and being supportive to colleagues. It was interesting to see how the prospect of an inspection showed peoples' true colours. Some 'went to ground' and purely focused on themselves. Others rallied around the new staff to ensure they were clear on what was required.

As an NQT, I was told that Ofsted's expectations of my teaching would be low and that I should continue to do what I had been doing thus far. I made sure my marking was up to date and that the planning was tip-top so someone else could understand it, not just my memory jogs. Most importantly I left the school and got some rest. It was clear by the end of the second day who had looked after their wellbeing as well as preparing their work. Others had tried to push on, forgo sleep in the hope that they could do

one more thing. It was evident on the second day who these people were. I think their teaching suffered from a lack of rest. I was reasonably well rested for each of the two days and I intend to do the same next time around.

November: Half Term

Before you know it, half term arrives and the wonderful prospect of 9 days out of school sits before you. There seem to be a number of approaches to making the most of half term. Using the time to do even more planning and marking; partying hard; or just 'stepping off the roller coaster' for a while. I was fortunate to be able to get away for the week and would highly recommend it. I spent the first four days sleeping, eating and sleeping. By Wednesday I felt I had unwound and could enjoy spending time with people. Being away it was impossible to pick up a book or note a few lesson ideas. This didn't stop me thinking about the following term but allowed for some proper rest. Although I didn't realise it at the time, switching off completely during the October half term meant I could see through the Winter Term to Christmas without flagging and without getting ill.

If you are to strive to make progress with your pupils in every lesson there is always something to do. Following the mantra 'Plan – Deliver – Consider – Improve' means you are never finished. This takes getting used to, but ensures you are always striving to be better. The conveyor belt of planning and marking is brutal, endless and unforgiving. There was a few times where I had left a couple of pieces of work in books. If you let this happen it creates nothing but trouble. Even letting a few days go by without marking books means you are playing catch up and having to spend entire weekends to do so. I cannot be clearer in advising that NQTs apply a little and often approach to marking. On the occasions that the Year Leader pulled me up on my errant books he did it with class. He was sensitive to the fact I was new and offered help with ideas and support to get me back on track and then keep on top of it. This was an early indication that staff were willing to support and not lecture NQTs, which I found was easier to respond to positively.

During the first term I was made a subject lead. This was necessary, as the previous lead had taken maternity leave. I was excited about the chance to lead a subject, but voiced my concerns about taking on more responsibility with the Head. She was understanding and along with the previous incumbent set out a clear plan of what should be achieved. The danger of taking on a role that you are passionate about is that it may affect how you prepare for the less fun, but necessary parts of the job. Not wanting this to happen I requested Subject Lead release time to allow me to complete some of the subject lead tasks without impeding on other areas of my teaching.

December: Parents' Evening

The first parents' evening seemed like a momentous occasion – the first time people would sit down and ask, 'So what exactly are you doing to help my child learn?' The main challenge at my school was a language barrier. Where we knew parents struggled with English we made arrangements for someone to help with translation. This was most often another parent or pupil. Apart from the language issue the evening went well. It was good to meet the parents properly and spend time suggesting ways they could help their children progress with activities at home.

January: Asking Questions. Asking for Help

As I mentioned at the start of this piece, all members of staff are busy with their workload. Also, when you get to your second term people are less aware of you being 'new'. As a result the number of times you are asked if you are OK, or if you need any help diminishes. In a normal job this might be fine, a couple of months to find your feet and then off you go. However, there is so much to learn, know and do that this cannot and should not be the case for an NQT. Reflecting on this period of the year, where I found it most challenging, I have recognised that I didn't ask for help from colleagues when I needed it. Perhaps it is trying to prove you are a good teacher. Perhaps it is a male thing. Part of it was definitely because I thought everyone else was too busy to answer what I thought were simple questions. Either way, my struggle at this point was exacerbated by not seeking out the support of colleagues within school. The irony is that when I did, they were keen to help and made time to answer questions, source resources and locate information. The more I did this, the better I felt. My workload became more efficient and I started to build positive working relationships across the school.

February: Listening

During this term I read an education blog that asked, "What do teachers mean when they say to their pupils, 'You need to listen'?" The premise was that although the phrase may be recognised by pupils, they might not understand it. Does a pupil know what you mean when you ask them to listen? For my class, which has a significant number of EAL (20/28 with 17 different nations represented) and SEN (10/28), this was an important consideration. Particularly when some seem to allow any verbal input, class discussion or small group answers to pass them by.

To address this I have started to explain to the class what it means to listen. We now talk about listening meaning I am:
Watching the person talking with my eyes;
Listening to them with my ears;
Thinking about what they are saying with my brain;
Each is coupled with a physical action to accompany it.

In addition to this, during speaking and listening exercises I would ask pupils to summarise answers that others had given. It really highlights who is listening. Now the practice has been established in class pupils know they have to actively listen to each other because even if they are not asked the initial question they may be called upon to contribute – listening to what others are saying then becomes very useful.

March: Test or Quiz?

When we talk to pupils about the formal assessment weeks I like to use the word quiz rather than test. It sounds far less intimidating. In preparation for the assessments, I talk to the class to make a few things clear; I am looking to see who can try their best, if they don't get a huge score I won't be cross. Whatever they do in the quiz will help me be a better teacher as I will know what they need extra help with. This last point seemed to help the most at reducing the anxiety in the room.

During March the second round of Optional SATS tests for Year 4 were scheduled. In the previous term we had used past papers to gauge where our pupils were. In this term we were using new papers, produced by a company, based on the new national curriculum. Senior Leadership Team (SLT) had warned that they would be different to what we had before. They weren't wrong.

We stream for English and Maths in Year 4. Streaming is still something I haven't made my mind up about as I can see plenty of positives and negatives for both sides of the argument. But that is another conversation. As a part of the streaming I take the Entry Level maths group (I don't like to call, or have others call them the lower group). It was heart-breaking to watch them navigate a path through the quiz with little understanding of what they were being asked to do. Across the year scores were very low. The lowest were of course in my Entry Level class. The confusion and frustration felt by the pupils during the test was matched by my frustration and self-doubt when the results were processed. It made me question whether I was doing things correctly. Despite spending time thinking about this, I have yet to come up with a solution to help. Testing is an inevitable part of teaching. However, these new tests appear to have achieved little more than knock the enthusiasm out of both my pupils and me.

April: Take Care

By the time the Easter holidays arrived I felt as though I was physically broken. As well as my energy levels being basement-low, a sore back was causing me major discomfort. Hour after hour hunched over a computer, marking books and leaning over tiny desks were all contributing to the condition. In addition to this, unhealthy food choices were made daily by the seemingly endless provision of cake and biscuits in the staff room. I was lacking both rest and exercise. The first weekend of the holidays I was unable to do much more than sleep and eat. I booked a physio appointment to have my back looked at and started to address my diet.

In the summer term I tried to take better care of myself, making small changes to ensure I did not end up like this at the start of the summer holiday. A few staff began to meet weekly for a short after work run and the improved weather meant I was more inclined to cycle to work. If you follow teachers on Twitter you may have noticed the current trend in discussing work life balance. A popular theme is #teachers5aday. It is used by colleagues to encourage each other across the country to set aside time to achieve a work-life balance, for example exercising in some way or sharing time with friends and family.

May: Reports

Reports are an expected part of teaching and one that on the surface seem fairly simple – summarise the strengths and development points of each pupil's progress over the course of the year. Early in the Spring Term my NQT mentor suggested I start making prep notes about my pupils on a regular basis. I simply kept a table open on my laptop, into which I could add comments and observations. This was great advice as it meant when I came to start the reports I already had a bank of ideas to include. Despite starting this exercise early on and feeling confident about Reports as the May half term came around, I had massively underestimated the time that needs to be designated to this project. There is input from other teachers to collect (PPA subjects and streaming groups), formatting the text, creating different ways of stating similar messages and proof reading are some of the time expensive tasks. I was glad I had heeded my mentor's advice as I dread to think what it would have been like without it. With a few long and late shifts I finally got over the line. Thankfully there was only a pair of errors to correct in the read through. I had started early enough in the year. I started the note taking in late February. However the route to the finish was more crescendo than consistent. I plan to ensure that next year I follow the latter path.

June: Sports Day

As mentioned before, I had been made PE Coordinator, therefore, Sports Day was my responsibility. This was a huge undertaking, with a lot of planning and coordination to manage. I wanted to make this a great celebration of sport, so arranged a whole week of activities and competitions for the pupils, staff and parents to coincide with the Youth Sport Trust's National School Sports Week. A full run down of what we did and why would be a paper in itself, so it is perhaps better to recall the advice given by staff at St Mary's about Subject Leadership.

Early on, explain your objectives clearly to SLT to get them on board. This helps when later down the line you may need to ask for extra time, resources or funding. It also means that the message to the rest of the staff about their involvement in your plan has support from the top.

Make an impact by choosing something interesting and new. It doesn't have to be something you have created, but draw on all the learning you have soaked up over the course of your training.

A good mantra for all school-based projects is under promise and over deliver. Be careful not to be too elaborate in what you want to achieve on top of the rest of your day-to-day tasks. I almost learnt this lesson the hard way when planning Sports Week. Realising that I was trying to take on way too much about a month before Sports Week meant I was able to scale back the events list. I was confident that I could go back to SLT and have this conversation and I am fortunate to have a great SLT team who were very supportive.

July: Is it Really July Already?

Now at the end of the year I have a chance to look back and start to prepare for my second year. My thoughts are mixed at this point. The standard clichés are there; hasn't it gone quickly and I'm really looking forward to the summer. There is also a sense of frustration, as during this last half term I finally feel as though I fully understand the way my class works – and now they'll be leaving to go to Year 5.

Of course there is also the excitement of a new year, a new class and a chance to improve on this year. I will remain at the school and have been fortunate to be given a Year 4 class again. This will allow me not only to consolidate my practice, but also really embed all the things that went well during this first year.

When friends asked me how my NQT year was going, I often said that:

"The second week was easier than the first."

"The second month was easier than the first."

"The second term was much easier than the first."

I believe this is true for most NQTs, even if you ignore our Ofsted visit. By recalling this mantra I was able to keep going when the inevitable moments of doubt crept in. It has also given me encouragement for next year. If the improvement between the first and second term is replicated in the first and second year, I am in for a great a year.

I hope that this review of the year has shown some of the approaches I have used to survive my NQT year. They worked for me, in my school, with all its inherent challenges and demands. Not all of the approaches will work for other teachers; in fact the opposite may be true. Find what works for you and what works for the pupils in your class. That is what is most important.

ReflectED Review

Mathematics Education Teaching and Research Enterprise METRE

Page 99 Conference

23rd June 2015

Freda Rockliffe, St Mary's University, Twickenham, UK

METRE is an initiative of the Primary and Secondary Education team at St Mary's University. It was established in 2014 to promote partnerships with local, national and international teachers and researchers in schools and universities. Our aim is to continue to contribute to the development of a community of mathematical innovators.

Members of the St Mary's community gathered together on 23rd June for the inaugural METRE conference. Delegates included, recently qualified finalists, teachers from partnership schools, link tutors and colleagues in the school of Education, Theology and Leadership. The day commenced and concluded with inspirational keynote addresses. Two rounds of workshops were conducted to enable small group discussion to focus on specific aspects of the aims of the curriculum.

The conference Outline

Christine Edwards-Leis welcomed all and gave an introduction to the broad aims of METRE which include:

- Conducting research into practice and publishing the outcomes through conference presentations and texts;
- Hosting Sphere events where innovative practice is shared by teachers and researchers;
- Supporting teachers in schools through CPD;
- The development of resources to encourage teachers and learners to explore mathematics creatively; and,
- Hosting conferences where ideas are shared and explored.

Inspired by current thinking and the latest developments in mathematics pedagogy, the conference focused on the aims of the National Curriculum, which emphasise the need to develop fluency, reasoning and problem solving. Aligned with these aims was an additional focus on developing mastery in the curriculum, which is a recent addition to the mathematics curriculum. A mastery approach aims to ensure that all children partake in a common lesson and that through careful planning of next steps and reinforcement by teacher modelling; children come to a secure, deep and broad understanding of basic concepts and calculations, which are then applied in problem solving context. The implications for teaching and learning are profound, calling for less emphasis on simple levels of differentiation and more depth of understanding and challenge for all children as more children progress at a similar pace.

Keynote 1: What is Mastery?

Caroline Clissold from the National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics [NCETM]

Caroline gave an inspiring presentation about the meaning and interpretation of a mastery approach. Illustrated by engaging practical examples and insightful reflections, she presented a contrast between current approaches and practices as influenced by the Primary National Strategy and current National Curriculum and some of the changes and challenges faced in implementing and interpreting the new mastery approach. She advocated spending longer and digging deeper into topics and themes, making connections with prior learning, consolidating and developing depth of understanding. Drawing on the work of Drury (2014), Caroline emphasised the importance of factual knowledge, procedural knowledge and conceptual understanding in developing sustainable learning.

Workshop 1

Using a context that can be revisited several times throughout Key Stages 2 to 5

Hosts: Nigel Wills and Jacky Oldham

The chosen context was the "cone" and the task involved taking a circle, cutting out a sector and joining the edges to make an open cone. The maths they looked at for Key Stages 2 and 3 was to try to find for different angle sectors which angle gave the largest volume. As this was aimed at Key Stage 3, rather than calculating the volume (Key Stage 4), they filled the cones with rice and weighed the rice. Although this does not give the volume directly, it does tell which cone holds the most, or has greatest volume.

Having started by making a range of cones, participants were asked which they thought would be 'the biggest' before doing the experiment. It isn't usually the one that pupils think it will be! As they weighed the rice, they plotted the mass against the angle using Excel and a pleasing graph emerged. They then refined the angle according to the graph.

This context could be revisited in Key Stage 4 to calculate the volume by measuring, then in Key Stage 5 by using algebra and differentiation.

Workshop 2 and 5

Using collaborative activities to develop mathematical reasoning at Key Stage 2

Hosts: Manish Kothari and Ruth Tomsett

Participants worked initially independently on a mathematical classification challenge, based on the properties of numbers before combining ideas in groups of 2, 3 or 4 to complete the task. Following this activity, participants reflected together on the effectiveness of their collaborations in solving tasks of this nature. Ideas were shared and developed through the discussions and the session ended by drawing out certain strategies for embedding collaborative practices more frequently in the classroom. The importance of the use of challenge was discussed as a key factor for effective collaboration.

Workshop 3 and 4

What if...? Using questions to develop reasoning

Hosts: Rene Hartmann and Freda Rockliffe

The workshop considered the importance of questioning as central to the role of facilitator/teacher in scaffolding mathematical reasoning and discussion; using a rich task as a starting point. Participants immediately engaged with the activity of building an animal from multilink cubes, each colour of which had been given a different value. This initial task had a set target total value of 597. Creative solutions all worth the target value included; a 5 legged spider, giraffe, zebra, turtle and crocodile. Some intriguing choices of calculations were selected, such as multiplying the values of adjacent white/black squares in the multilink zebra. On reflection this could be considered as an early introduction to algebra. The activity opened out by inviting people to consider adaptations, types of differentiations and variations, including effective questioning.

Workshop 6

Resources for Mastery

Hosts; John Garvey and Debbie Robinson

The National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics' document, Mastery Approaches and the New Curriculum (2014:2) states that in order to develop mastery, 'concrete and pictorial representations of mathematics are chosen carefully to help build procedural and conceptual knowledge together'. This workshop focused on blending the use of physical and virtual resources (ICT) with a view to enhancing teaching and learning in mathematics. Participants also focused on the modelling of mathematical concepts using resources commonly found in primary classrooms.

Keynote 2: Enriching and developing mathematical promise of Children within the National Curriculum

Professor Valsa Koshy, Brunel University

Valsa's reflections on creativity and motivation in mathematics learning were inspirational. She called for an enriched curriculum, illustrated by some thought-provoking examples of tasks which offered opportunities to develop deeper mathematical thinking. She challenged participants to consider what such a curriculum might look like for all children, not only those labelled as 'mathematically able'.

The participants were engaged throughout in discussion and presentations that challenged their thinking and supported their quest for new understanding. Thoughts and reflections include:

"The Maths conference was a huge success. It brought colleagues from across phase together to celebrate and inform a cross section of emerging and established educators about contemporary pedagogic practice in primary and secondary mathematics. It was great to see students, teachers, link tutors and primary ITE programme colleagues learning together in a motivational and inspiring environment!" *Caroline Corker – Academic Director Primary Programmes*

"I have learnt so much today." *NQT*

"Inspiring ideas to deepen learning for all children in Maths... no limits to achievement." *Link tutor*

METRE look forward to hosting their 2016 conference where exciting and challenging aspects of mathematics pedagogy and curriculum can be explored. You can find a copy of the programme and keynote presentations from our 2015 event on our website www.stmarys.ac.uk/education-theology-and-leadership/metre.htm.

Guidelines for Contributors

Submissions are welcome from early years, primary, secondary and higher education sectors. Contributions are encouraged from any country and it is expected that the Journal will publish articles that offer readers insightful, inspirational as well as practical information about teaching, learning and assessment across the curriculum.

The normal word limit for articles is negotiable dependent upon the nature of the article. Research articles should aim to be approximately between 3500-5000 words. We would welcome the opportunity to publish articles that describe good practice in schools, literature reviews that increase understanding of particular educational domains, research articles that explore new ideas, and articles from practitioners that demonstrate the contribution that reflective practice and informed action can make to effective teaching. The word limit for such writing would be negotiable.

Articles for consideration by the Editorial Board should be emailed to the editor, christine.edwards-leis@stmarys.ac.uk.

The articles will be 'blind' refereed by two referees, who will remain anonymous and authors will receive feedback through the editor. Articles can be submitted at any time during the year.

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Developing research assignments for submission

Many teachers and students write assignments that include literature reviews or that report on inquiries into aspects of their practice undertaken in a range of settings. These pieces of writing could be considered for submission. Ensure you provide an abstract and key words and reference according to the Harvard Method of Referencing. Contact the editor for guidance and support in converting your assignment piece into a journal article.

Notes for research articles for submission

It is expected that research articles make an original contribution to education research. They should be based on evidence such as newly acquired data through empirical research, historical data, or published work.

Sharing good practice and school projects

Great things happen in schools. Teachers and head teachers are encouraged to share their practice with the education community through descriptions of projects that they have created, implemented and evaluated. While these pieces are not necessarily expected to be supported by evidence from the literature (as a research article would be) the theories that underpin the practices described should be included to demonstrate informed pedagogy.

Preparation of research articles

Title

Please write a succinct title and include author/s, affiliations and email address of lead author.

Abstract

An abstract should be 200-250 words. It should have 6 key words for reference purposes. The abstract should provide the argument put forward, a rationale for the research, method used and major findings/recommendations. A good practice abstract will include an explanation of the project (length, participants, curriculum focus), its purpose and pertinent outcomes.

Article format

The article should include the abstract, all figures, tables, and reference list. Do not include a bibliography. It should be typed on A4 portrait in Word and pages should be numbered. Use Times New Roman (or similar serif font) 11pt font typeface. Headings for each section are recommended to guide the reader. Avoid footnotes and endnotes unless essential to clear communication. All figures and tables must be numbered and labelled and be on separate pages rather than embedded in the text. Indicate where they are to be inserted. Avoid grey or coloured shading on graphs. If photographs are to be included then ensure that you have both ethical approval for publication (this is particularly necessary for children) and copyright approval.

Referencing

The article is to be referenced and the Reference List compiled using Harvard Method of Referencing.

Figures and photographs

Please ensure you have the appropriate ethical approval to use photographs. Photographs and images should be of the highest resolution to ensure a high standard of reproduction.