



METHODS OF AUTISM INCLUSION IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOL

**A GUIDE FOR EARLY YEARS
PRACTITIONERS WORKING WITH
CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM
DISORDER**

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CONTENTS:

PAGE 1 - UNDERTANDING AUTISM

PAGE 3 - POLICY AND LEGISLATION

PAGE 5 - INCLUSION IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOL

PAGE 11 - REFERENCE LIST

Understanding Autism

Autism affects 700,000 adults and children within Britain (National Autistic Society, 2017) and as of June 2024, the NHS claims to have 193,203 patients with open referrals with suspected autism (NHS, 2024). However, these high numbers of referral patients have seen a decrease of 31.0% since June 2023. As stated by Joon et al (2021) Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability where an unusual pattern occurs during early years which can cause severe and chronic disabilities to an individual's mental or physical abilities. Developmental disabilities have a substantial impact on day to day functionality, other disabilities which are developmental include; Cerebral Palsy, Rett Syndrome, Aspergers.

Cerebral Palsy- Cerebral Palsy is an umbrella term for a group of physical disorders caused by an injury to the developing brain, affecting movement and posture. Some people with CP may solely have motor disorder while others may also have epilepsy, intellectual disabilities and sensory impairments (Alliance, 2015).

Rett Syndrome- A rare genetic disorder which effects brain development resulting in severe mental and physical disabilities more commonly seen in girls, (nhs, 2025)

Aspergers- neurodevelopmental disorder which causes difficulties in social interactions, verbal and non-verbal communication and may display limited interests, (Mirkovic and Gérardin, 2019)

Aspergers Syndrome

Similar to those with ASD, people with Aspergers have difficulty with social interaction and interest restriction whilst displaying a variety of characteristics allowing for many to confidently distinguish the differences between Autism Spectrum Disorder and Aspergers Syndrome (Barahona-Corrêa and Filipe, 2016). Recent developments have caused the diagnosis of Aspergers Syndrome as a form of ASD to be removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. However, controversy over this removal has occurred due to the fact that many who met the criteria for an Aspergers Diagnosis may not meet the new criteria for ASD (Chambers et al, 2019). Previous to the removal of the diagnosis many stated that it allowed that to make sense of their own experiences, explaining their behavior and finding relief in their diagnosis.

The Cause of Autism

Although ASD affects one in one hundred within Britain, researchers are still attempting to identify a clear cause of autism. While it is understood by Styles et al (2020) that 400 genes can be strongly linked to the cause of autism, describing it as a "multifactorial genetic disease", Styles et al acknowledged the possible risk factors included within the development of autism such as; prenatal exposure to toxins, drug and alcohol consumption, prenatal age and maternal physical and mental health. While all factors can be acknowledged to have potential risk when combined it is still unclear the extent to which these factors contribute.

Stages of Development

While it is important to understand the origin of ASD it is equally important to have the ability to identify the characteristics and symptoms within children. Alongside the fact that ASD presents itself differently from person to person, ASD may look different through a child’s stages of development. Using Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development allows for the identification of the emotions and pathways which will promote positive development.

As explained by Stephens et al (2006), the fifth stage of Erikson’s stages detail the importance of peer relationships. This key stage allows for the individual to reflect on previous experiences, societal expectations and their aspirations in order to “find themselves” (Orenstein and Lewis, 2022). Determining a secure sense of self identity is a crucial part of developing relationships with peers however due to the problems surrounding communication children with ASD face, as detailed by NHS (2018) people with ASD can often find it hard to communicate, interact while many also fee anxious or upset when in unfamiliar situations.

	Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development
Stage one Age 0-1	Infancy Period: Trust vs Mistrust Example- A secure environment provided by caregiver.
Stage two Age 2-3	Early childhood: Autonomy vs Shame/Doubt Example- Caregiver promotes self-sufficiency while maintaining a secure environment.
Stage three Age 4-12	Play Age Period: Initiative vs Guilt Example- Caregiver encourages, supports and guides the child's own interests.
Stage four Age 6-12	School Age Period: Industry vs Inferiority Example- Reasonable expectations set in school and at home, with praise for their accomplishments.
Stage five Adolescence	Identity vs Identity Confusion Example- Individual weighs out their previous experiences, societal expectations and their aspirations in establishing value and finding themselves.

Differences between girls and boys with autism

Despite the fact that many do struggle with social situations and communication, it has been found that girls with ASD may adjust to social situations easier to their male peers. A study conducted by Dean et al (2016) examined the social interactions of 24 girls and 24 boys with autism compared to 24 girls and 24 boys who were neurotypical. Being observed on their engagement within the playground, it was determined that the differences in social behaviors implicated the children’s relationships in different ways. The boys with ASD were seen to be prone to isolation due to being prone to restrictive interests and repetitive behaviors in comparison to the neurotypical boys who were content with playing sports in large groups within their break. Meanwhile the girls with ASD were seen to engage more frequently with their peers as many of the girls took preference in intimate conversations in small groups, the girls with ASD sat comfortably within these groups possibly due to the ability for girls with ASD to be able to mask and disguise their symptoms in order to be accepted within their social groups. Furthermore, those with ASD may have symptoms which fluctuate over time and as they develop such as their special interests however the traits and symptoms they present as an adult with the traits they continue to present for their adult life (Pandina,2020)

Policy and Legislation

Having an awareness of current policy and legislation

Alongside the importance of understanding the symptoms of ASD it is equally important for the practitioner and pupil to understand their rights, being presented in a format that is clear and understandable for all abilities. The ability to understand and implement current policy and legislation within an educational setting allows for both student and practitioner to have a clear view of their rights and the resources available. Stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Article 5 of the children's rights (UNCRC, , “My family should help me know and use my own rights” which is reflected within the Autism Code of Practice (2021), detailing that following a diagnosis assessment relevant information should be provided to family and carers regarding appropriate methods of support and external resources to provide an encouraging and safe environment. Similarly, Article 12 “I have the right to be listened to and taken seriously.” reflects the section on self-referral within the Autism Code of Practice, this inclusion allows for people with disabilities' to express their opinion, feelings and emotions with a sense of confidence and assurance that their opinion matters. The right to be listened to and taken seriously could heavily influence the point at which a person is submitted for referral or diagnosis if they feel more confidence in voicing feeling different than their peers. Furthermore, the detail and extent of the Autism Code of Practice can be extended to a wide range of practitioners by highlighting the need for post-diagnosis care such as collaboration with education and health services when speech, language and motor disabilities are recognised further represents the importance of reflecting upon children's rights represented within Article 23 “If I am disabled, I have the right to special care and education”.

The Autism Code of Practice reflects the children's rights set out by the UNCRC whilst also providing the importance of the aims set out by the Well-being of Future Generations Wales Act 2015 which focusses on the requirements set out for local bodies to ensure equality is at the foundations of communities, setting out to achieve cultural, economic, social and environmental wellbeing. Furthermore, a majority of policy and legislation aligns with the Equality Act 2010 (Gov, 2010) which contained a combination of previous legislation including; Sex and Discrimination Act 1975, Race Relations Act 1976 and Disability Discriminations Act 1995. Protected characteristics within the act protects against direct discrimination within work, public and whilst using transport. The Equality Act will allow with disabilities the confidence and the ability to have the equal opportunities as those living without disabilities. Doing so by increasing the difficulty for employers to reject an applicant based on their disabilities such as developing the questions and process of screening when applying for a role. Additionally, it protects those who may be perceived to have a disability or those who associate with a disabled person.

Moreover, the understanding of current policy and legislation implemented surrounding the rights of children and those with disabilities is crucial to providing and maintaining an inclusive and safe environment for both practitioner and pupils.

Inclusion in Mainstream School

Ysgol Maes Hyfryd

Ysgol Maes Hyfryd Special School, Flintshire, supports 135 students ranging from thirteen to nineteen all who have statements of special education needs (Estyn, 2020). Focusing on the strengths of their pupils, aiming to develop the students' self-esteem, confidence and communication skills. Ysgol Maes Hyfryd does so by having the ability to have approximately half of their students experience part of their education in mainstream schooling with the goal of broadening their number of opportunities. While the amalgamation with the mainstream school has also had a positive within their staffing teams, allowing for a higher level of collaboration by having the opportunity to share and discuss expertise and pedagogy as-well as creating a stronger understanding of abilities and preferences for their students. By using this method of teaching the school has seen an improved level of success within their students surrounding levels of attendance, exam results and understanding of core subjects. Some pupils within the school have seen a 30% increase in their attendance, a further four students were able to achieve twenty pass grades in their GCSE's. Additionally, 80% of students increased their reading age by 11 months, 98% of students increased their spelling age by 6.7 months and 98% of students increased their mathematics age by 9.2 months.

It is clear that the use of mainstream school has significantly improved the confidents and the academic success for many of their students. It is important to take into account that this method of inclusion may not be achievable within rural areas. However, similar methods can be used to encourage understanding and confidence for student with ASD who are in mainstream schooling. The use of 'pupil passports' can be used throughout school to allow all staff members to have an understanding of the strengths and difficulties their students face. As stated by Cunningham (2024) can also allow the children to communicate, request adjustments and specify the areas where they feel they need the most help. While identifying the strengths and weaknesses it also allows for new staff members to quickly identify the actions needed to allow for an enjoyable and comfortable learning environment and provide adequate support.

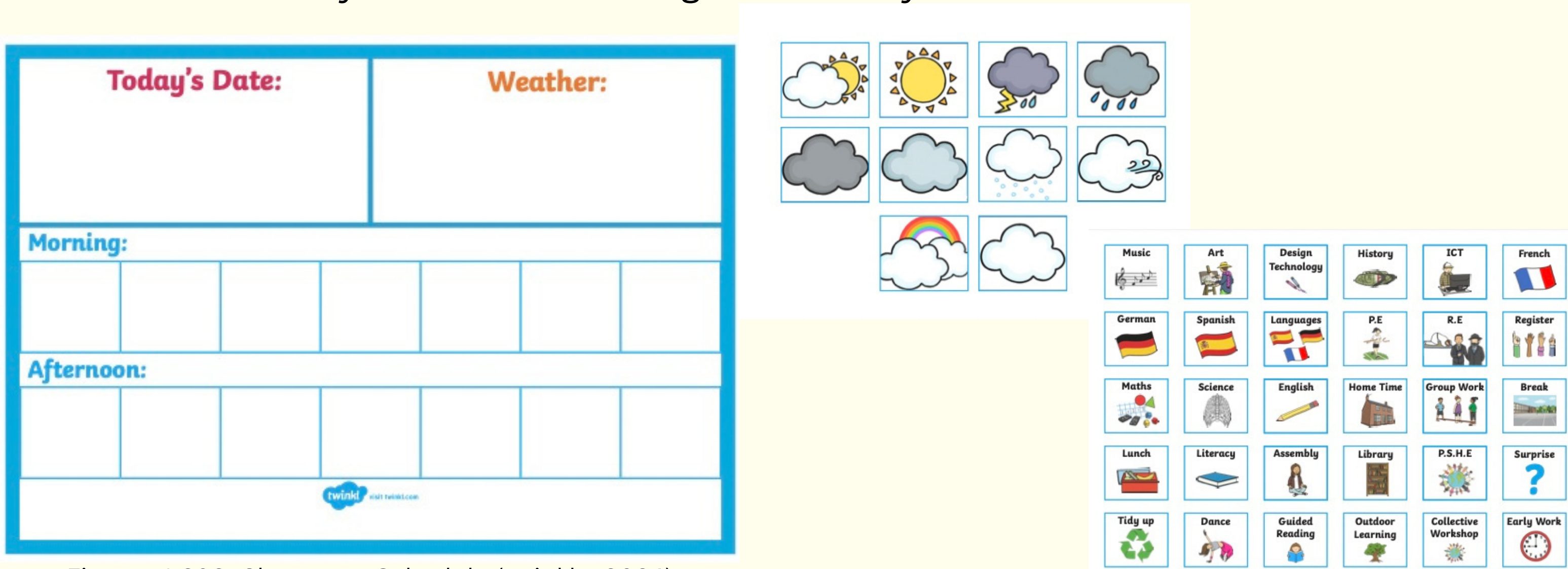
The Effects of mainstream schooling for children with Autism

A study conducted by Warren et al (2020) examined the opinions of students and their teachers who are educated via resourced provisions, spending their time split between specialist provision and mainstream schooling. In order to gather the students' feelings towards resourced provision they were encouraged to create a visual story board on how they, drawing and writing the main parts of how a typical school day feels to them with the support of staff they are familiar with. Later the five pupils were asked questions based on their drawings allowing them to expand on what each section meant to them. Each expressing that some parts of the school day were uncomfortable and evoked feelings of anxiety for them such as arriving at school, play breaks and the journey to and from school while others they more enjoyment and comfort from such as lunch time. It was found that the arrival to school was seen as a weary environment due to its unpredictable nature however the lessons that followed reintroduced a structure to their day, bringing them back to feeling calm in their environment, one student stating "I feel fine when I do handwriting in the morning cause I find it quite easy and it settles me in everyday and it kind of makes me feel welcome". However, when brought into the mainstream school to continue their lessons, the staff expressed that they noticed the shift of attitude and emotion within their students caused by the unfamiliarity and structure of the lessons in comparison to being in the specialist classrooms.

A common cause for upset within the students was the unfamiliarity of transitioning throughout their classes within the mainstream school, one teacher stating that the period between lessons is when they hear the most communication of "we don't like this". Similarly, Physical Education (PE) also seemed to make the students uncomfortable due to the unpredictability of the activities they may be encouraged to take part in as some of the students do not understand why they have to change to something they do not enjoy from something they did enjoy. Moreover some of that staff acknowledged that this may be an area for personal growth within the students, allowing them to experience unpredictable transitions within a safe space, using this as a tool to mirror the difficulties they may face when they are older. One teacher stated "They need to experience transitions, because that's real life... a safe environment can change, they need to learn how to cope with that", While this outlook may seem a positive way of thinking and an encouraging method many may view this outlook as aligning with Pavlov's conditioning theory by teaching the children to associate their feelings of stress and anxiety with something seen as 'adult' or 'real life' may cause them more anxiety when trying to gain independence as an adult. Play break was one of the main parts of the day which shows a divided opinion through the students, many commented on enjoying having their time to run around and play with their friends. Many of them were seen to have a small group of friends, many only having one. On the other hand, some of the students felt this time was isolating and lonely due to the fact that they were unable to communicate and interact with the mainstream students.

Similarly to Ysgol Maes Hyfryd, this study highlights the positives and negatives of combining specialist and mainstream schooling for those with ASD. Due to the difficulties student with ASD have with understanding others' emotions and ability to confidently communicate, a combined learning approach may not be suitable for all students however it is evident that it has a positive impact on personal growth towards their future. The staff awareness of the difficulties their students face allows for the implantation of positive reflection. By consistently reviewing the opinions and feeling of their students it allows them to fully understand how they can help them succeed in a way which is catered to their needs. As suggested by the staff member, all students in a combined learning space must be educated on the learning difficulties their peers have. By doing so, children with ASD will feel more accepted and understood within their classrooms, developing a confident level of understanding throughout the whole school will increase the levels of inclusivity.

In order to combat the difficulties faced during periods of transition the use of visual schedules can be implemented. Visual schedules can be used to provide predictability within the classroom by demonstrating the events of the day in sequence (Macdonald et al, 2018). Visual schedules can be used on an independent scale or for the whole classroom depending on class size, they could also be tailored to the student depending on their specific needs, such as changing the colour and fonts used for those with dyslexia as well as those with ASD. By using these on an individual level students can have them displayed on their table in front of them allowing them to refer to it throughout the day, allowing them to fully understand what is happening now and next. Using a visual timetable also allows for the students to have an involvement in planning their school when given the independence to do so, perhaps choosing a task which allows them to feel calm and comfortable at the start and end of the day. These can also be used to display if they will meet a new person or being going out of school for a outing allowing for the adequate time to adjust, furthermore by allowing the students to adjust the time tables themselves may develop a further understanding the task ahead of them while possibly encouraging them to continue with a task if they look forward to the next. A visual timetable may also be used in conjunction with pupil passports. Displaying an image and brief sentence about the schedule on their passport can make their teachers aware of how they feel whilst using the timetable, if they have a certain way they like to use it and when they like to use it throughout the day.



Figures 1,2&3: Classroom Schedule (twinkl, 2024)

There are many learning recourses which can be implemented in all school setting to ensure that children with ASD feel included and understood by their teachers and peers. The use of ‘Pupil Passports’ can be used to encourage an understanding of personal needs and strengths of an individual. Being used over time to support a pupil taking into consideration what they would like to communicate, any adjustments and considering what may or may not be helpful in fulfilling their needs (Cunnigham, 2025). Using these as part of a teacher's tool kit can allow for transitions to a new year group or a new teacher can benefit both student and teacher communicating particular activities or situation which may comfort a student or make them uncomfortable. It is ideal for parents and guardians to have involvement within the process of making a pupil passport to allow a cohesive teaching practice and methods of calming the student down throughout school and whilst at home. In order for a student to feel included within a classroom, the pupil passports can be used for all student within the classroom even those without disability ruling out the possibility of a child with a disability to feel as though they are sticking out.

Examples of Pupil Passports

This is a photo of me

My name is

The things I find difficult are

- English – writing
- I want to be in first place.
- Drawing a real person.
- Making a Sonic statue in Minecraft.
- Focusing in class.

My hopes and dreams

- I would like to be a scientist and to go to Sonic World.

I am worried about

- I’m scared of being on my own at home or at school.
- Getting something wrong in class.
- Strict teacher – I feel like I’m in trouble.

I’m good at I like:

- Games(Nintendo)
- Art
- Winning
- Running
- Sonic
- Pink donuts
- Toy shops
- Kirby games

How you can help me

- Lots of visuals to support.
- Pre-teach / printed flip charts.
- Work in a quiet room.
- The blue room
- Breathing
- Talking
- Playing with putty during input.

I don’t like

- Boring dreams.
- If someone keeps repeating my name.
- Touch
- Shouting/ loud noises.

The one thing that will make the biggest difference to me is

- Talking about my worries and anxieties.

Figure 3: Pupil Passport (Cunningham, 2024)

Date:

Signatures: Pupil: SENDCo: Parent/Carer: Teacher:

[Insert photo of pupil]

About Me

Name: D.O.B.: Class/Form:

Special Educational Need and/or Disability: Medical Need: Other:

What helps me with my learning?
[Relating specifically to my special educational need]
I think these things help me learn...
•
I learn best when...
•
I think I achieve when...
•

What makes me happy? What do I like?
[A chance for me to share my personal interests, hobbies etc.]
I am happy when...
•
I like...
•
Other people admire me because...
•

What do I do find challenging?
[Barriers/difficulties that I face as a result of my need.]
I am challenged when...
•
I don't like it when...
•
Things that make my learning difficult are...
•

How do I want to be helped?
[Things that would help me in school.]
I want...
•
It would be helpful if...
•
People who help me are...
•

What does my teacher and parent/carer say about me?
[A chance for adults who know me to share their views and additional information about me.]
•

Targets [These should be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound]	Steps to success How can I reach my targets?	Review date	How am I doing? [A = Achieved, N = Nearly there, K = Keep going]

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The Leaders Team

Figure 4: Send Pupil Passport (Twinkl, 2024)

Comparatively to Ysgol Maes Hyfryd, Ysgol Y Deri educates its 246 pupil on the same campus (Estyn, 2017). Enrolling students between the ages of three and nineteen all with statements of special education needs for a range of learning difficulties. The broad catchment area for the school has allowed children with learning difficulties to have specialist education from areas such as; Swansea, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Caerphilly and Cardiff. Providing their specialist education to a broad age range and amalgamation of three schools has allowed them to have a staff of 240. The new combination of schools allowed for a refocus of the aims and goals set for the students and staff. focusing on building a strong team of staff the school ensured there was frequent occasions for staff to bond with one another from the three schools to allow for the creation of specialist team to ensure everyone understood new provision, curriculum and the correct procedure to identifying the need of their pupils.

The new building allowed for a new branch of topics to be included within the curriculum such as allowing the students to have involvement and voice their opinions on what they would like to see within the new school, chosen two students from each of the schools to be named Construction Ambassadors. The involvement with the school allowed for the students to process and accept their new space, familiarising themselves with the changes taking place. Allowing the students to have this level of involvement can allow students to develop their ability to demonstrate emotion and opinions. As shown by Ysgol Y Deri it is important to allow children of all abilities to have involvement within the developments within their communities and areas. The use of student involvement could be used throughout both mainstream and specialist schools, taking opportunities to help children with disabilities to understand what changes are being made and including them in decision making processes teaches a level of independent thinking that they may not obtain from classroom studies.

To summarise it is vital to evaluate the methods and resources which can benefit students with ASD and their support team. Based on the evidence provided, the inclusion of children with ASD within mainstream may be difficult for all students to adjust to however there are relevant and adequate resources which can be used to benefit all. Using combination of several recourses and referring to them throughout the day and maintaining a steady structure can allow for students with ASD to remain comfortable and happy throughout their school. However, it is clear that there are extra steps needed to take when aiming for inclusion within mainstream education due to the lack of awareness raised to the mainstream students discussing the importance of understanding the difficulties children with ASD and other disabilities face in their day to day life. Raising awareness of the difficulties children with ASD face may increase the level of class involvement seen by those with ASD with the encouragement from their peers. This can be done by introducing the topics through story time or through involving the whole class in activities such as creating pupil passports and giving the explanation behind pupil passports and how they can benefit other students. The use of books such as 'Noah Chases the Wind' by Michelle Worthington detailing a young boy with autism describing the ways he thinks and feels differently than others whilst also introducing topics he enjoys such as science.

To conclude there are several successful ways to improve the inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a mainstream classroom alongside following current legislation and policy. It is also clear that it is vital for all staff and students within a school to be educated and have a full understanding of the symptoms and characteristics seen in those with ASD, allowing for all students to feel included and have the potential to gain the highest achievements possible to them. By transitioning to a combination of mainstream and specialised learning children with ASD can be presented with more opportunities whilst developing and going through life as it has provided them with the extra curriculum options, range of scenarios and the appropriate toolkit to understand the recourse they can use to aid them in a situation where they may feel uncomfortable.

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