



SENSORY COMMUNICATION IN AN ASD SPECIAL SCHOOL

Over two days I had the opportunity to experience school life for the children in four classes in an ASD Special School. The observations were based mainly on their sensory and communication needs and how the class teams support these needs to provide the children with the best teaching and learning opportunities possible.



Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

The children across the school communicate through non-verbal communication methods, a small amount of verbal communication, comprehensive language skills and through a system called PECS. There are six phases with PECS, the classes that I had the pleasure of experiencing were using PECS PHASE IV: Sentence Structure - where the child with autism learns to construct simple sentences on a detachable sentence strip using an "I want" picture followed by a picture of the item being requested and PECS PHASE V: Answering Questions - where the child with autism learns to use PECS to answer the question, "What do you want?", a study by Bondy and Frost (2001), the developers of PECS, found that by using pictures in a structured way, children with autism could learn to express more complex requests and communicate their wants more effectively.

Some children were using electronic communication devices instead of the detachable sentence strips, again the content was developed from the PECS system. According to Light et al. (2009) the idea of electronic devices can be highly effective, especially for children who have mastered the basics of PECS and need more advanced tools to enhance their communication.



In addition, it was pleasurable to observe the seamless way that the staff guided the children to these communication tools, so the children were able to communicate what they needed, which reduced any frustration from building. Research by Miranda (2003) highlighted how the use of PECS in children with autism can lead to a reduction in challenging behaviours that are often a result of frustration from communication difficulties and by giving children a means to express their needs and desires, PECS can minimise unpredictable behaviours.



SCHEDULES

Some pupils had a vertical schedule with their picture at the top, showing in order all the activities that they were doing that day. Others have transitioned from using symbol schedules to following a written list schedule. This reflects their growing independence and ability to process and engage with more complex forms of communication. According to Burd et al. (2003), visual schedules reduce anxiety by making the day more predictable, helping children know what is coming next, which is critical for those with autism who may have difficulty handling unexpected changes.



The children were directed by staff to check their 'schedule' for the next activity. The child would take the symbol card showing their activity, eg 'outside play' and they would velcro this to the door prior to going outside, this is a good example of active engagement with the schedule. This participation not only helps the child stay engaged with the sequence of events but also encourages responsibility. Zhang et al. (2013) found that when children with autism were involved in using visual schedules (such as moving or manipulating the schedule), they showed improved task engagement and increased time spent on task-related activities. Staff members would then collect the cards while the children are engaged in their task and place them in the cupboard to reuse. The children on written schedules would tick off their activity once completed and move to the next item.

The class teacher of the children in years 6-8 informed me that the one of the aims is for the children to check the schedule independently and manage transitions with minimal adult guidance. This promotes autonomy and encourages children to take ownership of their day. Studies by Koegel et al. (2001) have shown that when children with autism have access to schedules, they are better able to engage in independent behaviour and require fewer prompts or interventions from adults, promoting a sense of independence and self-regulation.

I was able to see this in some of the other classes that I visited.



Transitions

There was a universal settling period when the children arrived in school, some have been on transportation for a while and this can become unsettling. The children have their own routine of transitioning from the transportation into the classroom, some move into the outdoor space, whilst others sit in the sensory room or a quiet space in the classroom. These transition periods are exceptionally important for the children as they adjust to the new environment, calm down, reduce the anxiety and regulate the sensory input before they can engage in the classroom activities.

Transitioning from one activity to another can be a significant challenge for children with autism. There was a consistency across the whole school, where staff would count backwards from 5 to 1 (name the activity) and say finished, accompanied by the signing action for finished. This prompt moved the child to check the schedule, and the process of the next activity would start, for some classes they are moving activities every 2-3 minutes, for others it was a little longer. If the pupil found the transition difficult at this point the staff would collect the photo of the child and this would prompt the checking of the schedule and the next activity would start. Research shows that using countdowns mentally prepares the child for the transition, this creates a sense of predictability and reduces the anxiety relating to change. It can also support the executive functioning skills, such as self-regulation and time management.

Daily Activities

The first daily activity for all classes (after their settling transition) was to welcome each other with their morning song, all children and staff sit in a group and every child is welcomed by name, some of these songs were in Welsh, for some children the class teacher would hold the hands of the student to gain their full attention whilst they sang their name. The song about the weather followed this, I especially enjoyed a sensory song where the class had blown leaves out of a sieve with a hairdryer to demonstrate the wind, the children thoroughly enjoyed this.

The activities in the classes were based on the stages of development of the children, however they all followed the same pattern of using a carousel to keep the children moving around from station to station. These activities ranged from tuff trays with food items to encourage the children to taste different foods, textures. To trays with cups, spoons, flour, rice, for the children to practice instructional tasks like -pour, stir, sprinkle – these were accompanied by small core boards to aid communication.



The children also had time participating in tabletop activities with the class teacher, these ranged from a 'Zen Garden' to identifying 'Ben and Holly and what they were doing', these activities were photographed and uploaded onto a digital learning platform called Seesaw program. It allows children to upload content in a variety of formats and some children were voice recording their descriptions of their work that had been saved by the teacher.

The children in one class that I visited had Attention Autism as one of their carousel activities. This is a program designed by Gina Davies for children with ASD who often struggle with sustained attention and engagement. The activity followed a four-stage approach: 'The Bucket Activity' where the class teacher had two interesting items that created awe and wonder in the pupils, they were hooked in. This moved through two more stages where the teacher used mats, water, hay, goats, a block-built bridge to recreate the story of 'The Three Billy Goats Gruff', where the children actively took part in sliding the goats down a shoot to knock over the troll. All children were engaged and patiently waited their turn, which showed excellent social skills. This led to the final task of line following, 'moving the goat to the grass', each child had their own folder with their work and pen to go off and complete, this created independence.



All classes end the day as a group, exactly how they started. All children and staff sit together and sing their end of day song, saying goodbye and that each child has had a good day. In one of the classes the children got to choose from detachable images how they would like their 'well done', from the class teacher a high five, thumbs up, clap, cheer. These children struggled with social communication, but activities like singing a song together and saying goodbye provides opportunities to practice social norms, like greeting others and taking turns in a group setting. Over time, this helps build their social skills in a comfortable and supportive way. In addition, according to Smith et al. (2007) ending the day in the same way each time provides a predictable and consistent closure to their day. This predictability helps reduce anxiety, as children know what to expect and can mentally prepare for the transition from school to home



How will I adapt my practice based on this experience?

Use of Visual Supports: This could mean using visual schedules, picture cards, or step-by-step instructions in your classroom to support children with ASD in understanding the task at hand and staying on track. If a child has very little speech, look at introducing PECS as a way of enhancing the communication.

Use of Multi-Sensory Approaches: The Attention Autism program often uses sensory-rich materials to capture attention. Incorporating multi-sensory activities (e.g., using objects with different textures, sounds, or visuals) could be effective in maintaining interest and focus, as many children are responsive to sensory stimuli. This will lead to an increase in engagement and focus.

Importance of Structured Environment: The research highlights the value of a structured and predictable environment. Having a clear routine and a safe, consistent space can help children, especially with ASD feel more secure and focused, improving their ability to engage in the lesson. Incorporate the use of carousels in my lessons, using schedules to create independence in the children .

Promote Peer-to-Peer Interaction: Social skills are enhanced not only by structured teacher-led activities but also by peer interaction. Creating opportunities for students to interact with peers in a controlled, guided way can help them learn valuable social skills and build relationships. Such as in groups to start and end the day in the same way, building in these routines, will support the peer-to-peer interaction.

