

Report to Melland High School Equals Consultant Peter Imray

Autumn visit 2021

All three classes observed appeared to be working within an Informal Curriculum Pathway. Most of the students seemed to be on the severe learning difficulties spectrum, with complex learning needs. There is a fairly detailed description of the typical complex learner (in as much as one can describe the 'typical') in the Informal Curriculum Basic Principles section:

Please read Informal Curriculum document. Found here: [T:\16. SEMI FORMAL CURRICULUM & ASSESSMENT\SF - Curriculum Modules \(EQUALS\)\INFORMAL CURRICULUM \(EXPLORE\)](#)

E Group consisted of 7 KS3/4 students working with a teacher and 4 supporting staff in the hall. There were several activity stations laid out including:

- Two large skateboards which students sat on with ropes attached which staff used to pull the students along, especially concentrating on circular movements.
- Large PE mats laid out on the floor which a member of staff used to encourage students to roll over on.
- Several small rubber cones which had been laid out as a dividing line between the skateboard side and the rest of the hall but were used by staff to walk students around as in a snaking line.
- A corner of the hall which was used to encourage students to engage in bunny hops and star jumps.

The lesson was well planned and well-resourced and all staff worked very hard with engaging language and a positive approach to encourage learning. The student's engagement could have been encouraged further with free exploration and I wonder therefore whether the school needs to look at alternative forms of physical exercise where the students are much more in control. For example, whilst the circular movements experienced by the students being pulled on the skateboards may well have been both educational and worthwhile in improving vestibular understanding, it is not something that will be available to students in the normal course of the school day. Students cannot therefore be independent, cannot take control, cannot make decisions which affect their physical and mental well-being because to repeat the experience they will need a large smooth floor, a skateboard and rope, space with no-one else around and staff support. The school does, however, have several external spaces which are, at present, under development. This area could also be filled with swings, roundabouts, trampolines and climbing frames. If these can be openly and freely available to students throughout the day, students can learn over time to physically self-regulate, by taking exercise when they need it, rather than when it is timetabled.

What Went Well:

- Highly encouraging staff with excellent interactions and understanding of pupil needs, utilising Personal Learning Intentions well.
- Use of positive language to encourage learning at an appropriate level.
- Highly engaged pupils with calm, ready to engage behaviours.

Even Better If:

- Adjusted physical activity space e.g. playground to support constant physical activity access.
- Student led activities e.g. trampolines, swings etc that they can use without staff support.
- Group to access Informal learning opportunities to further meet the needs of learners e.g. following the SoW's within the Informal Curriculum, particularly relating to play.

Please read the My Sensory Play SOW. Found here: [T:\16. SEMI FORMAL CURRICULUM & ASSESSMENT\SF - Curriculum Modules \(EQUALS\)\INFORMAL CURRICULUM \(EXPLORE\)](#)

Equals Informal Curriculum

My Sensory Play Scheme of Work

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M Group consisted of 5 KS3/4 students, working with a teacher and 4 supporting staff. The room was set up well for this Informal class, in that it didn't look anything like a conventional classroom, having a sofa and bean bags and a noticeable absence of desks. The students were clearly free to be in whatever space they chose to be and seemed free to engage or not to engage as they chose, which is an excellent environment for learning. It might be worthwhile for the class team to spend some time with the Informal Curriculum *My Play* scheme of work, see above, since even though this is a KS3/4 class, Play could be expanded even further.

Taking three of the students as examples, each student was presented with a symbolised choosing board as part of an engagement and communication session.

- A young man who was sitting on a bean bag chose a pencil which he then proceeded to tap on the bean bag.
- A second student had been throwing mini-bean bags around the room but now chose a colourful translucent 'rainmaker' which he then held up in front of him and continued to reverse as he watched (and listened to?) the beads falling.
- A third student who had been exploring the room during the session collecting the thrown mini bean bags, now chose a car symbol and was given a number of small toy cars and a road mat to play with.

As the purpose of this exercise is Play, the opportunity to play might have been increased if the young man who chose the pencil symbol could have been presented with a large tray full of different types of sticks – long ones, short ones, bendy ones, different types of drum-sticks, as well as pencils – since he didn't use the pencil to write with, he used it to drum. This could inspire more learning and support the great interaction of the staff. Similarly, the boy who chose the rainmaker and cars could have been presented with a whole box of rainmakers and cars respectively of different shapes, colours and size. The use of a big tray/box gives (i) the student choice and encourages variation in their play and (ii) allows staff members to also play with (a stick, a rainmaker, a car) thus potentially engaging with the learner through parallel play.

In each case, the students were engaged, and maintained their attention on the objects they were playing with, though they were engaged in solitary play. The staff were encouraging interactions with purposeful language and modelled play. In an Informal Curriculum, Play (with things that the students are really motivated by) is key to learning, but whilst engagement is necessary for learning it can be expanded and the learning moved forward. That is, staff could concentrate on challenging students even further, otherwise the Play, especially solitary sensorimotor Play as these three seemed to be demonstrating, is likely to be the preferred play choice. However, there is a good foundation for further opportunities to develop. Challenge can come through staff being aware of the developmental stages of Play and how they might interact with students in different play opportunities. In each of these three cases, staff could have built upon their knowledge of the pupils and further engaged in parallel play with the students, that is, playing alongside the individual students with their own pencil/drumstick, rainmaker, toy car, perhaps engaging in an Intensive Interaction type session by mimicking the play of the student. This parallel play serves the purposes of:

(i) validating the play of the student (I am interested in this play too) whilst at the same time;

(ii) inviting the student to take an interest in either the play of the member of staff and/or the member of staff as a person who is playing. Solitary play is obviously not social, but we can lead the learner towards social play through taking the learner's play as a starting point.

What Went Well:

- Highly encouraging staff with excellent play foundations and interaction.
- Use of language and visual supports at an appropriate and individual level.
- Highly engaged pupils with calm, ready to engage behaviours.
- Free roaming space and an environment that encourages play. Purposeful for learner needs and play opportunities.

Even Better If:

- Access to even more pupil motivating resources, on a large scale.
- Refined choice boards to further inspire what motivates the pupils.
- Further CPD on Play to build upon the staff's excellent instincts in Play, to offer wider Play opportunities.

G2 Group consisted of 5 KS4/5 students working with a teacher and 3 supporting staff in a Free Play session. There were 6 'play stations' set out in the classroom, namely:

- (i) water play in a reasonable sized container, with cups and pourers.
- (ii) some snowman line drawings.
- (iii) a small play-doh tray.
- (iv) some brightly coloured toys such as a cushion ball, a spiky ball and a rainmaker in a large tray on the floor.
- (v) a small tray with some uncooked rice and pourers.
- (vi) a small tray with some coloured uncooked pasta shapes.

The blinds were half drawn and the lights were set low; the whiteboard was projecting coloured lights and playing soft music, creating a calm atmosphere. We tend to think that low lighting and background music will lend a calm ambience and aid concentration, but for those who are likely to experience sensory confusion – and this is very likely to be all those with profound and complex learning difficulties – the opposite might equally be true. However, the room was very tranquil and appeared appropriate for those learners. The classroom was set up in an informal manner conducive to Free Play with the learners exploring the room, and seemingly free to engage with whatever activity motivated them.

All of the staff worked very positively with the students. The activities put out were sufficiently motivating for the students to engage with them. If learners are not engaging it should lead one to assume that they're the wrong resources, the staff worked very hard to promote engagement and did have success with the majority of learners. As an example, there was a lot of excellent work at the water tray, where the supporting member of staff allowed the young man to engage freely, played in the water with him, but didn't dominate the play or instruct him what to do. She used very little language, but gave lots of non-verbal encouragement, seemingly enjoying the water play as much as the young man. Language can so often (inadvertently) dominate interactions if one of the participants isn't very good at it. This was an excellent example of modelled play.

One can conclude that the water tray was motivating for at least one student, whilst the other play stations were possibly, not as motivating. This is obviously a matter of trial and error over time, and as the class had only been together since September, such trials may still be taking place. I would recommend spending some time with the Informal Curriculum, especially the *My Play* scheme of work (SoW), see above. for some ideas on this, but as the class seemed to be working within the Pre-Formal and/or Informal Curriculum pathways, you might lean towards more sensory based Play activities, rather than for example, the play-doh and especially the colouring in activities. Also, sensory play works best if you can make the resources big and bold, so use large builder's trays on stands (not on the floor) so that learners can sit down or stand up at them, and fill them with sand, water, gloop, rice, pasta, flour, leaves etc, etc – there is a massive list of possibilities in the *My Play* SoW. This might well cause considerable mess, but cleanliness is not the object of the exercise!

The foundations of this group were encouraging and showed great care and attention to all pupils. A fantastic start to encouraging play, even with such complex learning needs.

What Went Well:

- Highly encouraging staff with excellent interactions and relationships. Particularly with a calm approach with limited, yet purposeful language.
- A variety of resources used to allow for preference and choice.
- Exceptionally calm environment with high staff ratio and all needs being met, allowing for learning opportunities to develop and be accessed.

Even Better If:

- Adjusted resource base to further encourage pupils play e.g. larger amounts of resources – follow a trial and error approach to see motivators.
- Incorporate further sensory principles to promote play and increase different types of play being accessed.
- Carefully consider music, lighting and environmental factors to support sensory needs.