



QA Report following visit to Melland School

17th June 2022

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The focus of the visit was on the writing of Personal Learning Intentions for learners with Complex Learning Difficulties.

The format of the morning was a classroom observation of M Group followed by feedback and a discussion around planning of Personal Learning Intentions (PLIs).

The afternoon consisted of a visit to G2 Group to observe the development of the use of specialist resources.

M Group (target pupils, SH and TC; teacher, Maria K).

Observation.

The first session was a group activity, with 4 or 5 pupils, supported by teaching assistants, seated in a semi-circle around a table. Maria (the class teacher) stood on the opposite side of the table and offered a choice of two objects to each pupil in turn. The activity was structured around 'Attention Autism' principles: objects were drawn from a bag and song, facial expression and voice were used to help gain and maintain attention. The pace of the activity was brisk being determined by the complex needs of the pupils and the demands which a directed activity placed upon them. TC communicated spontaneously by pointing. Symbols were used to signal that each stage of the session was 'finished'. The purpose of the session was less about communication and more about attention, proximity to others, emotional regulation and the stability provided by a predictable well patterned activity. Discussion with Maria afterwards confirmed this. SH observed the session from a slight distance, sharing a soft settee with a TA. No pressure was placed upon her to directly engage (quite properly).

The second, longer, session took place outside. Here the pupils were offered a varied choice of sensory play activities. TC chose the water tray and played 1:1 with a teaching assistant. TC communicated by pointing at objects and in one interaction pointed at an object which lay a little distance from the tray. The TA correctly read this as a request (an imperative communication) and retrieved the object.

Towards the end of the session SH, who had been sitting slightly removed from the activities, ran to the equipment and began hurling toys about the space, temporarily disrupting the other pupils' play and raising the emotional temperature in the group. Staff dealt with this very calmly and effectively restoring equilibrium. The teacher evaluated the situation and rightly felt that next time it may be an idea to spread out the sensory play stations a little more so that SH is not so challenged by the proximity of others. She might also be given access to the activities before the other pupils so that she can choose one and establish herself without necessarily having to share the activity with a peer.

My observation and discussions with knowledgeable staff around signing, leads me to agree that symbols, signs or pictures are all too complex for *some* of the learners in this group *as a means of communication*. Symbols, pictures and objects of reference, however, can have a *cognitive* function; they can be associated with regular routine events, or with



events/objects which have particular salience for an individual, and this can be a useful way of helping a learner to predict, anticipate, and control their world. The use of symbols (which was evident in the class) is therefore best thought of as a cognitive rather than as a communication skill (for these complex learners). Keeping this distinction in mind prevents interrupting the real gestural and physical communication by inserting artificial symbolic means into the interaction.

Maria, Ryan and I carried out a strengths/needs analysis for TC and SH as a means of finding a Routes for Learning / MAPP Milestones baseline and priorities. What emerged from this process was that TC's imaginative play, construction play, ability to work with (at least some) peers and spontaneous communication indicate a profile of strengths which suggest that he will benefit from a transition to a group who are working within the semi-formal curriculum.

G2 Group

Observation.

A range of high quality, meaningful sensory play stations were set up which all offered good access to varied materials and provided opportunities for pupils to indicate preferences. All were independently accessible which meant that pupils could actively engage with or withdraw from an activity at any point.

The resources for the pupils were well chosen, appropriate and organised so as to give pupils a high degree of autonomy. TA's picked up on when pupil attention flagged and either offered an alternative or sought to re-engage the pupil's attention. The TAs played in an animated way with the materials and really had fun with them and the pupils chose to play with and alongside them. This meant that pupils who are at the level of sensory play got engaged because the play was irresistible, not because they were complying with requests.

The schools continuing work in profiling strengths, needs and motivations is so crucial in setting appropriate personal learning intentions for pupils in the specialist pathways.

Mike Sissons.

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