Emer Ring, Divisional Inspector, Department of Education and Science, describes the recent evaluation of educational provision for children with autistic spectrum disorders and suggests practical school-based strategies and resources for teachers in meeting children’s needs.

How I Got to Keep Listening

I got to keep listening
But I keep missing the words
Maybe I could sit at the front of the carpet
That will be a little bit louder

Mrs. Hirst talks to me
And I got to think
I thought ‘it’s hard’
But Mrs. Hirst thinks it’s easy.

Maybe I only got small ears
And I got to keep them on
That’s how
I got to keep listening.

As we continue to develop and improve the quality of education for children with ASDs, we can usefully adopt Philip’s advice and keep listening.

REFERENCES

AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Significant developments have occurred since the Government announcement in 1998 that children with autism were to be recognised as a distinct group for special educational provision (Department of Education and Science, (DES) 1998). The Task Force on Autism was established by the DES in 1998 to consider the appropriateness of a range of policies and procedures, and to make recommendations to ensure the provision of an appropriate, effective, and efficient service. The report of the Task Force was published in 2001 and made a series of recommendations in relation to policy and practice concerning educational approaches to meeting the needs of children with ASDs (DES, 2001). The DES continues to develop policy and practice in line with these recommendations.

Autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) are identified by a triad of impairments in social interaction, patterns of communication and flexibility of thought and imagination (DES, 2001). It has been suggested that an additional dimension related to difficulties experienced by children in processing sensory information might also be added to the triad (Autism Working Group, 2002a, 2002b). In addition, it is important to remember that some children may fall in the range of general learning disability (Ordman, 1993). It is acknowledged that, because of the nature of the triad, it may be difficult to secure a precise assessment of a child's level of general cognitive functioning (DES, 2001). However, it is clear from recent literature that the severity of the ASDs and the level of general learning disability form two separate dimensions, which have to be explicitly considered when planning and providing educational and teaching programmes for individual children (Fowles, 1997; Jenkins, 2001; Autism Working Group, 2002b). According to the Task Force on Autism, prevalence rates of individuals affected with ASDs are estimated to be in the region of 5-10/10,000 of the general population (DES, 2001).

It is clear that while children with ASDs have many traits in common with children who do not have ASDs, they also exhibit a distinctive style of thinking and learning. While all children with ASDs have features in common, they have diverse individual profiles that necessitate an individualised approach to meeting their needs.

EVALUATION PROCESS

Five categories of educational provision for children with ASDs were evaluated by the Inspectorate over the two-year period 2002-2004. The aims of the evaluation were to identify, acknowledge and affirm good practice, promote continuity in the quality of education for children with ASDs, promote self-evaluation and continuous development by school staff, and provide an assurance of quality with regard to educational provision for children with ASDs and contribute to future policy development. The final composite report entitled An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders was published in April 2006. An extensive literature review was conducted as part of the evaluation and concluded that there was no definitive evidence to support the exclusive use of a single teaching approach to meet the varied needs of children with ASDs and their families. The review of educational approaches suggested that the following elements in Figure 1 represent valid practice in meeting children's needs.

PRACTICAL SCHOOL-BASED STRATEGIES EMERGING FROM THE EVALUATION

While there were some clear differences between the varied settings that were evaluated, for example, there were many features in common. The following areas emerged as being of particular significance in meeting the needs of children with ASDs.

CURRICULUM ACCESS

The goals of the Primary Curriculum are designed to foster each child's individual identity in a holistic manner through nurturing the spiritual, moral, social, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, and physical dimensions of development. All children with ASDs benefit from accessing a broad and relevant curriculum that addresses the triad of impairments, accommodates the special educational needs of the child arising from a general learning disability or other co-occurring difficulty, attends to developmental and adaptive needs, addresses the management of behavior that interferes with learning, provides curricular experiences that are consistent with the holistic approach of each child and uses and develops teaching methodologies and approaches. The signification of the triad of impairments, sensory sensitivities and general learning disability for curriculum delivery is illustrated in Table 1.

A range of publications is available to assist teachers in mediating the curriculum for children with ASDs. The Draft Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2002) are particularly useful when planning children's education programmes. A CD entitled Autistic Spectrum Disorder: A Teacher's/Parent's and a Video for parents entitled Autism: An Introduction developed through a North/South initiative were distributed all in schools in 2001. Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Guide to Classroom Practice (Autism Working Group, 2002b) has also been distributed to schools. Recenty a cross-border professional exchange initiative, co-ordinated by the Special Education Support Service (SES) published Opening the Spectrums: Insights into Working with People on the Autism Spectrum and this is available on the SES website at www.ses.ie. These resources provide practical advice and guidance for teachers and parents in meeting the needs of children with ASDs.

A co-ordinated approach to curriculum planning and implementation is fundamental to ensuring continuity and coordination of children's learning and teaching. It is also important that school policies and procedures consider and refer to the particular needs of children with ASDs. Individualised planning is a key component of children's learning and teaching programmes. Parents, available multi-disciplinary personnel and, where possible, the child's own ASDs can be included in this process. Referring to Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan process recently published by the National Council for Special Education (2006) is useful in planning for individual children's needs.

Children with ASDs may become anxious during unstructured periods of the school day such as recess periods. Creating buddy-systems, organising and monitoring structured games and activities and providing opportunities for children to engage in activities of their choice during these periods can assist in notifying children's anxiety. Children with ASDs benefit greatly from being engaged with three non-ASD peers during curricular and social activities. It is essential that every school provides opportunities and is deliberately planned and that these inclusions opportunities are also provided.

Monitoring children's progress in curricular areas can be achieved through the use of a range of formal and informal assessment procedures. A selection can be made appropriate from assessment strategies such as teacher observation, framework, teacher devised tests, diagnostic tests, criterion-referenced tests, norm-referenced standardised tests, checklists, summative assessment, curriculum profiles, routine of samples of children's work, photographs records,

TEACHING APPROACHES

A range of teaching approaches may be used in implementing education programmes for children with ASDs. Approaches used in implementing the Primary School Curriculum such as direct-teaching, modelling, prompting, task-analysis, task repetition scaffolding, activity learning, co-operative learning and collaborative learning may be effectively used with children with ASDs. A range of ASD-specific approaches has been developed and a selection of the most commonly used approaches is detailed in Table 2 below. A decision to use a particular approach or combination of approaches should be based on the individual needs of each child and be concerned with furthering the holistic development of the child.

As children develop, they become less reliant on visual information for learning and teachers rely less on visual methods and more on verbal methods in their teaching (White and Worth, 2006). However children with ASDs require visual support throughout their lives in order for them to meaningfully engage in activities. Simple stimuli, an adult with ASDs explains that the stimuli are in pictures and that words are a second language to her (Sandor, 1993). Recognising the strong visual learning modality of children with ASDs in the auditory-based environment of classrooms is crucial to the meaningful engagement of children in curricular activities (Sandsor, 1993). The use of visual schedules and objects, labelling clearly delineating areas of the classroom in association with the activities that occur in each area and utilising concrete materials assist in engaging children in curricular tasks.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Jordan and Powell (1995) observe that the education of a child with ASD ‘cannot start or stop when the school bell rings’ (p. 140). Children with ASDs require consistent support within school and home environments in order to make optimal educational progress and an array of opportunities to practice acquired skills in a range of different contexts. Involving parents and families of children with ASDs in children's education programmes optimises and enhances children's learning and teaching opportunities.