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.

An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

A Report by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science 2006

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


INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Computers have features that distinctly appeal to children with ASDs (Murray, 1997). Information and communication technology (ICT) may be used to support all areas of the curriculum and to meet children’s needs associated with the level of impairments. It is important to ensure that children are seated comfortably and appropriately when engaged in ICT activities. Computers are rule-governed and predictable, contrast conscious, enable self-error making and provide possibilities for verbal and non-verbal communication. However, the overuse of computers should be avoided as some children exhibit a tendency to become obsessed with particular programmes, which can interfere with their learning. Consulting the computer and reconfiguring the computer to the child’s daily work schedule are effective strategies for controlling computer access.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staff should be facilitated in availing of opportunities to engage in staff development and learning that enables them to effect a combined-skills approach to meeting the needs of children with ASDs. Schools’ attention is directed to Circular 0001/2007, Circular 0002/2007, Circular 0003/2007 and the Special Education Support Service.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent from the evaluation of educational provision for children with ASDs that significant progress has been made since autism was given recognition as a discrete disability category in 1998. Schools are proactive and successful in enabling children with ASDs across appropriate education and achieve their full potential. The imagination, commitment and shift of individual teachers have contributed greatly to the high quality of educational provision that is available for children with ASDs. Finally, in providing education for children with ASDs, important insights can be gained from the children themselves as the following poem written by Philip Aston, a seven-year old child with ASD demonstrates (Aston, 1996).
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 launched by the Minister for Education and Science, Mr Michael Woods TD in 2002 and the terms of reference included reviewing the existing range of educational provision and support services available to children with ASs, assessing the adequacy of educational provision and services, considering the implementation for an associated range of provision, and making recommendations to ensure the provision of an appropriate, effective and efficient service. The report of the Task Force was published in 2003 and made a series of recommendations in relation to policy and practice concerning educational approaches to meeting the needs of children with ASDs (DES, 2003). The DES continues to develop policy and practice with reference to 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; Jones, 2002; Reginald, 2006). In addition, it is important to remember that some students may fit within the range of general learning disability (Gillmore, 1993; 1994). 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 cognitive functioning (DES, 2001). However, it is clear from recent literature that the severity of ASDs and the level of general learning disability form two separate dimensions, which have to be explicitly considered when planning learning and teaching programmes for individual children (Froenten, 1997; Jerlow, 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 55 per 10,000 of the general population (DES, 2003). It is clear that while children with ASs have many traits in common with children who do not have ASs, they also exhibit a distinctive style of thinking and learning. While all children with ASs 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 continuous improvement in the quality of education for children with ASs, promote self-evaluation and continuous development by school and staff members, 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 exclusion of a single teaching approach to meet the varied needs of children with ASs and their families. The review of educational approaches suggested that the following elements in Figure 1 represent good 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 needing children to meet the needs of children with ASs.

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, social, moral, creative, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical dimensions of development. All children with ASs benefit from accessing a broad and relevant curriculum that addresses the tidal 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 behaviour that interferes with children’s learning, promotes curricular experiences that are concerned with the holistic development of each child and uses a range of teaching methodologies and approaches. The significance of the tidal of impairments, sensory sensitivities and general learning disability for curriculum delivery is illustrated in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task Force</th>
<th>Practically to ASDs</th>
<th>Implications for teachers of learning and teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improvements in social interaction</td>
<td>Animal-assisted therapy (AAT): - May improve social skills in children with ASs - May help to improve communication skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improvements in language and communication</td>
<td>- The child needs support in understanding the purpose and role of communication - Children need to be directed towards making the social interaction explicit: &quot;Listen, ask questions, show understanding, express feelings, take turns and give feedback&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional difficulties</td>
<td>- Sensory and perceptual sensitivities</td>
<td>- Sensory processing difficulties may be experienced.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Visual and auditory</td>
<td>- Visual and auditory sensitivities may be experienced.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Motor control problems</td>
<td>- Motor control problems may be experienced.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Difficulty in relating</td>
<td>- Difficulty in relating to others may be experienced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task Force</td>
<td>Practical implications</td>
<td>Implications for general learning disabilities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Improvements in general learning disability</td>
<td>- Improvements in general learning disability: - May improve general learning disability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Moderate general learning disability</td>
<td>- Moderate general learning disability: - May improve general learning disability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Severe general learning disability</td>
<td>- Severe general learning disability: - May improve general learning disability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Inadequate general learning disability</td>
<td>- Inadequate general learning disability: - May improve general learning disability</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Children with ASs 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 enabling children’s anxiety. Children with ASs benefit greatly from being involved in three non-ASs peers during curriculum and social activities. It is essential that inclusive opportunities are carefully and deliberately planned and that sincere inclusive 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 as appropriate from assessment strategies such as teacher observation, formal tests, diagnostic tests, criterion-referenced tests, norm-referenced standardised tests, checklists, summative assessment, curriculum pilots, monitoring 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 ASs. Approaches used in implementing the Primary School Curriculum such as direct-teaching, modelling, prompting, task-analysis, task repetition scaffolding, category learning, experiential learning and collaborative learning may be effectively used with children with ASs. A range of ASD-specific approaches has been developed and is a selection of the most commonly used approaches is detailed at 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 fostering 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 ASs may require visual support throughout their lives in order for them to meaningfully engage in activities. Standard tasks, an adult with ASs explains that like babies or patients and that words are on a second language to her (Gianini, 1993). Recognising the strong visual learning modality of children with ASs with the auditory-based environment is crucial to the meaningful engagement of children in curricular activities (Whitley, 1992). The use of visual schedules and tokens, timelines, clearly delineating areas of the classroom in association with the activities that occur in each area and utilizing concrete materials used in engaging children in curricular tasks.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Jordan and Powell (1995) observe that the education of a child with ASs ‘can neither start nor stop when the school bell rings’ (p.140). Children with ASs require consistent support within school and home environments in order to make optimal educational progress and should also have opportunities to practice acquired skills in a range of different contexts. Involving parents and families of children with ASs in children’s education programmes optimises and enhances children’s learning and teaching opportunities.