

Design an autism-friendly school, classroom and plan for a day including an activity. Write a 2000 word reflective commentary to explain why you have chosen to create it in this particular way.

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Introduction

This essay outlines suggestions for an autism-friendly mainstream secondary school which specifically meets the case study Mia's needs. I have added a sensory profile to Mia so the school can take into consideration her sensory needs. The four sections in the essay consider: autism characteristics and theories; the whole school approach; the classroom design; and an example plan for a day. Through these, I hope to understand autism better and develop adaptations mainstream schools can make to support autistic pupils. I have chosen to consider mainstream secondary schools because I wish to become a Geography teacher and that is where I would likely teach. The Centre for Research in Autism and Education (n.d.) suggests around "70% of children on the autism spectrum attend mainstream schools" making it very likely that, over my career, I will teach many autistic children. Therefore, through my research and design suggestions, I hope that, when I am a teacher, I will understand autism better and have at my disposal a range of possible methods to help my students.

Autism Characteristics and Theories

Discussions of autism must always consider the great variation between autistic individuals. In this section I will examine common characteristics of autism and consider the Theory of Mind, but I note that autism is a spectrum and each autistic individual is unique and therefore not all will experience all the characteristics, nor to the same extent.

Autism is diagnosed using the Triad of Impairments, which suggests there are three impairments autistic individuals share: social interaction; communication; restricted patterns of behaviour, interests and activities (Milton, 2012, pp. 2). Frith, Happé and Siddons (1994, pp. 104) state social

“impairment is the defining characteristic of autism” which is intriguing because it is one third of the Triad of Impairments, not the “defining characteristic” and therefore suggests a misrepresentation of autism in some academic texts. Indeed, this misrepresentation is further illustrated by Kossyvakis and Papoudi (2016, pp. 46) who suggest “children with autism have poor quality friendships”. This statement is sweeping, does not leave room for exceptions and seems to judge autistic children’s friendships using their own parameters, not necessarily the child’s. The quote is suggesting autistic children can face social difficulties, a characteristic of autism, which may cause challenges in friendships. However, the language used here, and in multiple other academic texts is negative and predisposed to the worldview of a non-autistic individual. Therefore, texts should be read with consideration of this possible bias.

Another characteristic many autistic individuals experience are “sensory processing problems” (Myles et al. 2004, pp. 288). Iarocci and McDonald (2006, pp. 77) suggest “persons with autism process sensory information in a way that is different from others” indicating the need to understand the autistic individual’s way of processing sensory information. The National Autistic Society (2018b) explain how senses can be over-sensitive or under-sensitive or both at varying times in autistic individuals and that this can impact their behaviour. Therefore, when designing autism-friendly environments, it is important to take individual’s sensory needs into account.

Multiple theories surround autism, but I will only discuss one in this short section. The Theory of Mind suggests autistic individuals’ difficulties with empathy and imagining the thoughts and feelings of others, which help predict others’ behaviour and is something autistic individuals stereotypically have difficulty with (Milton, 2012, pp. 3). Milton, (2012, pp. 3), however, critiques this model of viewing autism, by suggesting the deficit the Theory of Mind suggests “is more to do with a breakdown in communication between two people who process information differently” than the ‘problem’ being solely with the autistic individual. This double empathy problem suggests that both autistic individuals and non-autistic individuals cannot empathise with each other because they think

differently. Roth and Rezaie (2010, pp. 227) further criticise the Theory of Mind for not adequately addressing “the distinctive non-social symptoms in autism, particularly the repetitive behaviours and stereotyped interests” which suggests the theory is limited. Therefore multiple theories should be considered when choosing which intervention methods are best.

Whole School Approach

The Equality Act 2010 protects disabled people from discrimination and the Children and Families Act 2014 “reformed the system for supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities” (National Autistic Society, 2018a, pp. 2) in England, which shows there is legislation in place to ensure the fair and equal treatment of all students. However, a “report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism found that too many children on the autism spectrum are being let down by the education system and held back from achieving their potential” (National Autism Society, 2018a, pp. 2) which indicates that many schools are not equipped to comply with the legislation. In this section I offer suggestions for how a school could meet the needs of the case study of Mia on a whole school level and therefore fulfil the legislation’s requirements.

School Design

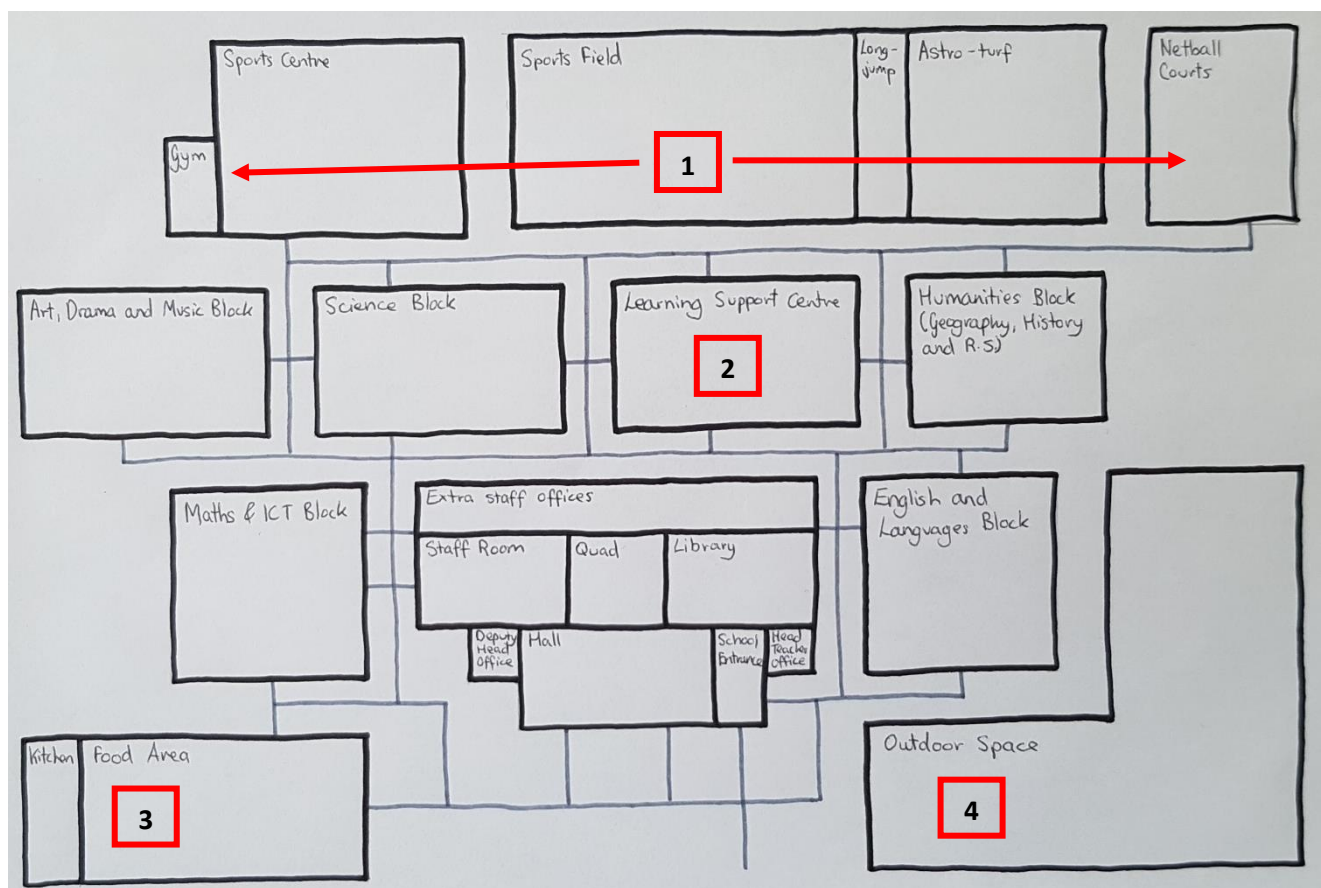



Figure 1 – Birds Eye View of the Whole School

Feature number	Reason for this feature
1	<p>The school has a large sports facility which is good for Mia because she loves to be active and the wide range of sport and equipment available support this.</p>
2	<p>The school has a dedicated Learning Support Centre, which is a space for individual and group intervention. The building interior is bright and has areas of quiet and busyness. Mia attends the busy areas because she dislikes dark and secluded places.</p>
3	<p>The school has a large food area, where Mia can have lunch with her friend/s. The kitchen serves healthy food, which meets Mia's preference of a healthy meal. They use a dividing plate to serve her food, because Mia likes her food to be presented in a certain way.</p> 
4	<p>The school has a large outdoor space which is a mixture of grass and tarmac, meaning in the winter months Mia still has space to be active in at breaktimes, even when the grass is wet.</p>

Additional features

The school buildings are arranged by subject and purpose, which gives the school's design structure and this helps Mia feel more secure at school because she finds structure reassuring. There are also wide corridors, which make class change over time less chaotic and mean Mia is not forced to touch anyone she does not choose to.

Teacher Training

I consider teacher training one of the most important ways of making mainstream schools autism-friendly because it can help teachers understand autism better and therefore respond appropriately. Milton (2014, pp. 9) suggests "distress can be ignored when viewed as an inappropriate behaviour" which illustrates how misunderstanding the actions of autistic children can lead to miscommunication and potentially damaging actions: I once witnessed a teacher yell at an autistic child having a meltdown, which worsened the situation. Had she received appropriate training on autism and understood this child's needs, the situation could have been dealt with better. Goodall, (2015, pp. 318) suggests training can increase teacher confidence and that this is "a foundation on which to build successful practice" further indicating how training is an effective way to support teachers in inclusive classrooms.

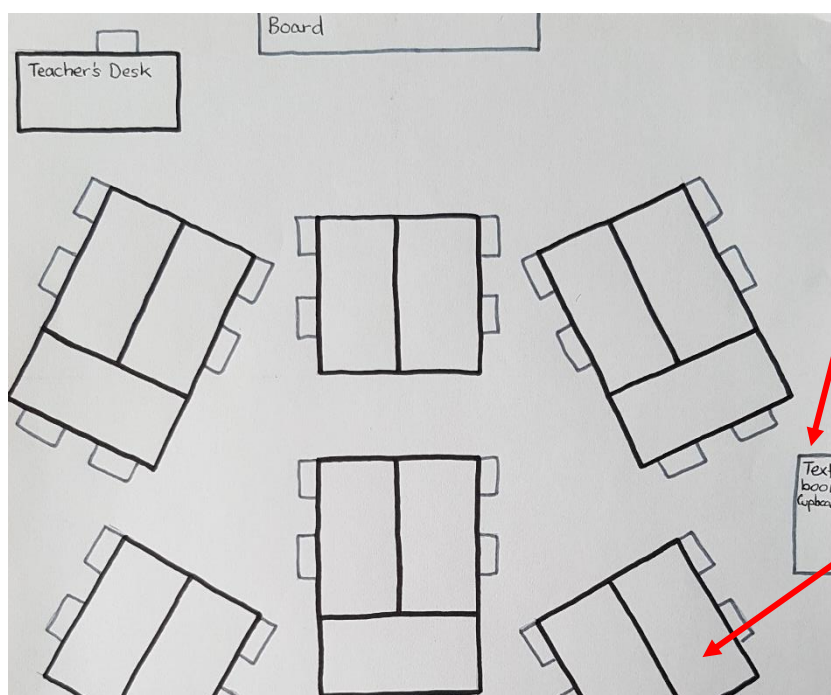
In addition to generic teacher training on autism, it is also important to have specific training for individual children, because every autistic child is unique and will need different support. For example, Mia really dislikes being in trouble and values appreciation and fairness. Communicating these things to her teachers and recommending methods to handle these can be part of the training. Such a method could be communicating gently to Mia if she misbehaves.

School Leadership and Ethos

The school's leadership is also an essential part to creating an autism-friendly school because it is key in setting the tone of the whole school. Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006, pp. 127) reveal "the difficulties in persuading colleagues to look past a student's behaviour to its cause" which indicates that the good intentions of one teacher can have little effect. What is needed is leadership to "empower staff to ensure they have the confidence to be inclusive practitioners working with a diverse range of children" (Goodall, 2015, pp. 315). In addition, the school ethos also "cascades downwards from leadership, shaping teacher beliefs and transforming inclusive practice" (Goodall, 2015, pp. 315). This reveals the importance strong inclusive leadership and ethos can have in a mainstream school. Guidance and support given and expected by leadership encourages teachers to enact this in their classrooms and thus makes the school more autism-friendly because a more inclusive environment is created.

Such leadership and ethos benefits Mia because her teachers are encouraged by the leadership to adapt their classes to suit her needs. For example, communication between teachers moderated by the leadership has meant Mia's relationships with fellow pupils has been shared. This means her teachers can ensure she shares her table with those she gets on with, making her more comfortable in class.

Classroom Design



Textbook Cupboard:

Mia's seat is in close proximity to the textbook cupboard meaning the teacher frequently asks her to help hand them out, which gives her a responsibility.

Mia's seat:

Mia is on a table of four to reduce the likelihood of personality clashes.
Her seat is at the back of the room near the door which she prefers.
The group tables also encourages teamwork, which Mia enjoys.

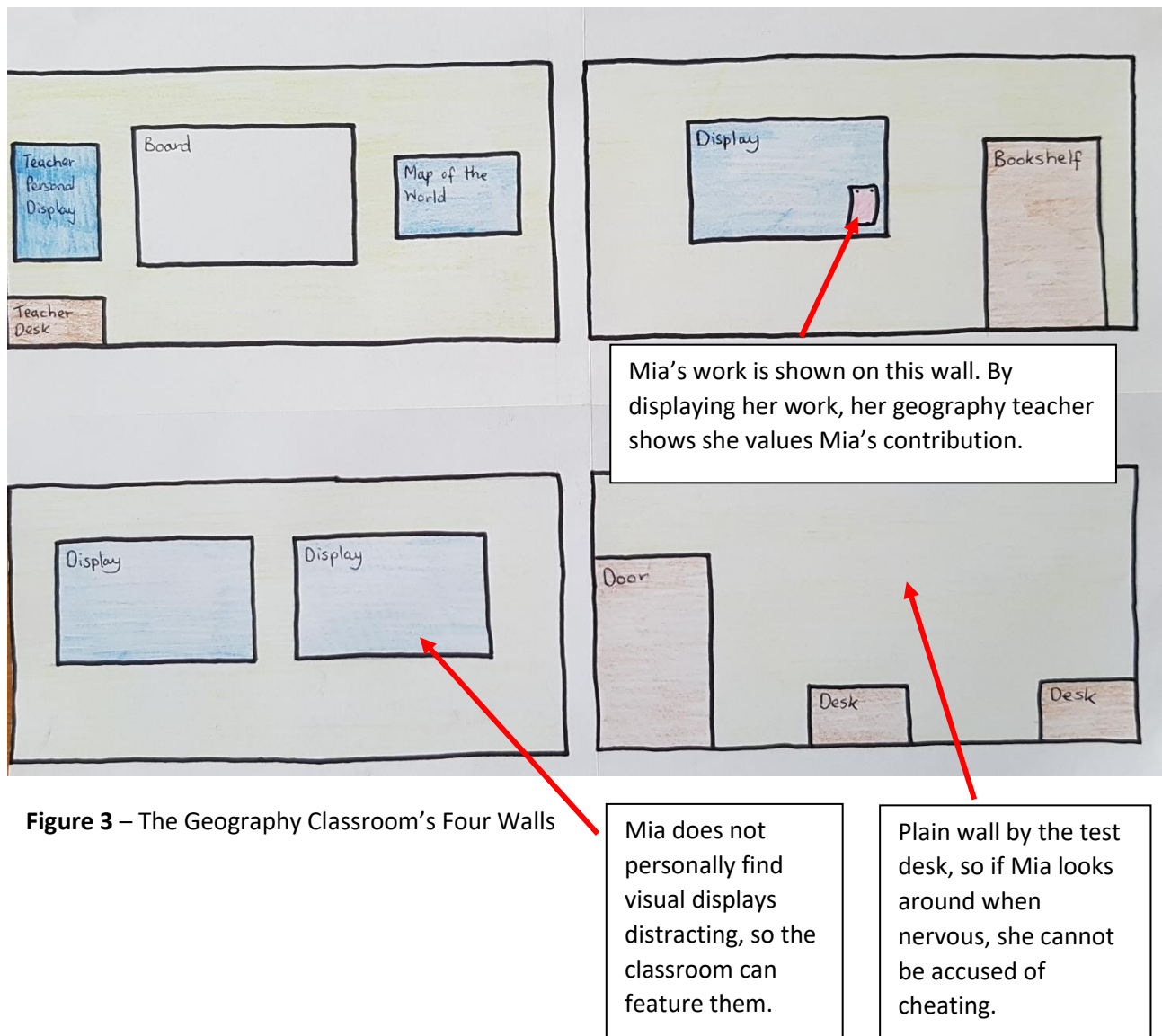


Figure 3 – The Geography Classroom's Four Walls

Environment Design

Figure 2 and 3 suggest simple alterations a mainstream classroom can make to better accommodate Mia. I believe it is important to acknowledge that in mainstream environments money can be a barrier to creating environments used in special schools. Therefore using low-cost methods such as having the desks arranged in a certain way, a suitable seating plan and/or awareness of classroom displays to positively change an environment to suit a child is important. As a Geographer myself, I consider the way space is used in schools highly important to effective teaching. Macpherson (2010) uses the term body-landscape relations to express how environments themselves can disable bodies. Many can view disabilities such as autism as “solely biological givens” (Macpherson, 2010,

pp. 4) and not consider how the environment they are in impacts their behaviour. Milton (2012, pp. 10) also reflects this view, suggesting that the problems may not be with only the autistic person, but “the world in which they inhabit”.

Classroom Assistant

A Teaching Assistant (TA) is present in all of Mia’s classes to support her and the other children’s needs. Cremin, Thomas and Vincett (2005, pp. 415) suggest the “most common option for teachers is to give assistants responsibility for particular children”. However, in Mia’s classes, the TA and teacher use a strategy called Reflective Teamwork to more effectively serve her needs and those of her peers. In this strategy, the TA and the teacher “develop and advance the ways in which they will work together as a team” (Cremin, Thomas and Vincett, 2005, pp. 416). This strategy helps Mia because the TA is able to use her relationship with Mia to understand how classes can better suit her needs. She can then communicate this to the teacher who can build this knowledge into her lesson planning. For example, the TA reminds the teacher to give Mia homework slips, which help her stay organised. Additionally, this strategy is beneficial to other pupils in the class because the TA can communicate their needs too. Cremin, Thomas and Vincett (2005, pp. 425) reflected that this strategy made the teacher in their research “think more deeply about planning, and she adapted her teaching following conversations with the assistant” indicating the value of this strategy.

Plan for the Day

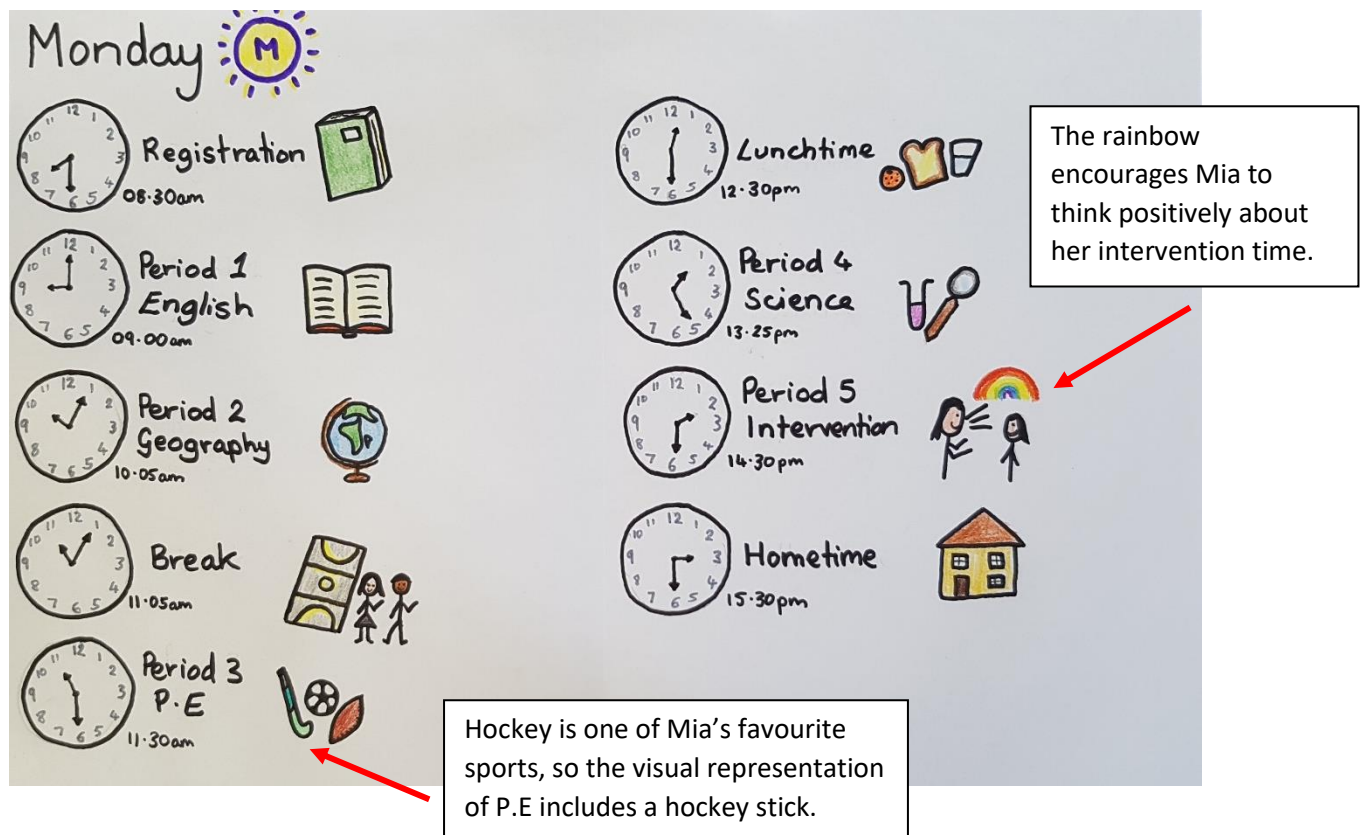


Figure 4 – Mia's Monday Visual Timetable

Visual Timetable

Figure 4 is Mia's visual timetable for Mondays. The National Autistic Society (2018c, para. 2) explain how visual "supports can help to provide structure and routine" among other benefits, both of which are important things to Mia. Additionally, they "can make communication physical and consistent, rather than fleeting and inconsistent like spoken words can be" (National Autistic Society, 2018c, para. 2) and this helps Mia feel more in control, which is helpful to her. In addition to this, on any given day, Mia has the same TA with her through the day, which helps with consistency and the building of relationships. If there are any changes to Mia's timetable which are unavoidable, such as a fire alarm drill, this TA is able to explain these to her and help her cope with the change.

Interventions

During Mia's Monday, she has three available interventions. At breaktimes, the Learning Centre has areas to play, because many interventions emphasise the "importance of teaching play skills in pupils with autism" (Kossyvaki and Papoudi, 2016, pp. 58). This play intervention is a choice individual pupils can make whether to attend or not, but is provided as a constant breaktime space. Mia personally likes to be very active and often spends her breaks in the outdoor space with her friends. However, during wet weather, she and her friends utilise the space provided in the Learning Centre.

At lunchtimes, the school offers a wide range of lunchtime clubs, including sports clubs, which Mia prefers. Bond et. al (2016, pp. 312) suggest "naturalistic proximity based lunchtime clubs" are a valid intervention which are a good peer-mediated intervention, helping autistic children to develop social skills. Therefore, when Mia joined the school, she was directed towards these lunchtime clubs and is now an active member. On Mondays, after eating a healthy lunch with her friends, she changes into her P.E. kit and does Hockey club. Afterwards, she is able to remain in her kit for her P.E. class.

Period 5 on a Monday, Mia has an hour Relationship Development Intervention (RDI), which aims to build "functional relationships" (Milton, 2014, pp. 10). Through this intervention, the school hopes to improve Mia's quality of life by building on her social skills (Milton, 2014). Mia's friends are very important to her and arguments with them upset her a lot. Therefore, this intervention aims to help her strengthen her friendships and builds trust with the TAs who work with her, so that she can confide in them and feel supported. In addition to RDI, Intensive Interaction is also used during intervention time, which aims to improve Mia's communication and build "trust and rapport on the child's own terms" (Milton, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, my research has shown me that there are multiple methods that can be put in place to help autistic children like Mia. Milton (2012, pp. 1) encourages the reader “to never think that they understand autism”. He also writes interventions and strategies depend “on the child” (Milton, 2014, pp. 12) and adaptability will be essential in teaching. However, my research has given me, if not a complete understanding of autism, then certainly a better one. It has encouraged me to, as a teacher, seek guidance from leadership, parents, the children themselves and any other sources I can access to ensure the best experience possible for the children in my care.

Mia's Profile

Year 7

Things we like about Mia

She is full of fun and has a beautiful smile. She is reliable and tries her hardest with everything! Mia shares what she knows with other people, she is a good study buddy and a good leader. She is full of fun and a bundle of energy!

What's Important to Mia at school

- Not to be late for school
- To be organised, to have everything she needs for the day
- To feel in control, to have a structured, calm day and know what is happening next and to have an explanation if things have to be cancelled
- To have a job to do and some responsibility, Mia is very reliable
- Not to be in trouble, Mia sees it as a big thing if she is told off and it upsets her
- To play and run around and be active in PE and play time – this is “extra ultra important” to Mia. She much prefers team sports
- To have someone to play with. Not to fall out with her friends – this really makes Mia sad
- Not to feel under pressure. Mia says that she worries she'll get in trouble for looking around when she is “under test conditions” but she can't help looking around when she is nervous
- To be herself and to do her best, be noticed for doing hard work and told well done
- To be fair – Mia has a real sense of justice and doesn't like it when people break the rules or tell lies and it isn't sorted out
- To have a healthy lunch she likes and someone to have lunch with
- To have lessons that are doing rather than listening
- Not to go on her own to places that are dark or in secluded areas
- To be part of a team, to have an activity to get involved in
- To share a table at school with children who she gets on with, no personality clashes
- To have enough sleep on a school night

How to help Mia have good days at school

- Be aware that it is very important to Mia to have everything that she needs for her day. If she does forget something, please support her by letting her phone home to have it dropped off, it will make a big difference to her day.
- Remember that Mia having all that she needs for her day includes homework, so please support her by giving her homework slips at the end of lessons. This helps Mia to be organised and reassures her that she will know what she needs to do once she is at home
- Feeling in control is something that really matters to Mia. At the moment Mia's year 6 class has a visual timetable and this works very well for her. If something isn't going to happen that she is expecting, please explain why. She may not show she is concerned about this at the time but will be very upset when she gets home.
- Mia is really helpful and loves to have a job to do. Be aware of this and give her every opportunity to make her contribution.
- Mia takes it to heart when she is told off. Please be sensitive to this
- Remember that Mia is a bundle of energy; she is a very active girl. If there are clubs or after school activities that she may like, point them out to her, especially if there is a team to join!
- “Test conditions” worry Mia as she is concerned she'll get in trouble for looking around if she is nervous. Support by knowing this and understanding her worry about being told off.
- Mia always tries hard. A well done goes a long way!!
- Know that Mia feels strongly about fairness. Support her by reassuring her about this is she is involved and reminding her she doesn't have to worry if she isn't!
- Falling out with friends and not having someone to play with makes Mia really sad. She may not tell you she is upset but you can see it in her face. Keep a look out for a sad day and support her by offering her the chance to say what's wrong. She will let you know if she wants you to step in or sort it out herself

We also think that...

Mia is really kind, caring and helpful. She is a brilliant dancer and a great hockey player – she just gets stuck in! Mia is sweet and polite

Sensory assessment checklist

(based on the sensory profile checklist from Bogdashina, 2003 and included in the IDP autism spectrum)

Tick which apply and then consider which teaching staff need to know this information.

Where possible, complete this in discussion with the parents or carers and the pupil.

No.	Item	Yes	No	Don't know	Action required
1	Resists changes to familiar routines				
2	Does not recognise familiar people in unfamiliar clothes				
3	Dislikes bright lights				
4	Dislikes fluorescent lights				
5	Is frightened by flashes of light				
6	Puts hands over eyes or closes eyes in bright light				
7	Is attracted to lights				
8	Is fascinated by shiny objects and bright colours				
9	Touches the walls of rooms				
10	Enjoys certain patterns (e.g. brickwork, stripes)				
11	Gets lost easily				
12	Has a fear of heights, lifts, escalators				
13	Has difficulty catching balls				
14	Is startled when approached by others				
15	Smells, licks, taps objects and people				
16	Appears not to see certain colours				
17	Uses peripheral vision when doing a task				

No.	Item	Yes	No	Don't know	Action required
18	Finds it easier to listen when not looking at person			✓	
19	Remembers routes and places extremely well			✓	
20	Can memorise large amounts of information on certain topics	✓			
21	Finds crowded areas very difficult		✓		
22	Prefers to sit at back of group or front of group				✓
23	Covers ears when hears certain sounds		✓		
24	Can hear sounds which others do not hear		✓		
25	Is very distressed by certain sounds		✓		
26	Bangs objects and doors		✓		
27	Is attracted by sounds and noises		✓		
28	Does not like shaking hands or being hugged		✓		
29	Likes a hug if chosen to do this	✓			
30	Only seems to hear the first words of a sentence		✓		
31	Repeats exactly what others have said		✓		
32	Very good auditory memory for songs and rhymes	✓			
33	Dislikes the feel of certain fabrics and substances		✓		
34	Seems unaware of pain and temperature		✓		
35	Dislikes certain foods and drinks	✓			
36	Seeks pressure by crawling under heavy objects		✓		
37	Hugs very tightly		✓		
38	Enjoys feeling certain materials				✓

No.	Item	Yes	No	Don't know	Action required
39	Dislikes certain everyday smells		✓		
40	Eats materials which are not edible		✓		
41	Likes to have food presented in a certain way on the plate				✓
42	Dislikes crunchy or chewy food		✓		
43	Quite clumsy and bumps into objects and people		✓		
44	Finds fine motor movements hard		✓		
45	Has difficulty running and climbing		✓		
46	Finds it hard to ride a bike		✓		
47	Does not seem to know where body is in space		✓		
48	Has poor balance		✓		
49	Afraid of everyday movement activities such as swings, slides, trampoline		✓		
50	Has extremely good balance	✓			

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