Designing an Autism Friendly School, Classroom, and Day Plan for Mia

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Introduction:

This illustrated essay will focus on the profile of Mia (Appendix A), and will avoid people first phrasing, e.g. 'person with autism', as is the preference of many in the autistic community (Milton, 2012). Mia is in Year 7, and could be considered as 'high-functioning', although that phrasing is problematic in itself as it ignores the disabling factors of autism that may not be seen by the rest of society, and implies that 'high-functioning' autistic people do not need support (Gardiner, 2018). Despite this, I will focus on a mainstream school in Mia's case, as this will likely be most beneficial to her regarding her current capabilities. Mainstream schools have been suggested to increase the social skills and confidence of autistic children, and also to improve the knowledge and acceptance of students not on the spectrum (Conn, 2014). It is important that the mainstream school is well adapted to autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as only surface level inclusivity could be of detriment to autistic students, this means that rather than focusing only on the physical integration of autistic children into mainstream schools, this design will rely on 'diversity being considered from the outset' (Goodall, 2015: 306). For this reason, the whole school, even architecturally, will be designed with ASD in mind (Ellerby, 2019).

There has been a tendency in the educational methods associated with autism to attempt to intervene with a student's behaviour, with the aim of allowing them to 'pass' as not autistic (Milton, 2014: 8). This method does not take the happiness of the autistic person into account

(Milton, 2014). This essay will therefore take inspiration from the social model of disability, where the barriers in society are recognised as issues, and the educational environment is adapted for the benefit of the child, rather than the medical model of disability, where autism is seen as the problem, meaning the child must be 'cured' or changed (Milton, 2012). The children would also be involved in the process of adapting the educational environment, 'those who can best understand a disability or condition are those with the disability or condition themselves' (McAllister & Sloan, 2016: 332). By adopting these methods in when considering the design of an autism friendly mainstream



Figure 1: Social vs Medical Model of Disability

school, appropriate to suit Mia's specific needs, it is hoped that any alienation of those with ASD can be avoided (McAllister & Sloan, 2016).

Defining and Explaining Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):

Autism, once considered to be rare, is a spectrum disorder, with an approximated 1 in 100 people being diagnosed as somewhere on the 'wider autism spectrum' (Milton, 2012: 1). The work of Kanner and Asperger laid the foundations for early understandings of autism and since then, definitions of what autism is have been debated, with some attempts to blame the mother's of autistic children, and some perceiving autism as a curable condition (Milton, 2012). These understandings have been disregarded and proven false by many academics in the autistic community (Milton, 2012). Contemporary definitions of autism describe a triad of



impairments, in social communication, social interaction, and imagination, with autism being 'diagnosed according to 'qualitative' impairments in all three areas' (Milton, 2012: 2). As well the triad of impairments definition of ASD, there are some main psychological theories surrounding autism,



including the theory of mind, weak central coherence, and executive dysfunction.

The theory of mind model accounts for aspects of social skills that autistic people may find difficult, the ability 'conceive of mental states', otherwise described as 'knowing that other people know, want, feel, or believe things' (Baron-Cohen, 1985: 38). The absence of a theory of mind in autistic people has been implied to lead to a lack of empathy, social skills, and pretend play (Baron-Cohen, 1985). This theory has been criticised however for being too negative and focus on struggles autistic people may face rather than on the strengths they possess (Milton, 2012).

Theories of central coherence aim to amend this. "Weak central coherence' refers to the detail-focused processing style proposed to characterise autism spectrum disorders (ASD)' (Happe & Frith, 2006: 5), this is often described in autistic people as a failure to 'see the big picture' (Happe & Frith, 2006: 6). The understanding of a deficit in central coherence within ASD, however, has changed to focus on the strengths that can arise from detail-oriented thinking, with many autistic people being able to excel in certain career paths because of this (Happe & Frith, 2006).

Theories of executive dysfunction have power in explaining the daily struggles of autistic people, struggles that may be invisible to onlookers of 'high-functioning' autistic people (Gardiner, 2018). The functions included under the umbrella of executive dysfunction are planning, working memory, impulse control, inhibition, generativity, and action monitoring (Hill, 2004). Deficits in these functions often lead to a disengagement from the immediate environment (Hill, 2004). Executive dysfunction can encompass repetitive actions, perseveration, and difficulty in inhibiting desire and generating novel ideas (Hill, 2004). Gardiner (2018) described an executive dysfunction as the most disabling factor of his autism, leading to many anxieties in the ways that the difficulties that accompany this are often misunderstood by others that are not autistic.

Whole School Approach:

Although mainstream, the school would be architecturally designed with ASD, as what is beneficial for autistic students is oftentimes beneficial for all students (Ellerby, 2019). Corridors would be made as wide as possible, and where possible would be avoided, with classrooms and alternative learning and support spaces being located next to each other, with no need to access them through a corridor in busy changeover times, as the loud and crowded nature of these can be overwhelming for autistic students, and chaotic for everyone involved (Ellerby, 2019). In situations where corridors are necessary, cool toned, curved walls would

be used, to aim to reduce the anxiety of what can be hidden around a corner (Ellerby, 2019). This would hopefully reduce Mia's worries about feeling in control, allowing her to comfortable navigate the school while avoiding sudden changes and sensory overload (Milton, 2014). By including large windows, in the ceiling where possible, in the design of the school, fluorescent and flickering lighting can be avoided, which is often also a trigger in overwhelming the senses, or causing a distraction for autistic students (Ellerby, 2019). In Mia's case,



Figure 3: School Floorplan with Curved Corridors

this would allow her to feel more comfortable in classroom, as someone who is energetic and loves the outdoors, the visibility of outside space would likely be beneficial to her learning (Ellerby, 2019).

The teacher training approach of the school must not only have inclusivity in mind, but also be based in an awareness of the diverse needs of students (Goodall, 2015). This should involve teachers understanding their students, not only in the ways that they best learn, but also in the ways that students are interacted with generally (Goodall, 2015). Mia enjoys lots of positive reinforcement when she is doing a good job and reacts poorly to being told off, so careful and sensitive discipline would be preferred if it is necessary; these are considerations that would likely not be understood with surface level inclusivity policy, meaning that teacher training must be more in depth, and be conscious of ASD in its origins (Goodall, 2015). This would include the training of teaching assistants, who can provide valuable support in a classroom environment, allowing for better 'room management, zoning and reflective teamwork' (Cremin et. al., 2005). It is also important to consider the outside space of a school, as it is an important space providing calming, but reasonably stimulating breaks from learning (Ellerby, 2019).



This mainstream school would have a sensory forest school, as although it is for those of a secondary level, spaces for relaxation (Ellerby, 2019), and a diverse environment allowing for changes in scenery and types of activity are important in the educational experience for all ages of autistic students (McAllister & Sloan, 2016). As Mia is someone who enjoys sports and outdoor activities and

Figure 4: Design of Sensory Forest School. Ellerby, 2019.

playtime, this would be specifically beneficial for her learning, as it would provide a space of comfort for spending time with friends, and stimulating activity during break times (Ellerby, 2019). To further cater to Mia's preference for stimulating activity, structured playtimes would be utilised. Structured play allows for more rewarding experiences for autistic children, as imaginative play can sometimes pose problems, due to the way social skills may develop (Kossyvaki & Papoudi, 2016). By structuring playtime, Mia would have more

support when developing her friendships, hopefully alleviating her worries about falling out with her friends and not having someone to play with.

Classroom Design:

Structurally, classrooms will be laid out in a way conducive to learning for autistic students, with maximal storage allowing for less clutter, and minimal displays and designs, as these things can be distracting and overwhelming for autistic students (Ellerby, 2019). Within classrooms, a TEACCH program will be adapted, which outline methods for structured teaching (Mesibov, 2009). These methods in include, structuring the classroom environment and activities so they have higher accessibility for autistic students, using interests in visual details and visual skills in order to provide more understandable learning, using the special interests of students to engage them in learning, and lastly, supporting the 'self-initiated use of meaningful communication' (Mesibov, 2009: 572). These techniques, outlined within the TEACCH program, would be beneficial for autistic and non-autistic students alike, and would provide more accessible learning, allowing for a less frustrating school experience overall (Mesibov, 2009). This would be positive for Mia, as she enjoys structure, and likes to feel involved within the classroom setting, which the TEACCH program could provide. It would be important for Mia, that she gets a homework slip at the end of the day and is able to feel organised when it comes to doing her homework at home. A structured teaching program would make this possible, as Mia's needs for organisation could be addressed and worked into her own personal program, which would include an outline for how best to approach homework. Involving her parents in this process would be a priority, as this would give her the most support possible when working at home.

A visual timetable would also be utilised within the classroom, as a further way of supporting Mia in her organisational needs, and so that she is prepared for what will be coming throughout the day. Visual aids are especially important when planning education for autistic students, as they are the most accessible means of communication, this is important



Figure 5: Visual Timetable

in the case of timetabling, as changing tasks can often be daunting for students, such as Mia, and making them the least complicated they can be is a priority (Preston & Carter, 2009).

Day Plan & Extra-Curricular Activities:

The visual timetable that would be used in Mia's classroom would be also be given to her to have as her own, meaning at the beginning of the day she would be made aware of her schedule with a teacher; the visual timetable provided to her would be one she could check throughout the day, in case she began to feel out of control. A visual checklist for the day would also be made available to Mia, so that she knows that she has everything she needs for the day, if anything is ever missing from her checklist, it will be important that her teacher contacts her parents to have this item dropped off as soon as possible.

Social stories have been adopted by many in the autism and education domain, as they 'have



Figure 6: Example of a Social Story

been suggested to positively affect the social development' of autistic children (Karkhaneh et. al., 2010: 641). The goal of social stories is to 'share accurate social information' in a manner that is reassuring and 'easily understood' (Karkhaneh et. al., 2010: 642). Although Mia's social skills appear to be well-developed, a social story may be beneficial in the case of her worries about fairness, where it is important to reassure her that it is okay if she isn't involved all of the time. A social story would be the best way to get this information across to Mia, in a way that doesn't make her feel like she is being told off, which should be avoided by her teachers as much as possible.

Mia is very active and enjoys being in a team, because of this, she would be encouraged to join after-school sports activities, which would be structured similarly to playtimes, and would have a teacher running the activities in order to avoid any unnecessary chaos (Kossyvaki & Papoudi, 2016). These after-school sports would each be organised with a schedule, so as to avoid Mia feeling unprepared for what will happen.

Conclusion:

Overall, when approaching a school design, the unique needs of a child, in this case Mia, are important to consider. However, it is also important to note that each autistic student will have their own preferences and requirements, and the approach taken for Mia cannot be applied to each individual student (Milton, 2014). This school design has attempted to create an overall calming and welcoming environment for autistic children, while catering for the specific needs of Mia, but in doing this in the context of a mainstream school, non-autistic children will also likely feel the benefit of a more friendly and relaxed learning approach, i.e. the sensory forest within an urbanised environment (Ellerby, 2019). Due to this school being mainstream, one of the main concerns will be the education of non-autistic students about ASD, in order to avoid any bullying, but hopefully, once awareness has been increased, non-autistic students will be able to have a more diverse understanding of others, which will be a benefit to them later in life (Conn, 2014).

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Appendix A: Mia's Profile

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 at 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