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EDUCATION SPECIAL !!

A warm welcome to the spring ACoRNS newsletter. In this issue:

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This edition is all about education, with spotlights on inspirational teachers from across the education system. One of these is Sadie Gillett and her work supporting autistic pupils in mainstream primary and secondary schools. We also hear about Rory Matthews and Alexandra Harris, from two local special needs colleges, and the work of a group of students striving to make the University of Sussex an autism-friendlier place.

INTENSIVE INTERACTION

Intensive Interaction (II) is a therapeutic approach used to develop communication and social interaction skills, particularly for people who may have limited ability to use spoken

language. It is based on the way in which the 'Fundamentals of Communication' are learnt in typical development through parent-infant interactions. II has been used with autistic children and adults where carers or teachers have found it difficult to establish connection and shared understanding. Alexandra Harris is Autism Lead and Head of Therapy at St. John's School and College in Sussex. She will be doing a talk about her work with II and young people in the ChatLab soon – contact us to be added to the mailing list if you would be interested in coming along.





ROBOTICS WITH RORY



Rory Matthews is a teacher at a special needs college in Burgess Hill who has been using a Lego® robotics kit called Spike Prime in his lessons with students who have a wide range of interests and support needs. This kit provides structured lesson plans to build, code and troubleshoot different robots. The plans give an aim, provide clues and even include videos where the kit goes wrong, to help the students develop their troubleshooting skills.

Using the familiar stimuli of Lego® means that it is an accessible way for the children to get involved with coding, as they already understand how to build with the bricks. The children usually work in pairs to create the robot for that lesson. Rory uses the platform called Seesaw to create a collaborative space for teachers, parents, and young people to contribute. Students post pictures and videos of what they have been doing and are able to comment on each other's work - with both verbal and written comments. This has given the students a safe place to work on constructive feedback giving and communicating their ideas, as well as helping carers share some of the excitement.





Spike Prime with iPads The use of encourages collaboration, with the children working in pairs to create their robots but then also working as a class. It is possible to simply follow the track, or to modify the track and code to avoid (or encourage!) crashes. Robots and students can also race against each other or take part in "Robot Wars"-like scenarios. Rory uses a skills chart to help students identify the skills they are developing. It was inspiring to see how Rory's Robotics class can help them develop their skills in communicating, teamwork, adaptability, and perseverance.

The class has also brought together students, teachers, and support staff, with enthusiastic engagement across the school, and among students with a wide range of including diagnoses, autism, Down's Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy. Rory said the programme has been so accessible because the instructions are visual diagrams without the need for words. It has also been great for developing fine motor skills, given the tiny pieces in some of the kits! Rory worked with researchers from University College London and from ChatLab Sussex in an earlier tech project: you can see the write-up here.

AUTISM FRIENDLIER UNIVERSITY



Last year's ACoRNS placement student, Ethan, has been running a survey about autism services at the University of Sussex for a final-year dissertation. More recently, the University has funded a group of five undergraduate students to be employed as Student Connectors on a new project towards an Autism-Friendlier working University, mentored by Sophie Anns and Nicola Yuill of the School of Psychology at Sussex. The students have developed their own ideas, creating four projects. One involves developing peer support meetings for autistic students to work with each other and develop confidence. These meetings will be guided by a survey about what kind of support neurodiverse students at Sussex would like. A new paper on peer support in autism provides some guidance on benefits and potential pitfalls. The second project involves consulting autistic and neurodiverse students and then creating a guide, on paper and online, bringing together in one place all the info about support services, spaces and facilities, to be made available for every new neurodiverse student. This follows findings that knowledge of existing services is very patchy. The project may also highlight gaps where extra support is needed.





It might even include guided tours tailored for neurodiverse students new to the university, introducing them to the local area, highlighting more autism-friendly spaces and places.

Project 3 focuses on sensory needs, and especially on how the university library environment can be further adapted for students with sensory sensitivities. This will also provide a template, with tips for all staff, on how university spaces more generally can be modified. The final project involves creating an animation to help neurotypical people to understand better the cognitive and sensory overloads that neurodiverse students can experience, and to have better knowledge and confidence in supporting students under stress. Each project has a plan for evaluating what effect these measures have.

Together, these projects should also raise awareness of the strengths, difficulties, experiences and needs of autistic students, helping the university to become a more autism-friendly place.

THE BRIGHTON AND HOVE INCLUSION SUPPORT SERVICE (BHISS)

Sadie Gillett from BHISS visited the ChatLab to tell us about her work in the autism and language team. This team is made up of advisory teachers and family support workers who provide support for 55 mainstream primary schools and 10 mainstream secondary schools across Brighton and Hove. The aim is to improve education for all autistic learners.

Sadie described the wide range of support available for schools in the area. The council provides a set amount of time per year depending on student numbers and schools can buy in more time. Services include staff training on topics such as setting up social communication groups whole-school autism and awareness training, as well as targeted observations of pupils with child-specific strategies, and staff surgeries to get more general guidance and advice. Schools can also use their allocated time to ask specialist teachers to carry out 1:1 or small group work with autistic pupils. Sadie explained about the support for newly diagnosed multidisciplinary children, the teams involved and the work BHISS is doing to support pupil voice work. Hearing the voice of the autistic student is





especially important for late-diagnosed autistic young people, who will often seem to manage during the school day but can struggle

once they get home. Underlying anxiety can easily be missed or masked. Pupil voice work gives students the opportunity and support to say what isn't going as well and what they would like to change. Watch out for more news on a relevant event on Autistic Voice in our next newsletter!

Small-group work is common in schools where there are many autistic learners and very valuable in be sharing can experiences. Autism peer groups can provide a space to discuss strengths and challenges and provide mutual support. They can also help foster friendships between pupils who may have not otherwise met. BHISS also supports families with both central and schoolworkshops, and specific small-group meetups for particular groups, such as parents who are autistic themselves. These workshops can work powerfully to build connections in the community. The autism and language team also works alongside other local services to help support schools and families. This includes educational psychologists, clinicians at CAMHS, Seaside View Child Development Centre, Front Door for Families, and the strong local charities we have, such as AMAZE and mASCot.

We spoke about the effects of COVID, and the impact lockdowns had on autistic pupils. Post-COVID, some children have experienced elevated levels of anxiety returning to school, leading some parents to choose to home-school. Some autistic pupils in Brighton and Hove are on a very reduced timetable or do not attend school and this appears to have increased post-Covid. The challenge is to provide a balance between supporting children back into school and protecting their mental health. Being able to learn at home has shown so many children that there is a way for them to learn without the stressful environment that school can be for many children. It raised a lot of questions about the future of provision and <u>what lessons</u> should be taken from experiences during the height of the pandemic.

AUTISM READING GROUP

Our placement students, Jemima, and Alice have continued to host our monthly reading group on Zoom. Since the last newsletter, the group has discussed topics from inclusion in schools through the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural therapy for autistic people to the issue of autism and employment and the double empathy problem . The reading group is open to anyone interested in having an informal discussion about current topics and research about autism. To join, email – acorns@sussex.ac.uk. To learn more about previous meetings, check out our blog <u>here.</u>



RESEARCH UPDATES

Our placement students have created a video version of our Zoom or Room guidelines. Check them out <u>here</u>





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