

SEND School Improvement Partnership Project London South Teaching School Alliance: Spa Special School

1. The context

Spa School is a successful secondary special school for pupils with a diagnosis of autism and is currently judged Outstanding by Ofsted. It has been asked to open a new primary school provision for pupils with autism. Several members of staff from the secondary will move into the new primary provision and the headteacher was keen for them to develop a partnership with a strong local primary school to enable the sharing of good practice.

Charles Dickens Primary is judged Outstanding by Ofsted. Its SEND levels are just above national averages, and it has increasing numbers of EHCP (above national average). Within this cohort there is an increasing number of pupils with a diagnosis of autism. The school has a unique model of meeting the needs of SEND pupils in a mainstream setting within current financial constraints. The model, based on effective designated provisions for SEND allows for individual classroom-based support for all SEND pupils for 50% of the day and a 'curriculum around the child' based on their specific needs, rather than their needs being secondary to covering objectives based on Year Groups and Key Stage expectations. These include specific areas such as key learning skills and attitudes, Emotional, Social and Behavioural difficulties, Communication skills, and Physical and Sensory development. Strength in practice is achieved through teaching in teams with quality first teaching modelled and scaffolded - teaching assistants work in teams alongside the SENCo to plan and teach to meet the needs of SEND pupils and weekly assessment and moderation is completed collectively. However, SENDCo, classteachers and support staff all recognise that they need to develop their knowledge and skills to better meet the learning and wellbeing needs of these pupils.

London South Teaching School Alliance is a strong alliance with 35 members and a reach across many more schools in London. It has a strong track record of leading successful projects and school-to-school support work, including programmes that meet the needs of both special and mainstream teachers, and programmes designed to improve the learning experience of SEND pupils.

2. Project overview

The project brokered relationships between strong primary subject leaders in English, Maths, Science and Humanities and four key teachers at Spa School, led by Sarah Seleznyov, Alliance Director. Teachers first met to explore the outcomes they wanted from the project at a half day face-to-face session. Charles Dickens teachers then spent half a day observing in Spa classrooms to develop a better understanding of how the school meets the needs of children with autism. Following this, Spa teachers spent half a day observing good practice in their focus subject in strong mainstream primary classrooms at Charles Dickens. There was then a follow up half day face-to-face session, at which teachers explored their learning and decided on next steps for the project. The SENDCo at Charles Dickens and the Deputy Head at Spa also engaged with this process throughout.

The project therefore intended to have an impact on:

- Special school teachers' knowledge and understanding of primary national curriculum

- Mainstream subject leaders' understanding of how schemes of work might need to be adapted to better meet the needs of pupils with autism in mainstream classrooms
- Pupil learning in the new Spa Primary School opening in Southwark

3. Phase One: the setup meeting

In this session, the teachers met their partners in the different school. They began by working in separate school groups to explore what they each wanted from the project and what they felt they could offer.

Spa teachers listed the following:

What we can offer	What we want
Autism specific practice & strategies	Building skills
Communication - range of devices	Higher achiever options e.g. sentences
Sensory needs	Resources, activities
Independence, regulation, ready for the future	Fresh ideas
Joint attention	Reception
Structure - lessons, individual class	Extending students
Resources	Concrete materials, schemes
Modelling	Phonics - early lit skill builder (English/maths)
	What and how they teach curriculum
	How they measure and assess achievement and success
	How they foster independence
	Methods in teaching, ideas, resources
	Interventions

Charles Dickens teachers listed the following:

What we can offer	What we want
Age expected levels within key stages	Strategies for learning
Vocab/ knowledge curriculum - sentence stacking, text units	Strategies for communication
Early years home learning	Strategies for routines
Primary curriculum progression/assessment	Strategies for behaviour regulation
Maths no problem scheme	Developing independence
Knowledge organisers	Could 1-1 staff visit the school?
Guided reading methods	Reducing language load

Teachers then agreed ways of working, discussing these in mixed school groups with their partners. The following list of dos and don'ts was agreed:

Do's	Don'ts
Ask questions	Over-prompt/ talk too much in special classrooms
Follow the teachers lead - verbal and non verbal	Intervene in special classrooms e.g. with challenging behaviours - leave the area
Do offer advice - share ideas of improvements	Be afraid to ask why something happened/ ask questions.
Work with individuals and groups when in the class not just the children with autism	Be too polite if you think you have expertise to offer
Organise to see a range of levels	Touch the students, let them approach you instead (special school)
Share resources/ ask for things	Be afraid to ask silly questions
Communicate with adults	
Send an email beforehand to explain what will happen & find out what people feel comfortable doing	
Take photos but not of students	

Each pair of teachers then agreed foci for the observation visits so they were both aware of what they would be looking for. These lists included looking at planning, teaching, differentiation, resources, interventions, home learning and subject specific skills eg ways of working in science, phonics teaching, guided reading. The partners then also had some time to share schemes of work. Finally the dates and times for observation visits were agreed.

4. Phase Two: the school visits

Between the two face-to-face sessions, each of the visits took place as scheduled. Teachers were able to observe in at least two classrooms, as well as to have some time for discussion with their partner teacher.

5. Phase Three: the follow up meeting

This final session allowed participants time to share the learning from their observations in school teams and to reflect on what questions remained or had arisen as a result of the visits. They also reviewed the outcomes of visits against what they had originally said they wanted in order to assess how successful the project had been and identify any additional learning, for which they had not planned. Finally, the group made plans for further communication across the two schools.

5.1 Spa School

Spa teachers had been interested to see the mainstream classroom management strategies and how these worked with only one adult for 30 pupils. One teacher said *'Mainstream teaching is MUCH harder – the needs of children in our classes are much more aligned, whereas in mainstream there is a huge spread'*. They also noted how challenging it is to work towards statutory tests whilst meeting the emotional needs of children.

The special teachers had enjoyed seeing what a neurotypical child should be able to do by a certain age, and felt it was easy to forget this when working in a special context; many of the Charles Dickens Year 6 pupils were way ahead of the 18 year old pupils in their school and so this was a good reminder of what pupils can do. They noticed that the language used by the pupils was of a very high level as was the subject knowledge levels pupils accessed. They also saw some good opportunities for paired talk and sharing of ideas. Pupils were able to collaborate in a very positive way, and knew from a symbol or action that that is what they needed to do. The special teachers found it interesting that Charles Dickens taught skills through knowledge whereas Spa focus on skills. The knowledge levels at Spa were vastly different for different children, meaning the Charles Dickens approach would be very challenging to manage.

There were several practical strategies the special teachers had liked. Firstly, the use of hand movements for pupils eg clicking for agreeing, touching your chin/head if you know the answer were seen as successful in helping teachers check whether all pupils were listening, reducing anxiety for those who don't know an answer and are worried about being asked, and reducing noise levels. Secondly, they liked the way resources were on hand for different subject areas and felt it would be good to provide opportunities for some of their pupils to access knowledge sources independently, especially for those who want to work by themselves. They had also liked seeing all the different lesson starters teachers had used eg quizzes, starter activities. The Charles Dickens focus on thinking out loud, with teachers verbalising their thinking, modelling how to approach a task to show pupils how to do it and getting pupils to think without giving the answer, was something that teachers felt could be used across all classes, even for those with complex needs. They also liked the use of purple pens for editing and self-assessment during lessons.

The idea of working walls was seen to be a helpful one, for example, a history timeline, different habitats for animals, but tricky to implement in a school where teachers and pupils move from class to class. Special teachers liked the way teachers could point to them to help pupils remember and reflect on their learning. They also liked the clear resourcing, with every class using the same resources. For example, the use of the same lesson structure and resources for maths was seen as strong. They felt that everyone in the special school used different resources and that there was no real consistency in the materials teachers used for planning in some subject areas. The Maths No Problem books were seen as particularly strong in terms of providing careful sequences of learning. Issues remaining for Spa teachers:

The teachers would have liked more time to observe in the mainstream school, for example:

- To look at schemes of work and resources, and where they come from;
- To observe SEN practice in order to understand what pupils' experiences have been when they arrive new to the special school and understand how to help them settle better;
- To look at books across year groups.

5.2 Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens teachers identified several practical strategies they wanted to start using as a result of seeing how effective they were at Spa. Firstly, they wanted to use personalised timetables for individual pupils so that the pupils with autism could see what would happen that day and to enable them to work at their own pace. They particularly liked a grid one Spa teacher had used, showing four activities for the lesson: 'first this, then this, then this'. They also liked the use of cards on Velcro to sequence a series of tasks, which sequenced instructions visually (checklist) for an activity so pupils could work through the sequence instead of being given a complex series of oral instruction. Teachers felt this would encourage independence as pupils wouldn't need to be reminded by an adult of the next steps. They felt they currently spent too much time reminding pupils 'do this next, then this, etc'.

Mainstream teachers also liked the use of In Print live in the lesson and Colourful Semantics. They also saw strong use of clicker to teach vocab and sentences, or online interactive word banks pupils could use to create their own writing and which the software would read out loud. Teachers stated that they had these resources already but did not use them consistently across the school. The teachers were generally impressed with the Spa pupils' general level of independence. Pupils knew where the resources were eg scissors, glue, and were expected to go and fetch these themselves. They felt that in mainstream classrooms, one-to-one adult support often stifles independence, in an attempt to be supportive. They recognised that mainstream staff would often select and give resources in order to maintain the pace of learning, whereas Spa teachers are not pressured to get through the curriculum so can give children time to deal with their emotional problems.

Mainstream teachers felt that they had historically over stimulated pupils with autism. The Spa environment was very natural and they wondered if they could at least make a corner of their classrooms like this or the teaching station for pupils with autism. They noted that Spa staff made an effort to preserve the concentration of pupils. Teaching Assistants were careful not to interrupt the teaching by talking to the pupil whilst the teacher was talking, and all staff did everything they could to support pupils' concentration and not break it during the lesson. There was no unnecessary interaction between adults during lessons for this reason and interventions were minimal when required, with short verbal interactions. They reflected on the need to consider these pupils' concentration as very fragile. They also liked the way a period of work was rewarded with a 'time out' which pupils self-managed using a timer eg doing an activity the pupil would enjoy.

The teachers were impressed by the consistent way Spa staff taught pupils eg to stop them seeking inappropriate physical contact. There was a shared understanding of phrases like 'hands down' to avoid unnecessary touching.

Teachers at Charles Dickens were keen to copy the use of actions to introduce new vocabulary, actions that helped pupils remember the meanings of the words. They liked the idea of generating these actions with the pupils so that they remembered these new words.

They also liked Spa's use of mood meters which pupils used to indicate their mood using their picture before they started the day. They had assumed autistic children might not be able to express their own mood but there is an expectation that they do it at Spa.

Four questions emerged in relation to managing the needs of pupils with autism in mainstream classrooms. They felt these questions would need further consideration and exploration with colleagues in the school:

- What is the best way to structure a ‘small steps’ curriculum for pupils with autism? How can teachers move these pupils on and help them to make progress, in a way that is manageable for the classteacher whilst also meeting the learning needs of 29 other children?
- How can teachers balance the needs and wishes of the main class to go off task and follow new lines of enquiry that emerge, when pupils with autism need a clear and pre-planned sequence of activities for the lesson/day from which the teacher does not deviate?
- What is the best way to manage a certain amount of disengagement in the mainstream classrooms where the pace of learning is so fast? Choosing to go slow or not join in is manageable in the special school because of the number of adults but tricky in mainstream settings.
- Should pupils with autism join in the carpet time when it is not immediately relevant to their learning? What are they getting out of it?

5.3 Analysis of learning goals against outcomes

Teachers coded items as **partially** or **fully met**. Codes for Spa School were as follows:

What we want
Building skills
Higher achiever options e.g. sentences
Resources, activities
Fresh ideas
Reception teaching
Extending students
Concrete materials, schemes
Phonics - early literacy skill building (English/maths)
What and how they teach curriculum
How they measure and assess achievement and success
How they foster independence
Methods in teaching, ideas, resources
Interventions

Seven of the items listed as learning needs for Spa teachers at project outset were fully met and three partially met. Spa teachers felt that if they had had more time to observe in Charles Dickens classrooms and work alongside their partner teachers, they could have fully met their learning needs.

Codes for Charles Dickens were as follows:

What we want
Strategies for learning
Strategies for communication
Strategies for routines
Strategies for behaviour regulation
Developing independence
Could 1-1 staff visit the school?
Reducing language load

Charles Dickens teachers noted that three of their learning needs were fully met and four partially. Teachers felt they had seen what they wanted to see but needed time to think about how best to implement it in a mainstream setting. They identified one key issue as deciding how to balance the good use of knowledge-language, and introducing strong and useful vocabulary, whilst reducing the language load of tasks for pupils with autism. Spa teachers admitted that they also struggle with this dilemma for their highest achievers.

5.4 Next steps

Plans had already been made for the Spa leader to observe in KS1 and Reception and Charles Dickens support staff would be visiting Spa to observe.

Teachers agreed they would like to arrange a session to look through books across a range of subjects and age groups. They would also like to compare approaches to IEPs, to see what progression looks like.

6. Post-project interviews

The interviews asked project participants about:

- how confident they were about their knowledge of either autism or the primary national curriculum at the start of the project;
- whether they were looking forward to the project and what they hoped to get out of it
- to what extent the project met their needs and what unexpected learning there was
- how this learning might inform their classroom teaching and what changes to practice they might already have made
- what they would like next from the project
- whether they felt other special and mainstream schools would benefit from such a partnership project

At the start of the project, some of the special teachers involved had a good or reasonable knowledge of mainstream primary practice, some having taught in primary schools although two not in the UK. They were looking forward to seeing early years practice and working with primary subject leaders. More broadly, they were keen to see other teachers' practice and be reminded of expectations in mainstream schools. For the Spa leader, this was an ideal opportunity to get into other teachers' classrooms: *'Teachers love seeing other teachers teach and it's difficult to manage*

this during the school day'. She also felt that although most teachers in special schools would have had some mainstream teaching experience, the move to a special school would have been a deliberate choice, but that it was important to *'keep a foot in the water and have an eye on contemporary mainstream practice'*.

At the start of the project, some of the mainstream teachers felt they had some knowledge of how best to meet the needs of pupils with autism, but identified that there were gaps in their knowledge *'I didn't know what I didn't know'* and that where they were aware of suitable strategies, they had not actually used them in practice, and definitely not consistently. One felt that the majority of her strategies for meeting these pupils' needs came from the Education Psychologist or from pupils' EHCPs. Some were keen to get involved, but some felt it wasn't relevant for them, especially for those who had no pupils with an autism diagnosis in their own class. Some felt the context of the special secondary school would mean any strategies seen wouldn't be suitable for pupils in the mainstream primary. Others were keen to learn and especially to see what strategies looked like when they were rolled out across a school.

The mainstream SENDCo felt he had a fairly good foundation of knowledge, but that there was more to know. He wanted to get more of an insight into what special schools were like. He felt that perhaps the mixed feelings about the project were because some staff felt they knew more than they actually did, and that the project had been an *'eye-opener'* for many teachers in the school. He had wanted teachers to understand how to implement appropriate strategies both in medium term plans, but also in day-to-day teaching.

For the special teachers, there were specific challenges in terms of borrowing good practice from mainstream colleagues, largely related to the very specific and individual needs of each of the pupils they taught. Some of the mainstream practices were interesting, but inaccessible to even the highest functioning pupils in Spa. Other practices were at the right learning level, but needed to be adapted significantly to reflect the age level of the pupils, for example early years practices in teaching phonics or reading. All agreed that it was not enough to simply see the practice, but that they would need time to adapt it: *'[Some of our pupils] are nearly adults – how do you reconcile that?'* The Spa leader agreed that there were complications around *'age and stage'* to be considered by the special staff when borrowing practice from mainstream schools and they would need to adopt a *'pick and mix'* approach, since some practices would be most helpful for one or two pupils, but not for the whole class.

Special teachers felt the subjects in which borrowing was simpler were maths and science. English teaching practices on the other hand were *'way off'*, and the teachers attributed this to the close links between autism and language and communication difficulties. There were some concrete examples of strategies that special teachers had already used since observing them at Charles Dickens. One teacher had already tried some of the approaches to teaching maths in her own class. One teacher was interested in Charles Dickens' *'knowledge organisers'* which shape the teaching of the curriculum. Another felt that some of the ideas she had seen in Year 2 could be used for high achieving pupils in KS3.

Spa teachers felt they would have liked to have more time, for some specific pieces of work, for example: looking at and comparing subject leader files with mainstream colleagues; observing the SEND provision; observing early writing techniques and phonics; looking through books. They felt two visits to each setting would have been better than one. They also felt this would have been more beneficial for the mainstream staff as they often felt they had not had time during the half day visit to fully explain their approaches.

By the end of the project, even mainstream teachers without a pupil with an autism diagnosis in their class felt that they had learnt a lot and were using some of these new strategies to benefit pupils. Some had had a diagnosis since the project had begun, others had simply found strategies they had seen in the special school worked more generally for pupils with behavioural or language difficulties, or even for those who arrived in the morning in an unsettled mood and not ready for learning.

All mainstream teachers felt it had been helpful to see the strategies being used, instead of being told about them: *'You have to see it, how it's very simple but effective. Just hearing about it is not as impactful'*. One mainstream teacher felt he had realised the importance of routine and structure for all pupils, not just those with autism, especially when applied consistently across the school. Others had gained ideas for individual pupils, for example the use of worksheets and activities to develop literacy skills for a Year 1 pupil with autism. One recognised the importance of repetition for SEND pupils: *'I was surprised by how repetitive the History curriculum was – how necessary repetition can be'*. All noted that the use of In Print and Colourful Semantics for all literacy teaching, the use of small steps curricula, communication strategies like gestures, and having simple learning goals, were making a big difference to learning: *'Every lesson is now accessible to E, his work is scaffolded for him'*. One noted that the new knowledge organisers the school was developing now took great account of the importance of dual coding. One teacher said that next year, the early years classrooms would try to create a calmer learning environment, and the SENDCo noted that even subjects such as French were now experimenting with strategies drawn from this project. All felt the whole school had benefited when the SENDCo used the knowledge gained from the project to lead an assembly on autism: what it is, and what it means for establishing successful relationships with pupils with autism. Mainstream teachers felt that they had not simply copied the strategies they had seen in the special school, but adapted them so that they were more suitable for the pupils in mainstream classes. This was because: *'it's not whole class for us, it's more complex'*.

The mainstream SENDCo said that the project had made him think differently about when to refer a pupil for a special school place, because he had seen how challenging these pupils' needs were, and that this made the school feel more empowered to keep pupils instead of making an automatic referral: *'it helped place on a continuum where our pupils are when compared to others with those needs... it changed perceptions of the children we have'*. It also made him aware of the need for a proper transition handover when a pupil is moved to a special setting, so that the mainstream school's high learning expectations are clearly communicated.

Special teachers also described it as *'interesting to see how difficult it must be to teach in [the mainstream] environment'*. They were keen to maintain the helping relationship they had established with the mainstream teachers in relation to pupils in mainstream classes with autism. One had already arranged for a Newly Qualified Teacher to visit Spa in September and there was a plan for TAs from Charles Dickens to observe in Spa classrooms, which mainstream teachers felt would be particularly important. Mainstream teachers also felt that setting up a shared Google folder to share resources in the future would be helpful.

7. Summary and conclusions

What does enable mutual learning is time, for face-to-face visits and for discussion and reflection. Simply hearing about good practice is not enough. Overall there was important learning for both schools engaged in this project, but there was not a clear handover of ideas and strategies. Due to

the very different nature of the special and mainstream context, and the very different levels of need of pupils in each, any strategies learnt had to be carefully tailored on both sides to meet the needs of pupils and teachers. The awareness the project generated was as much about the gaps between the two provisions as it was about the sharing of mutually beneficial strategies. Future projects across special and mainstream schools should consider this and not expect a smooth sharing of strategies and skills.

8. Future plans

The alliance is exploring two possible projects across mainstream and specials schools which member schools could access in the future and which would build on the good practice from this project. These include:

- A project with the English Folk Dance and Song Society enabling primary, secondary and special pupils to work together on folk music projects, culminating in a joint performance
- A project to enable special school staff to support the implementation of an assessment and planning tool for pupils working within the P Levels (pre-national curriculum)