



Learning Environments for Children with Autism October 2006 – September 2009

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The aim of this project is to develop an optimal learning environment for a predominantly Key Stage 4 (14–16 years) class group with severe learning disabilities and autistic spectrum disorders and the staff within their classroom so that the students can more effectively engage as learners.

To date, much of the relevant research around environmental design has focused on living environments (Beaver, 2003 and 2006; Humphreys, 2005; Plimley, 2004; Whitehurst, 2006) rather than on learning environments. An initial review of literature has indicated that there are three main avenues to focus on when developing optimal learning environments for children with profound ASD: the physical environment; the pedagogy and related resources utilised to teach lessons and structure classroom activities; and the teaching staff.

An action research method has been adopted. Modifications are being introduced serially into the learning environment, and their impacts on the young people's engagement are being assessed. Data collected includes photographs, participant and non-participant observation and student feedback.

During 2006–2007, the following modifications were trialled: linear to curvilinear furniture style; fluorescent to daylight lighting; reflective to non-reflective surfaces; increasing robustness of furniture; and pedagogical approaches supplementary to the TEACCH approach.

So far this academic year has seen the introduction of a new classroom group table and customised independent work stations. Interviews to gain Sunfield teachers' perspectives on the students' current learning environments will commence shortly. Exciting times lie ahead, with the eagerly anticipated introduction of chairs specially designed to actively prevent children from leaning back in March 08, and Intensive interaction will soon be introduced as an option during the students' choice time. It is anticipated that outcomes from this research will inform the planned school redevelopment.

References

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