



Queensmill School

# Research & Development Newsletter

## Welcome & Update from the R&D board

Welcome to the fourth edition of our R&D newsletter. The focus of this issue is Special Interests and Autism. For the next three months Queensmill is focusing attention on the subject of special interests (also described as circumscribed interests). Special interests are an important, yet understudied feature of autism. However, recent research is beginning to demonstrate the value (a long held view of parents and professionals) of special interests as a motivation for learning for pupils with autism (Turner-Brown et al. 2011, Koegal et al. 2010 & Lanour et al. 2012). Case study research does exist that provides informative examples of how professionals have used special interests in the classroom but as yet, there is very little research on a whole school approach to embedding special interests across the curriculum and linking up with the home environment.



To that end, we will be looking at how information on special interests can be gathered from professionals and parents, what categories the special interests of the pupils fall into, how these might change over time, how they are used by staff in the curriculum and how to measure their specific contribution to learning. Questionnaires have been sent to all parents and staff and observations will take place across the school. The findings of our investigation will be reported in the next newsletter.

Our investigation has been influenced by two main research papers. There is a summary of these papers on page 2

### Journal Club for Staff

The next journal club for Queensmill staff will take place on Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> May at 3.30pm in the training room at Queensmill School. The focus for this session will also be special interests and the impact of these on learning in school. Articles to read for the session will be posted in the staff room and sent out to all those on the journal club mailing list after the Easter holidays.

Please contact Caroline by email on [cbulmer.205@lgflmail.org](mailto:cbulmer.205@lgflmail.org) if you would like to be added to the journal club mailing list.

**Enjoy the newsletter & Happy Easter from the R&D board!**

### NEW WEBSITE PAGE

The new R&D page for the school website is up and running! This provides access to a range of information about Autism research both in and out of school. You can also access old newsletters, research summaries and journal club information at: <http://www.queensmillschool.com/R&D.html>

### 'Understanding Research' group for parents

The next 'Understanding Research' group for parents will be held at Queensmill School on Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> May at 2pm.

The focus of this session will be on research into special interests.

Please contact Caroline by email on [cbulmer.205@lgflmail.org](mailto:cbulmer.205@lgflmail.org)

or by calling the school if you would like to contribute to this session by talking to the group about the impact of your child's special interests on family life at home.

Information letters will be sent out after the Easter holidays.

## Autism Research Digest: Special Interests

### Phenomenology and measurement of circumscribed interests in autism spectrum disorders (Turner-Brown et al. 2011).

This study designed a questionnaire to be completed by parents to find out about the special interests of their children. The questionnaire was completed with 50 children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and 50 children without ASD. In particular the investigators wanted to compare if there were any differences in the number, type, frequency of engagement, intensity and effect on functioning of special interests between the two groups of children. The finding showed that the two groups did not differ on the number of special interests but that there were important differences in the type of special interests. The children with ASD were more interested in, for example, mechanical systems. Parents of children with ASD also reported higher levels of intensity, more resistance when children were interrupted and greater impact on daily life.



At Queensmill we have used this study as the basis of our questionnaire for parents. However, we have also asked staff to complete the questionnaire so we can compare any similarities and differences between responses. Over time, we would also like to repeat the exercise to see how special interests might change during childhood.

### Improving motivation for academics in children with autism (Koegal et al. 2010)

The researchers in this study were concerned with the issue that some children with autism can show very little interest in academic work and exhibit disruptive behaviour when presented with tasks. They wanted to investigate how special interests might be used including, providing choice, using them throughout a task and as a reinforcer in writing and maths activities. Four children identified with autism, from 4 to 7 years of age participated in the study. The children were observed over many occasions to gather detailed baseline data before the use of the special interests and during the use of the special interests in their writing and maths activities. The findings were very positive and showed that the use of special interests reduced the time it took for each pupil to begin a task, improved their rate of performance and interest and decreased disruptive behaviour.

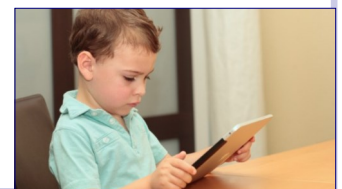


At Queensmill we will be using a modified approach to the observations and data collection used by the researchers in this study.

### Current Research and Development project at Queensmill

#### Captioning

A new technology, real-time captioning (a bit like having subtitles for a lesson), allows students to receive simplified text of what the teacher is saying onto a tablet or computer screen. Children will be able to scroll back through instructions, supporting them when material is missed due to working memory or attentional problems. Abstract content will be removed and complex information simplified. Students at the Queensmill unit at Fulham College Boys School are currently involved in trialling this technology within their inclusion sessions as part of a research project in association with Ai-Media and the University of Melbourne. The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of real-time captioning technology in classrooms with children who have ASD. In particular, the impact of the technology on classroom behaviour, social skills, inclusion, study skills, and academic progress (literacy and numeracy) is being investigated.



## Parent Voice

This issue, one of our parents provides insight into the impact of her son's special interests on life at home:

My son's name is Marcus, he's 8 years old and he is in red class. He has several areas of special interest, many of which can come and go. However, the one special interest which has remained a favourite is the tube. Tube trains, tube maps, tube announcements, tube stations. London underground has no idea the influence they have on our life!

The tube has been instrumental in the development of Marcus' speech, and understanding of schedules. It was a huge motivator in the early stages of 'first and then', and has helped give our weekends structure, as though he loves visual timetables at school, Marcus refuses to use them at home! If Marcus knows he is going to the tube in the afternoon, I am occasionally allowed to tidy up on a Saturday morning...

The downside is, one of us has to spend 8 hours 'riding the rails' with Marcus every weekend. You have to be fully vigilant at all times, he is desperate to get as near to moving trains as possible, which means there's no looking at your text messages! Also, as much as it encourages Marcus to communicate to get what he wants, it is a world into which he retreats, even when we are with him. But, the pluses outweigh the minuses; he has learned colours, numbers, and he usually like stations with a café!



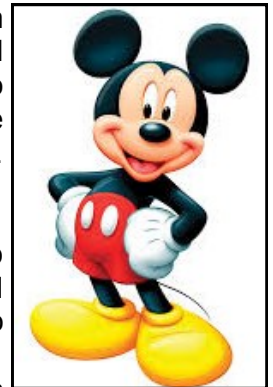
## New Research Project at Yale: Affinity Therapy

### Current Research and Development project at Queensmill

#### E-mentoring

This project aim is to produce a consultancy model for schools about effective methods of teaching for the use of information and computer technology's (ICT) with children with special educational needs (SEN). This will involve identifying and developing examples of effective teaching practice in using ICTs which facilitate learning for and aid teaching of pupils with SEN and developing the skills of practitioners as e-mentors. This research is being carried out with teachers from Queensmill School lead by researchers at the Institute of Education.

The development of affinity therapy stems from an approach by Ron and Cornelia Susskind called 'Disney Therapy', devised in response to their son, Owen, being diagnosed with severe autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at the age of 3. They embraced Owens love for Disney to develop a therapeutic approach, using his favourite Disney movies and characters to help him achieve a remarkable level of social and adaptive functioning. This approach has led to the development of a more general 'affinity therapy', which applies the same principles to other equally intense passions, such as Thomas the Tank Engine, for the core social communication deficits of ASD.



Researchers at Yale, MIT and Cambridge University have recently begun a new project to study the uses of 'affinity therapy'. Their study will use favourite movies and shows as the framework to encourage role-playing and social interaction in a group of 4 to 6 year olds. For a comparison, another group of children with autism will receive an equal amount of therapeutic attention using the more traditional Floortime approach, which follows the child's interests throughout the session. The ultimate goal of this study is to develop and refine behavioural treatments for children with ASD that improve social communication skills by using children's core affinities or interests to tap into the reward system that normally supports social motivation and social learning.