

Pan London Autism Schools Network-Research

issue 1

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editor: liz pellicano

Welcome to Issue One

Take a look at some of the projects the Pan London Autism Schools Network (PLASN) Research group have been working on inside...

The Pan London Autism Schools Network (PLASN) is a network of schools from across London that all specialise in autism. The PLASN-Research group is a subgroup of PLASN that provides links between the **schools** and autism **researchers** from a group of **universities**. This research-practice link enables us to identify priorities for research and provides the opportunity to work together with researchers on identified projects. By working in this way, we continue to provide **evidence-based practice** in our schools.

In this first ever issue of the PLASN-Research newsletter, research members describe some of the exciting and innovative projects that they are currently working on....

Ooey Gooney

Food Play Group: Supporting the challenges of eating and feeding

Challenges around food and eating affect a large proportion of children at Phoenix School but there is currently no provision to deal with these challenges. In conjunction with the school's Occupational Therapist (OT), the school trialed a pilot research project with children in early years to address their feeding difficulties. The project was called **Ooey Gooney**.

In the Summer holidays of 2015, prior to children starting at Phoenix, the OT and school's speech and language therapist

met children and families and carried out feeding assessments at home to gain an understanding and baseline of the child's feeding difficulties and parents' expectations.

In the first term of 2015, **food playgroups** were set up and run twice a week for 6 weeks by a teaching assistant and OT assistant. The starting point for these groups was to use food that the children already tolerated (e.g., dry foods, sweet foods) and gradually introduce them to a variety of foods in a general order – dry to crunchy, sweet, soft sweet, soft savoury, savoury vegetables, pasta – in a way that

is tailored to their needs. Parents are critically involved in the process.

All children made **excellent progress** with their feeding. That is, they are now tolerating touching, smelling and tasting a wider range of foods which they previously would not have engaged with. They are able to sit at the table for meal times with peers, and are able to accept a wider range of foods in their diet at home and school. The next step is to test the effectiveness of the behavioural feeding programme on a wider range of pupils!

Veronica Armson, Senior Deputy Headteacher, Phoenix School



Autism in Down Syndrome

Recent research has suggested that around 16% to 18% of children with **Down syndrome** (DS) also meet diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, the profiles of autism symptoms in this group may vary from those typically described in children with ASD.

Research conducted by PLASN-R member, Prof. Patricia Howlin, examined autism symptoms and emotional and behavioural problems in 183 children with DS who

screened positive for ASD on the **Social Communication Questionnaire** (SCQ) and compared their profiles with 189 children with clinical diagnoses of ASD attending PLASN schools. Groups were matched for age and approximate language level.

They found that that the children with DS who met screening criteria for ASD showed **similar profiles** of communication and repetitive behaviours to those of the PLASN autism sample. However, they tended to

have relatively milder difficulties in social reciprocity.

It is important that clinicians are aware of this somewhat **atypical profile** if children with DS who also have autism are to be correctly diagnosed and thus eligible for specialist intervention and education services.

Patricia Howlin, Georgina Warner, Erica Salomone, Joanna Moss, Tony Charman (King's College London)

Universal Access

Many of the pupils at Russet House have individual weekly **Occupational Therapy** (OT) or **Sensory Integration** sessions but staff wanted as many as possible to benefit from specialist advice.



Their Occupational Therapist, Jacqui Siebert, devised a plan of **Universal Access** which entailed her going into classes, observing all the pupils taking part in their daily activities, and recommending OT-based strategies and

interventions which might help them to be calmer, more focused and perform better. She taught class staff to use the prescribed strategies and equipment with individual children and then returned to observe the effects several months later. A bespoke intervention measure was used to rate the pupils' time on task, compliance levels and arousal/calmness levels before and after intervention.

Early indications suggest that most **children improved** in all three aspects after Universal Access intervention, though further work continues. So far, OT access has been increased from 57% to 84% of pupils through this intervention.

Dr Rachel Walker, Research Coordinator, Russet House School

Playfully Empowering Autistic Children...with robots!



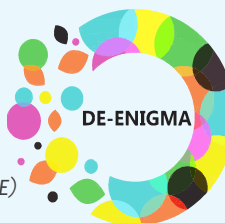
Liz Pellicano and her team at the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE) are part of a large European-funded Horizon 2020 project, **DE-ENIGMA**, which aims to create and evaluate the effectiveness of a new-and-improved human-like robot, developed to support autistic children in their learning.

Robots are increasingly being used in all parts of our lives – workplaces, schools, care homes. This project is designed to help support

autistic children's emotional understanding, as robots are perceived to be more predictable, less complicated, and potentially less threatening than humans.

The idea is to test whether robots could be a useful tool to help enhance autistic children's social and emotional skills by developing a robot that can dynamically adapt to an autistic child's specific behaviours, just like a human might. CRAE are working with several schools in London, including **Queensmill School**, to see if this might be the case.

Liz Pellicano, Teresa Tavassoli and Alyssa Alcorn (CRAE, UCL IOE)



Evaluation of the 5P Approach to Behaviour

The 5P Approach, developed by Linda Miller, an Educational Psychologist, offers a practical framework for the analysis and management of behaviour, which can be used by professionals, parents and organisations.

At **Hatton School**, we have been using the 5P Approach for several years across all classes to help us both analyse and develop appropriate strategies to manage identified behaviour and to look at the whole school and class environment and how this is used to enable our pupils to maintain a calm emotional mind set.

The 5P Approach is carried out with the whole team working with an individual child, which enables all staff members, and parents, where possible, to work together to provide consistency. This is carried out through the use of a '**Working with Me Pack**', which is accessible to everyone. Through this process, learning support staff feel empowered and teachers and parents feel supported. Pupils are also supported in learning to manage their own behaviour through the use of visuals.

Catherine Carroll, a PLASN-R member from UCL Institute of Education, conducted a research project to evaluate, on a small scale, the impact of the 5P Approach. Her findings indicated that "the traffic light system provides a **good visual hook** for pupils with autism", as well as creates a common language around behaviour for pupils, staff and parents.

Beverley Power, Senior Deputy Headteacher, Hatton School and Special Needs Centre

Autism and Initial Teacher Training

In a preliminary study, Liz Pellicano and colleagues at CRAE recently put together a **survey** for the Primary and Secondary **PGCE students** at UCL Institute of Education to understand their experience of working with autistic students.

Of the **121 trainee teachers** that responded, strikingly, more than half had received no training on autism. Overall, their knowledge

of autism was satisfactory and they were only somewhat confident about their ability to teach and manage their autistic students. Interestingly, the more confident they were about working with autism, the more positive they were about including autistic children in their classrooms.

These findings suggest there is still some work to be done to improve ITT students'

knowledge of, and confidence in, working with autism. **Mandatory training**, as campaigned for by the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism, will certainly help in this regard but research will need to determine what is the 'right' training.

Liz Pellicano, Anna Remington, Laura Crane and Lorcan Kenny (CRAE, UCL IOE)

Newsflash!

One of our wonderful headteachers retired this past year: Sue Blows from Hatton School. We are hugely grateful for all her support to PLASN and PLASN-R over the years and for the amazing work she has done for autism education more broadly. We will miss her greatly and wish her all the very best in the years to come.

Current PLASN-R School Members



Hatton School
North London



Eagle House School
North London



Sybil Elgar School
Middlesex



Durants School
North London



Phoenix School
East London



Prior's Court
Berkshire



Spa School
South London



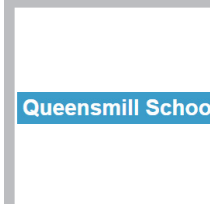
TreeHouse School
North London



Springhallow School
West London



Russet House School
North London



Queensmill School
West London



Manor School
North London

Current PLASN-R Research Members

Dr Catherine Carroll

Catherine is a Senior Research Associate in Education & Psychology, specialising in inclusive education, at UCL Institute of Education.



Prof Richard Hastings

Richard is Professor of Psychology and Education and Cerebra Chair of Family Research in CEDAR at the University of Warwick.



Prof Patricia Howlin

Patricia is Professor of Clinical Child Psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry, in autism and other developmental conditions.



Prof Elizabeth Pellicano

Liz is a Developmental Cognitive Scientist and Educational Psychologist. She is Director of the Centre for Research in Autism & Education.



Dr Vicky Slonims

Vicky is a Senior Consultant Speech and Language Therapist at the Newcomen Centre & Honorary Senior Lecturer at King's College.



Dr Kerstin Wittmeyer

Kerstin has been appointed as a Lecturer and Researcher in the School for Education at Birmingham, specialising in autism.

