

Pan London Autism Schools Network-Research

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editor: melissa bovis



“It should not be beyond education authorities, teachers and school staff to create greater opportunities for autistic children...”

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 **schools** and autism **researchers** (from a range of **universities**). This research-practice link enables us to identify topics for research that have a **positive** impact on the educational experiences of autistic children and young people. By working collaboratively, we ensure that we provide **evidence-based practice** in our schools.

In this **second** issue of the PLASN-Research newsletter, research members describe the latest findings from some of the studies they are currently working on within their schools....

Autism practice in Bangladesh

Veronica Armson and colleagues from Phoenix were able to visit **Bangladesh** in January this year, on a jointly funded project with APASEN charity in Tower Hamlets, to work with four special schools in **Sylhet**, Northern Bangladesh, setting up a school

for autistic children and young people. In addition, they travelled to the capital, **Dhaka**, to support the development of the National Academy for Autism and Neuro Developmental Disability.

During the 12 day tour, the Phoenix team established excellent links with the **British Council**, ran training over two days for 85 teachers and parents, worked within the schools to support teachers and implemented simple structures that are (hopefully!) still in practice today. Additionally, they worked alongside Head Teachers, exploring curriculums and

management of work areas in their schools. When visiting mainstream schools, **inclusion** was discussed and training offered to teachers regarding challenging behaviours.

The Phoenix team met with the **Minister of Education** when in Dhaka to discuss the building of the National Academy, establishing links with Phoenix, in the hope to develop a provision based on Phoenix school's practice. A seven-day training package has been put together for teachers to come and visit Phoenix from Bangladesh and work alongside teachers in school. The training is specifically around the development of their new Academy provision, which includes residential care.

Veronica Armson, Phoenix School



Getting Young Autistic People Back into School

New research highlights damaging impact of exclusion on young autistic people.

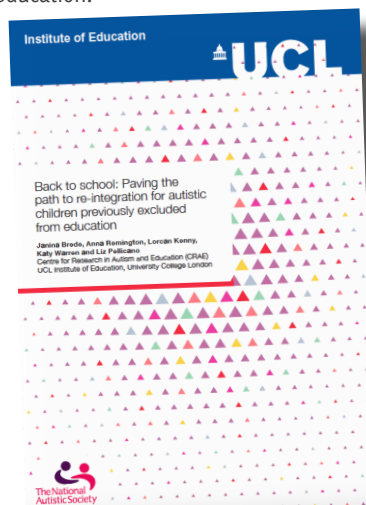
A new report from the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE) argues that educational authorities and school staff should do more to prevent exclusions by improving their understanding of autism and providing tailored support.

Over a six-month period, CRAE researchers worked with nine young people aged 10-18 years. The young people had been **excluded** from education and re-integrated into school life within the Inclusive Learning Hub at the National Autistic Society's Robert Ogden School.

The report found that the young people reported often harrowing accounts of their previous educational placements, which meant that they missed out on school. This had serious consequences for their mental and emotional **wellbeing**.

[mainstream school] was a very depressing time for me because it was just, I was ill, as in the way of, not as in coughing all the time, just in who I was. I wasn't right. **Student**

In contrast, the young people and their families greatly appreciated the **Hub** because its dedicated staff understood and accepted the students' individual needs and challenges. This helped to rebuild their confidence and encourage them to stay in education.



Despite the support the young people received from the Hub, the report found that they needed to be better prepared for the realities of life after leaving school. One way of doing this would be to provide a range of **work experience** opportunities.

“The parents and young people in our study simply weren't getting the right help in their previous schools, and their mental and emotional wellbeing had suffered because of it. It should not get to this point.

“It should not be beyond education authorities, teachers and school staff to create greater opportunities for autistic children well before they reach specialist provision like the Hub. That kind of education would be attentive to the needs of individual children and would be accepting of their differences. It would foster relationships between young people and their parents, and work with other agencies, including health and social care, to promote the wellbeing of autistic students.

“This is not just good practice in autism education, but good practice in education more broadly

Professor **Liz Pellicano**, Lead Researcher

Liz Pellicano, Director of the Centre of Research Autism and Education (CRAE)

Sleep wise

Rates of sleep disturbance among autistic children are known to be higher than in the typical population. Studies have reported that **sleep disturbance** has been linked to reduced daytime functioning, increase in challenging behaviours and increase in family stress levels. Reports from parents at Queensmill School



demonstrated that this was one major area of concern for our parents and pupils. The school trialled the **Sleepwise** programme (O'Connell 2005), for ten pupils (between the ages of 3-8 years old) and their families at Queensmill School to see whether it could help improve their sleep habits. The programme was delivered by Queensmill staff who were well known to the pupils and families.

The programme included two three-hour **workshops** (one week apart) exploring the issues around sleep and what parents could do to help their children. Parents completed a **diary** of their child's sleep habits in between the two training sessions and staff met with families in their home to complete a comprehensive sleep **assessment**. Parents were asked to undertake the **actions** agreed in their individualised sleep programme over the course of three months.

Overall areas of improvement included:

- Falling asleep within 20 mins of going to bed
- Falling asleep in a parent/sibling's bed
- Fear of sleeping alone and away from home
- Awake more than once in the night

The sleep diary was really good, as it allowed me to reflect back on previous days and the week; it was useful to see it all written down rather than just remembering.

Parent

Caroline Bulmer and Charlotte Spencer,
Queensmill School

I would encourage all parents to take part. Queensmill are like an extended family who really understand your child's individual needs. The sleep plans and home visits were most useful in providing strategies and support in the areas of sleep you need help with.

Parent

Lesson Study

Teachers at Russet House have been developing their outstanding classroom practice by using the innovative UCL Institute of Education model of **Lesson Study**. Originating in Japan, Lesson Study encourages teachers to work collaboratively to research and study the impact of specific **teaching strategies** on learning.

At Russet House, we have chosen to focus on areas of the **curriculum** that can be tricky for autistic children to master, such as, scientific enquiry, problem solving skills and the creative arts. The Lesson Study process involves teachers researching ideas on how to teach chosen topics effectively and then plan lessons together, **incorporating ideas** from the **research findings**. The teachers in the research group then observe each other's lessons and watch how certain children respond to the learning opportunities they are given.

Following each study lesson, the research group meets to discuss the **impact** of the strategies on the learning of the focus children. This enables them to identify successful strategies and add to the **research knowledge** which, in turn, informs the next cycle of Lesson Study.

This has been a very thought-provoking and inspiring process for our teachers, as they have seen children making fantastic progress in subjects they have previously struggled with. If you would like to know more about our Lesson Study projects, our findings and how we have **adapted** the Lesson Study model to suit our specialist setting, please email Rachel Walker: assistanthead@russethouse.enfield.sch.uk.



Rachel Walker, Russett House School

Performing Arts

Performing arts is a core part of education for pupils at Sybil Elgar School. In partnership with the National Autistic Society and Research Autism and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Daisy Loyd evaluated outcomes and teaching approaches for ten pupils involved in performing arts work over one year.

Her research found that performing arts work enabled pupils to **interact**, **communicate** and **think flexibly** and illustrated both how these areas developed over time and contrasted across contexts. It also uncovered teaching

approaches that facilitate interaction, communication and flexible thinking and identified particular opportunities

presented by the **performing arts**. Pupils were involved in the research throughout and gaining their consent and views formed a central part of the research process.



Daisy Loyd, Sybil Elgar School

Forest School

Autistic, non-verbal students between the ages of 7-10 years old from College Park School are taking part in a Forest School study over two six-week periods in Paddington Rec Forest School grounds.

The research will incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate differences between the impact of indoor and outdoor learning environments on autistic pupils in two key areas: engagement and emotional regulation.



Tanya Zeljic, College Park School

Who's involved..?

Current PLASN-R School Members



College Park School
Central London



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



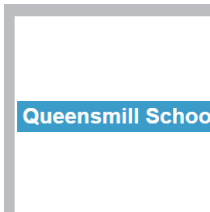
TreeHouse School
North London



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.



Dr Laura Crane

Laura is a Senior Teaching and Engagement Fellow conducting research at the Centre for Research in Autism and Education.



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 is a Lecturer and Researcher in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, specialising in autism.

