

# PLASN-R



Pan London Autism Schools Network Research



The Pan London Autism Schools Network - Research group (PLASN-R) links research and practice. Comprising staff from autism special schools alongside a team of academic researchers, we are dedicated to being at the forefront of thinking and practice in the field of autism education. We create transformative partnerships leading to tangible benefits to the lives of autistic children and young people in special schools. Focused on change at a local level, our work can influence national and international agendas.

## “IT’S ABOUT SHARING A MOMENT”

RACHEL WALKER, HEAD OF THE ENFIELD ADVISORY SERVICE FOR AUTISM, WRITES ABOUT HER DOCTORAL RESEARCH ON PARENT EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING THEIR AUTISTIC CHILDREN TO READ.

When I was about to start my doctoral thesis, the special school where I worked was seeking ways to enhance the teaching of reading and to engage parents in supporting this by reading with their children at home. It soon became apparent that teachers in the school knew very little about the parents’ experiences of trying to read with their children and, similarly, parents knew little about how teachers taught reading skills, particularly to children who had significant learning difficulties, were non-speaking, and did not readily engage with activities that were not of their choosing. This was an ideal area for my doctoral research and I designed a project to:

- a) explore parent experiences of home reading activities with their autistic children,
- b) learn more about ways teachers engage autistic children with learning difficulties and minimal verbal language to teach them reading skills,
- c) enable shared understanding and exchange of strategies between parents and teachers so that they could work together in teaching children to read.

"It's about sharing a moment"

Rachel Walker

"Maximising communication for all"

Jo Saul

"The benefit is for our students"

Katie Denton & Pengie Yang

"Autism comes in all shapes and sizes"

Lizzy, The Girls Group

Phoenix specialist classroom and DFN Project Search internships

The first part of the project comprised a parent questionnaire (sent to all parents at the school with 69 returns) and parent focus groups (four groups of 4-5 parents in each), to share their views about reading with their children, their experiences of helping their children learn to read, the strategies they used and challenges they encountered. Reading behaviours that the children demonstrated most often at home were found to be: showing an interest in specific books; looking at favoured reading material on their own; trying to join in with well-known stories/rhymes and looking at digital texts. The least common behaviours were reported to be: watching others read; looking at a book with someone else and reading aloud to someone. Parents spoke about their own areas of confidence and challenge in reading with their autistic children:

Parents were confident about:	Parents were not confident about:	Parents were unsure about:
Teaching book handling skills (holding the book the right way up, page turning etc.)	How to teach their children (what were the 'right' strategies to use?)	Interpreting their children's reading behaviours
Encouraging engagement by buying books on children's interests	Using phonics to help decode unfamiliar words	Whether children were engaged when they read to them
The importance of reading with their children	Using illustrations to help decode unfamiliar words	Whether children understood what they were reading



Through the project, I found that building trusting relationships between teachers and parents (in my case focused on reading) had many benefits: they both got to know the children better; how they could adapt practice and what worked best for the children in different contexts; and they had ways to problem-solve together when things were tricky.

With the continued support and encouragement of my supervisors, Professor Liz Pellicano and Dr Jon Swain, one part of my doctoral thesis work has now been published in a peer-reviewed journal. The article, "It's about sharing a moment", focuses on the views and experiences of parents reading with their children at home.

You can read Rachel's article by following this link  
<https://bit.ly/46CoZQG>  
 or qr code:



## PHOENIX WORK INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME AND APPRENTICESHIPS.



DFN Project SEARCH is a full-time transition-to-work programme for young people aged 17-24 with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP). This is a team effort among Queen Mary University of London (the employer), Phoenix School and College (the educators), and Kaleidoscope Sabre Associates (employment support services). The program immerses interns from the school in a real workplace. It blends together job skill learning, career discovery, and practical training by giving participants the chance to try out different jobs at the host business. Each young person participates in three work rotations within a host business, each lasting three months long. Interns also complete an Employability Course to learn valuable transferable skills they can then apply within the workplace.

DFN Project SEARCH QMUL is currently coming to the end of its 4th year. It places 7 or 8 interns every year in departments across Queen Mary University in roles including portering, hospitality, admin assistants and IT technicians. Over 85% of interns go on to be employed by companies such as Greggs, Home Bargains and Leon café. On top of this, Phoenix School has shown their support in return to our interns by offering apprenticeships to two of our graduates to work in their school kitchen. Both are on course to complete their apprenticeship and one has already been offered a full-time position.



## PROJECT ISLAND: “MAXIMISING COMMUNICATION FOR ALL”

Jo Saul, University College London

"Project Island" is a Royal Society-funded project led by Jo Saul. The project aims to delve deeper into our understanding of minimally verbal and non-speaking individuals within the autistic community, such as those we serve within the PLASN-R network. The central pillar of Jo's research is to explore individual differences in unspoken language, with an emphasis on understanding why some individuals remain minimally verbal and how we can bolster their support. While spoken language is the primary form of communication being studied in this project, it sits as just one of many overlapping ways that people communicate.

The main question we are trying to answer is: what can help us predict someone's spoken language skills? Some ideas we have right now are that paying attention to the same thing at the same time as someone else (we call this "joint attention") and wanting to interact socially might be important. We are also looking into the idea that difficulty with moving and planning might be a roadblock when it comes to speaking. This is especially relevant for some autistic people, as they often have a higher chance of having apraxia. Apraxia is when you want to make the movements for speaking, but the actual movements you make do not always match up.

This will be a study over 3 years with 150 children aged 4-12. Data collection will include measuring skills related to language/communication abilities and wellbeing, as well as identifying signs of apraxia; notably, an autism diagnosis is not a requirement. It is hoped that this work will contribute significantly to the understanding of the mechanisms of speech and alternative communication for minimally verbal and non-speaking individuals within the autistic community.

# THE BENEFITS OF “IN- SCHOOL” RESEARCH

Jennifer Davis, Research  
Coordinator, Springhallow School  
Pengjie Yang, doctoral researcher,  
UCL

"A team at UCL has been studying how the interaction between vision and movement (known as VMI) affects reading and writing skills in autistic children aged 7 to 11. VMI is the skill of coordinating what you see and how you move. It's what allows us to do things like reach for a doorknob, bounce a basketball, or copy a teacher's movements. It's been found that autistic children often show unique patterns in how they plan and coordinate their movements, as well as how they learn by watching and imitating others. This is thought to be, in part, because of the different ways their brains process VMI information. What isn't clear yet is whether VMI differences in autistic children also impact their school performance in areas like reading and writing skills.

This project will use standard tests to evaluate VMI and literacy skills, including things like word reading, understanding what is read, and handwriting. To get a detailed view of how children use VMI, the team will use a digital drawing tablet to do what is called a kinematic analysis of exactly how pupils move when performing VMI tasks.

Several schools in London have been partnered with the project, including Springhallow School, The Grove, Drumbeat, Russet House, the Village and Phoenix.

“It's really amazing to see the growing collaboration with PLASN-R”

Spencer Hayes, UCL

“Every day I learn something new from school, I am so grateful”

Pengjie Yang, doctoral researcher, UCL

“Thank you for collaboration and thank you for your support”

Tuğçe Çetiner, doctoral researcher, UCL

“Being part of the research is being part of the next steps

... the benefit is for our students and young people”

Katie Denton, Head of School, Drumbeat Downham

## RESEARCH IN SPRINGHALLOW SCHOOL

Springhallow School always seeks to promote best practices in teaching our students (all of whom have an autism spectrum diagnosis). Our school has been a member of PLASN-R for several years and we have engaged with research projects by filling in surveys and participating in discussion forums. Outcomes of research do not usually filter back to us directly and - as a result of workload - we have never consciously implemented such research. That is, until now...

A researcher from UCL, Pengjie Yang, has been embedded in Springhallow School, supported by Jennifer Davis, the school Research Coordinator. Working alongside our staff teams and supporting daily activities enabled Pengjie to build positive relationships with staff and students. Attending staff meetings and training, she added her knowledge to our collective reflections. Working within the school community has provided an open communication channel to parents, allowing her to explain what is being researched and how any interventions we devise will be implemented.

Springhallow Autism Conference enabled the delivery of information about this study - and other research at UCL - to all who work alongside us. Through building these professional and community relationships, we were able to co-construct the focus of questionnaires to find out the questions that we as a school community need answers to. The positive impact of the researcher being embedded in school outweighs any time spent on answering surveys. The beneficial effect on school culture encourages the whole school community to see themselves as researchers, using evidence to seek better methods to overcome barriers to learning and communication for our students.

As a school, we are convinced that this research will not sit abandoned on a dusty shelf in a library thanks to the active engagement of students, school professionals, and parents with the whole process.

# EVERYTHING STARTS WITH A DOT



Ginny D'Odorico, Headteacher at The Windmill School  
(formerly of Oak Lodge School)

"The Girls Group and Ginny D'Odorico, Headteacher at The Windmill School (formerly of Oak Lodge School) and PhD researcher at CRAE, has had the pleasure of collaborating with author Vicky Martin and her amazing team at Community Focus over the past three years.

Girls Group was initially set up at Oak Lodge School in Barnet to foster positive identity and extend social networks for a small group of autistic girls who were keen to share their experiences of social anxiety, low mood and limited social opportunities to engage with their strengths and interests. The school also aimed to provide an environment that fostered the possibility of forming friendship groups, especially for girls who often found themselves predominantly in class groups where boys were in the majority.

Vicky Martin was introduced to the school by Lili Barcroft, the Arts Coordinator from Community Focus, and Sophie Critchlow, the Project Manager. Vicky had been making a positive impact at Oak Lodge with our girls, since introducing them to her transformative text 'M is for Autism'. A grant from the John Lyons Charity paved the way for further work with Vicky, developing an 'inclusive' creative arts, writing and drama project that has given a small group of autistic girls a therapeutic space to 'write'.

As the girls shared their admiration for autism heroes like M and Rosie King, Vicky enthusiastically began to document their individual journeys. Their enthusiasm was contagious, sparking a surge in their creative writing.

"We wanted to make this book unique...  
autism comes in all shapes and sizes just  
like Kadinsky"



Vicky's talent for storytelling, her understanding of the challenges faced by autistic girls, and her unique approach, all culminated in the creation of a story featuring a character named 'Perry-Rose'. The story, aptly titled 'Everything Starts with a Dot', embodies the unique characteristics of each girl. The narrative follows Perry-Rose as she embarks on a quest to find confidence through her passion for Art.

Vicky's work underscores the need to uphold a positive autistic identity and to champion participatory work with autistic individuals, reshaping the girls' experiences through their personal narratives.

UCL's Centre for Autism Research and Education (CRAE), was delighted to host the official launch of the book.

# PHOENIX PARTNERSHIP PILOT PROJECT: SPECIALIST CLASSROOMS

## PLASN-R



Queensmill School



Phoenix School has been concerned about the number of children currently on the waiting list and has not been able to take all the children who really do need a place in the school. Over the last few years, the borough (Tower Hamlets) has had to find places for these children out of the borough and the cost has been extremely high. Phoenix has launched a proposal to enable mainstream schools to work in partnership with Phoenix and set up Specialist Classrooms to ensure the children have an effective curriculum in line with what they would otherwise get at Phoenix.

Owing to demand, two groups of schools will be involved in the project. Group A consists of twelve schools, each led by an Outreach teacher and supporting "buddy" teachers, and they will participate in the research project. Group B includes another set of twelve schools with existing programs. These schools will also be led by an Outreach teacher but will not be part of the research study. Importantly, both groups will have equal access to training resources. The Borough is supporting this initiative by providing funds, ensuring each school can employ a dedicated teacher and classroom support assistants.

Phoenix School is committed to regularly hosting resource evenings and fostering a community of schools to collectively improve practices aligned with the Phoenix Curriculum and assessment. They aim to promote this inclusive practice across both primary and secondary schools within the Borough. The hope is that the research will demonstrate the benefits of collaboration with special schools, while also enabling students who cannot secure a specialist placement to stay in their current schools and still receive effective education that helps them progress as they would at Phoenix.

The school is very excited about this initiative and anticipates the improvement in provision across Tower Hamlets with quality support and resources to ensure there is great practice for all.