

Yvonne Evans

Course – Post-experience certificate for individuals working with Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

Bio-note

Yvonne Evans has been working as a support teacher in a secondary mainstream school since 2001. During this time her role has involved periods of 1:1 support for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders, small group tuition in numeracy and literacy and 'circle time' provision. She has a son who has an autistic spectrum disorder.

Rationale

Over recent years mainstream schools have seen an increase in the number of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). Physical integration, however, does not mean that the complex needs of these pupils are being adequately met. A research study carried out by the National Autistic Society – 'Inclusion and autism: is it working?'¹ – identified that very few schools have staff that are sufficiently trained and able to provide the right level of support. A number of recommendations were made from the study e.g. that autism awareness should be a mandatory part of continuing professional development in education and the need to develop autism specific expertise.

My rationale for undertaking the activity was two-fold. Primarily, I wanted to increase my knowledge and understanding of ASD. I was conscious that whilst my personal experience as a parent of a child with ASD stood me in good stead, it did not provide me with the full complement of skills necessary to support pupils on the spectrum. Furthermore, I had very recently planned and implemented a social skills programme for a small group of pupils with ASD within the school and I felt that the activity would help me to further develop the programme. It was this identified need that prompted me to search for a course that would fulfil my objectives and suit my work commitments.

Description of the activity

The one-year, distance learning, web-based course offered by the University of Birmingham is a practice-based programme of study. It has been designed to provide students with a broad understanding of ASD, introduces the latest research and gives an insight into current practice. Learning is assessed through the completion of essays, case studies and synopses. Tutorials are undertaken on-line and regular 'chat' sessions with fellow students and tutors allow for the sharing of information and experiences.

My studies helped me to introduce both individual and whole school teaching strategies to support pupils:

- With the help of learning support assistants, I have begun to collate a 'social stories' resource to help address one of the key difficulties of ASD.
- I have been able to refine the social skills programme by introducing new units of work such as emotional literacy and conflict resolution skills.
- From the advice of my tutors, other professionals in the field of ASD and work colleagues, I have compiled a disability awareness lesson for use during personal and social education periods for key stage three pupils.

Evaluation and reflection

Whilst these strategies are recent developments and their evaluation will be on going, some success has already been evident with the use of social stories.

Using what I have learnt and disseminating that knowledge to other members of staff will help towards reinforcing the school's inclusion policy in that strategies already in place to help secure the inclusion of pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties will be widened to include pupils who have the complex needs that are specific to autism.

Moreover, the activity has helped me to reflect on and evaluate my work practice, has renewed my focus and has directed me to the support systems that need to be in place for the benefit of pupils with ASD.

¹ Barnard, J. Prior, A. & Potter, D. (2000) Inclusion and autism: is it working?, National Autistic Society: London