

# Pupil engagement of children and young people with Autism

## School/ context

Springhallow School is an LA maintained special school in the London Borough of Ealing for children and young people with Autism between the ages of 4-19.

## Key points: (summary of the project)

Special schools joined the primary school learning clusters in September 2023, so the lead reviewer and headteacher of Springhallow decided to link the Peer Enquiry Review process to the Spirals of Enquiry 'scanning' phase. This presented with a few challenges, as the scan involves asking a series of questions. We decided used the 'Leuven Scales' with the primary department and one class in the secondary department to observe pupils' well-being and engagement.

The scanning stage of Spirals of Enquiry was used with the rest of secondary department to ask pupils about their recent lessons and their experiences at school.

## Purpose

The school has many research partners and works hard to create a research culture with the wider staff team. This process has been shared recently with Ealing schools in a Research Network meeting. We adapted the existing Peer Enquiry Review materials used in the mainstream to make the process meaningful for our pupils and staff, whilst also engaging mainstream primary headteachers in the process.

## What were your reasons for doing this work?

As part of an ELP Peer Enquiry Review, it was agreed that the Spirals of Enquiry scanning stage would be a useful tool for measuring engagement following a focused learning walk in each class. It would also be the first-time mainstream heads had carried out a Peer Enquiry Review in a Special School, so an opportunity for collaboration and learning

## Who were you targeting?

Pre-verbal pupils in the primary department and pupils with verbal ability in the Secondary department.

To ensure that all pupils experience was captured, including those in the secondary department who are social and language partners (pre-verbal), the Leuven Scale was used to focus on pupil well-being and engagement.

## What were your success criteria?

How well pupils are engaged in their learning and how meaningful curriculum experiences are from their perspective.

## What did you do?

Pairs of peer reviewers visited 7 primary classes and 5 secondary classes for 15 minutes. The Leuven scale was used to focus on the experience of one pupil per researcher in the class, and their level of engagement was measured at each task change. Within the secondary classes (except one where the Leuven Scale was also used), pairs of pupils were interviewed following the 15-minute observation using question prompts about why their learning was important and how they are doing with their learning. A small group from the Student Council were also interviewed.

## What has been the impact on pupils?

Through the use of the Leuven Scale, the engagement and well-being of the pupils was highest when motivating resources linked to pupils' interests were infused within an activity, indicating that the focus of the lessons was right.

Frequent task changes and allowance for movement breaks/regulation activities had a positive impact on maintaining their long-term engagement in completing a series of set tasks. Incidents of dysregulation had a minimal impact on others and pupils were equipped with the skills then needed to support their regulation.

For the pupils who were able to express their views and took part in the scanning stage, many were able to articulate what they were learning and why it was important. They spoke positively about their experiences within the Secondary department. Pupil views relating to their learning were best captured straight after the session. The members of the school council who were interviewed struggled to remain on topic about a recent learning experience, however they were able to speak more widely about their experiences at school.

## What has been the impact on teaching/ leadership?

The school leaders that took part in this research project spoke highly about the experiences they had in the lessons that were visited, particularly regarding positive interpersonal relationships between staff and pupils.

Through the use of adapted questioning, school leaders were able to understand what is important for the individuals interviewed and could witness how positively they spoke about their experiences at school.

All pupil feedback (through observational data collection or interviews) is useful to help develop the school's curriculum experiences and strategies further to ensure that what is being taught, and how the pupils are being supported, is appropriate and relevant to them as individuals and as a wider cohort.

Using the Leuven Scales enabled reviewers to focus on the experience of an individual within a lesson. It was really insightful to see how levels of engagement fluctuated and were supported through use of visual support and positive praise. This demonstrated that the staff at Springhallow know the individuals exceptionally well. One pupil experienced a wide range of emotions within one 15-minute period, however she was successfully supported to reengage with the tasks and achieved a successful outcome.

This research project with ELP has enabled us to open our doors to colleagues from mainstream and support their understanding of teaching and learning in a special school.

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