

Alohim considers how he is going to cut up the cake



Including children with high-level needs in the mainstream classroom

The NAS Autism Professionals Award for Inspirational Education in a primary school went to a multicultural east London school. **Alison Thomas** paid them a visit to find out why

It's a fine May morning at Tollgate Primary School in Newham and Year 6 are revising some maths with their teacher Michael Patient in the run-up to SATs.

Today they are looking at fractions; more specifically, simplifying fractions and finding equivalent fractions. There are two children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the room, each with one-to-one support. Alohim is almost non-verbal while Brian, although higher functioning, has his own particular difficulties.

For much of the time the two boys use their own personalised materials, prepared by specialists from the school's ASD resource provision in consultation with the teacher. But every so often Mr Patient draws them into the work of the class.

'Can you cut this into quarters, please, Alohim?' he asks, presenting

the boy with a Victoria sponge. Alohim eyes it up cautiously at first, but with encouragement from his TA slices it up correctly and takes it round the tables for the others to check and admire. The next cake must be cut into thirds, and again he accomplishes the task successfully.

Holding up two more sponges, Mr Patient makes an announcement. 'At the end of the lesson, everyone who has worked hard will be wanting a piece,' he says. 'How can we make sure there are enough to go round?' Now it's Brian's turn to take charge of the knife while the others collectively solve the questions: 'How many sixths make a half?' and 'How many quarters make a half?'

Finally, Mr Patient takes the two sliced-up cakes round the room so the children can see for themselves in concrete form the concepts they will be working on in the abstract.

A two-way learning process

2014 winner of the Pearson award for Outstanding New Teacher of the Year, Mr Patient joined the school in 2009 as a classroom teaching assistant, then worked as a one-to-one supporting adult in the resource provision team and as a learning mentor before training as a teacher.

'Having held all these different roles gives me an advantage,' he tells me when I catch up with him afterwards. 'I understand where the children are coming from and can see from every angle what they need in order to be able to access the lesson. When we use concrete objects in our lessons, not only does it help Brian and Alohim to learn, it helps the rest of the class as well.'

He observes how delighted he was when he noticed a pupil drawing a cake. 'She was learning from what the boys were doing,' he explains. 'They all do. It's not just about academic learning, it's about Brian and Alohim being accepted for who they are by society. One day they will grow up and have to go out into the wider community. The children in my class are not going to turn around and stare at people like them on a bus or give them a hard time. They have already accepted Brian and Alohim into their world.'

'So it's a great learning curve for all of our pupils, as well as allowing the boys to learn from the rest of the group. The learning goes both ways, which is fantastic.'

A fully inclusive approach

This principle lies at the heart of the school's approach, one of six primary schools in the borough with a resource provision for children with autism.

'We are fully inclusive,' says deputy headteacher Elizabeth Harris. 'The children are not taught in a separate unit, which is quite unusual. Some of them have no language, low cognition and may not be toilet trained, but they spend the vast majority of their time in the classroom with their peers.'

The fact that this works so successfully is due to the commitment and expertise of the specialist team coupled with a high



Alohim takes the cake round the room for the others to see



It is Brian's turn to take charge of the knife

“ Children with significant needs learn with and from peers in an inclusive setting ”

level of autism awareness throughout the school, not only amongst the adults but the pupils too.

'We do a lot of work around educating the children,' Ms Harris explains, 'starting in the nursery, where we teach them that everyone is different and some people don't talk. By the time they reach Year 6, they are learning about the triad of impairments, with reference to how it might affect children they know.'

Pupils also learn how to sign from Reception class onwards, and every year on World Autism Awareness Day they take part in activities that help them develop empathy and experience for themselves what it feels like to have autism.

'We come together at the end of the day for assemblies, then the children take away a helium balloon emblazoned with

World Autism Awareness Day,' says Ms Harris. 'The idea is that people will ask them what it means and they can teach others what they know. We have also produced a leaflet on autism, which they share with their families and friends.'

Resource provision

There are currently 22 children in the school's resource provision, supported on a one-to-one basis by adults who have been trained in autism. Staff are organised in three teams (nursery to Year 2, years 3-4 and years 5-6), each led by a specialist learning support teacher. Inclusion manager Annabelle Greyling heads the whole provision and leads the lower key stage team.

'The learning support teachers devise autism-specific learning programmes for each child alongside the class teacher,' she explains. 'They also devise individual targets and all the activities linked to these. Meanwhile, the class teacher is responsible for differentiating general classwork to ensure the child is able to participate, again with support from us.'

Children spend 85 to 90 per cent of the

day with their peers and for the remainder of the time are withdrawn for interventions and therapies. Depending on the individual, these might include Attention Autism (see *Special Children* 223), communication, speech and language sessions, Intensive Interaction (see *Special Children* 211), sensory room sessions, where they work on relaxation and interaction, or soft play, again to support interaction as well as addressing physical challenges.

Seamless integration

The work that takes place during these interventions is transferred back into the classroom, as speech and language therapist Jenny James explains.

'I might set up an intensive language programme for a child,' she says, 'then hand over that work to the TA, who delivers parts of it in class, then the child's teacher takes it on, so it becomes seamlessly integrated.'

'A lot of my work is through the TAs,' she adds. 'I set things up and ask them to do just a little bit of it every day. They are very knowledgeable, so I don't have to talk them through what different interventions involve. They are already in the picture and know just what to do.'

This is thanks to extensive training,

including bespoke packages devised by the learning support teachers to enable people who have worked here for some time to expand and deepen their understanding. Teachers too are trained on a yearly cycle by the specialist autism team so that good practice is embedded right across the school.

“Learning support teachers regularly pop into lessons to see how things are going”

In addition, Tollgate is a lead school for the borough in SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, Transactional Support), an educational model developed in the US which chimes with what the school is already doing, namely enabling children with significant needs to learn with and from peers, who provide good social and language role models, in an inclusive setting.

Teamwork

As part of its strategy to support integration and teamwork, the school stays open until 9pm every Thursday,

when staff get together for a planning evening. In some schools, that might appear a tall order, but not at Tollgate.

'Everyone here is passionate about what they do,' says Ms Greyling. 'We all work incredibly hard and that brings us close together, almost like a family. We're not obliged to stay till the very end, and we sometimes get pizzas in, so it becomes a bit of a social occasion. It's not a case of: 'Oh no, it's Thursday. I've got to stay late again.'

This whole-school meeting time is when the learning support teachers look at teachers' planning for the forthcoming week, advise them on what resources can be used for the ASD children in their class and suggest appropriate activities, individualised to the child's interests.

'It takes quite a lot of preparation because most of the children are not verbal, so they rely on visual support quite a lot,' says Ms Greyling. 'Then when we start on a Monday, we know exactly what is going to happen throughout the week and all the resources are in place.'

To ensure it all comes together in reality, learning support teachers regularly pop into lessons to see how things are going, make sure the teacher is clear about the child's work for that session and has all the resources they need.

Classroom routine



In every classroom, supported children's communication for the day is displayed in exactly the same place on the door. It always follows the same format, with the sign of the week at the top and the visual timetable below.



When the child arrives in class, they join their peers on the carpet, with TA support. Then when the first session begins, they move to their own workstation, where everything has already been set up so they know exactly what to do and are ready to go.

The system is consistent throughout the school, so that children are not confronted with unnecessary change. As they grow older, the workstation is gradually phased out depending on how well they are coping.

They have their own tray with all the work the learning support teacher has prepared for them in addition to what the class teacher would like them to do.

The choosing board is designed to create structure by giving clear beginnings and endings so they understand: 'This is what I am going to do in my first session, then I will have a reward.'





Differentiation

Differentiation is central to all that goes on in the classroom, as the school has a very diverse intake, including a significant number of children who speak English as an additional language.

With regard to children with ASD, some sit at a separate workstation to block out the bustle around them, while others, like Brian and Alohim, are able to carry on in the body of the room with learning support.

'In a typical class, you will see everyone getting on with differentiated tasks devised by the teacher, while the child with autism works on their own differentiated activities,' says Ms Greyling. 'There are usually two, sometimes three, adults present, who all have a very specific function within the lesson.'

'Most lessons follow what we call the Tollgate teaching timeline. Any whole-class teaching takes place during the first 15-20 minutes, which is long enough for the children's concentration span. Then they all engage in their various tasks, with mini plenaries every so often to support assessment for learning. It all comes together again for the last 10 minutes.'

Questioning techniques

Mr Patient's maths lesson followed a different path, with a succession of short bursts of teacher input interspersed with lots of mini plenaries.

'This was a revision session,' he explains, 'so I had to be sure that the children had grasped each part of the process. If just one child had left the room

unable to do fractions, that's no good. They all have to know.'

To encourage full participation, his questioning technique went along the lines of: 'What can you tell me about...?' or 'What else do you know?'

'It means that nobody's wrong,' he says. 'Even if someone says the simplest thing about fractions, that helps, and can add to the lesson. It is important that everybody is included so that, even if they don't contribute, they feel that they can.'

A reason to stay cheerful

When asked about Brian and Alohim, his eyes light up.

'I have to confess I rely on them to get me back on track if things are not running as smoothly as they should,' he says. 'If I'm having a bad day, I know that sooner or later Alohim is going to come up to me and say: "Sir, are you OK?" And I am bound to reply: "Yes, Alohim, I'm fine. How are you?" I know I can't react in a negative way to him, because he is very sensitive to that. So I count on him to cheer me up. It is good to have him around.'

'As for Brian, he is such a happy boy and always has a massive grin on his face. He's got his ways – for example, he likes to get up and walk around at times. The others are very accepting and don't react. They know that the boys get upset at times, although they are not able to express it. So if something out of the ordinary happens, the class just carries on with their work.'

Understanding difference

The extent of the children's understanding is abundantly clear when I meet up with a group of school council members and pupils with a sibling on the spectrum.

'Children with autism don't like loud noises,' observes Myka, 'so we are always very quiet when we move around the school.' She also tells me she has noticed that some children don't like the flash bulb going off during school photo sessions, they all find it difficult to cope with change and they often get agitated if they have to wait around for things to happen.

Phoebe agrees, adding that when someone with autism is upset about something, it can make them panicky, and she describes the strategies teachers and support staff use to help them calm down.

Other members of the group contribute their own insights, ranging from the use of iPads as communication aids to how the whole school learns to sign and the different activities they do on World Autism Awareness Day.

Treating everyone the same

The children take their own responsibilities seriously and if someone's TA is absent, they do all that they can to help. Likewise at playtime, they make sure that children with autism are not left out of their activities. Apparently Brian really likes playing with a ball and they keep a special one just for him.

Meanwhile, the Year 6 pupils in the group really enjoyed having Brian and Alohim with them on a recent three-day residential trip.

'It was amazing!' says Myka. 'They took part in everything. They helped us and we helped them. We really got to understand each other much better.' 'That's right,' says Chelsea, and describes how confident Brian was on the high rope and how they all cheered him on and supported him. 'That's what we do in this school,' she says. 'We all support and help each other.'

The siblings talk about some of things they do with their brother or sister at home and explain how hard it is to get people in the outside world to understand why their siblings behave in the way that they do.

And what about at school?

'Tollgate is an inclusive school,' pronounces Myka firmly. 'It doesn't matter where you come from, what your race or religion is, or whether or not you have a disability, everyone is treated the same.'

FIND OUT MORE

Next year's Autism Professionals Awards are open for nominations. Closing date: 30 October. www.autismprofessionalsawards.org.uk