

The Link School – a case study

The Link School, a special Academy based in the London borough of Sutton, realised they needed to adapt their approach to supporting PDA children and young people to access education. They have explored different approaches, listened to the families and the PDA children they support and learnt a lot along the way. They now use that experience, understanding and learning to educate and work with professionals to help them understand that education systems can adapt to meet the needs of PDA students and help them to flourish.

The Link School, part of the Orchard Hill College and Academy Trust, provides for 150 learners who all have a communication need which causes a barrier to their learning. Similar to other Special schools, The Link School provides an adapted National Curriculum and uses evidence-based approaches to remove the barriers to education that PDA learners experience. The school has a high proportion of PDA students - there are currently 34 students aged between 6 – 16 who meet the criteria of a PDA profile. The majority of them have had a complex educational history in a variety of education provisions. Like many PDA children across the UK, some of them have been out of school for long periods of time experiencing trauma and missing out on education.

Visitors to The Link School satellite site, where the majority of PDA children are educated, see a hive of industry and learning. It's not the traditional view of a classroom with rows of seating and the teacher at the front. At satellite site teaching takes place in all areas, inside and outside. Some activities are child-led, others are jointly led with adults and young people working and learning together. Attendance is high and although there are some challenges and disruptions during the school day, the smiles, chatter and laughter speak volumes about the young people's experience of learning and their ability to manage their anxieties and self-regulate.

The Link School's work with PDA students began in 2017 with two learners who struggled in a class group and who didn't respond to any of the usual evidence-based approaches for children on the Autism Spectrum; in fact, the approaches seemed to exacerbate their anxieties and ability to regulate. With permission from parents, the school conducted a simple practitioner research project, trialling some of the approaches recommended by The PDA Society. This included identifying the children's interests and motivations and planning a learning programme around these – whilst also giving them choices around the access and timing of the more structured elements of the day. The positive changes for both children were huge with impact seen socially, emotionally and academically. Benefits were also seen for the families, peers and staff making life less stressful and happier.

At the same time, the school recognised an increase in consultations for PDA children from Sutton and other surrounding Local Authorities. Carefully balancing the needs of their cohort, the school gradually increased the number of PDA children ensuring that staff were fully trained and preparing the other children to understand and welcome the learning differences that needed to be an accepted part of school life. For the leadership team it became a purposeful decision to "draw new lines in the sand rather than bury our heads in it."

With each child came increased learning for the team and a range of discoveries that were then shared with other schools, SENCO's and parents through published articles and training packages.

Regular individual monthly meetings between specialist school head teachers and the managers at Sutton SEND services were key to understanding the challenges facing schools and commissioner's when seeking to meet the needs of placed children, including PDA children. The Sutton SEND team recognised the positive impact for learners that had been placed at The Link School who previously

had been challenging to place, as well as those where it had been difficult to maintain the school placements. The local authority were beginning to identify increasing numbers of PDA children through the EHCP assessment process alongside children who were undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. The SEND managers were keen to meet the challenges through earlier identification of PDA and by supporting schools to be able to provide an education that would work.

The practitioner research at The Link School included an identification of case histories and key shared factors for PDA children with regards to learning strengths and styles and educational barriers. These were shared with SEND caseworkers. This was followed by training for parents and professionals through the authority educational support service, Cognus, as well as training for the Sutton Educational Psychology team. This enabled professionals to more readily recognise PDA profiles. As children's needs were correctly identified the need for appropriate placements grew and The Link School became the point of reference in the borough for advice on supporting PDA children.

Effective provision for PDA learners in Sutton has come a long way in a short time through honest dialogue and collaborative practice. There is still a long way to go to develop adapted services across all schools in the borough. The possible next steps include expanding and funding the PDA outreach service for early intervention to mainstream and specialist schools as well as exploring cross Authority partnerships to build and maintain specialist provision for PDA learners.

The growing flagship provision for PDA children in Sutton has been born out of the collective drive and ambition of The Link School and the Local Authority to provide the best chances to achieve the best outcomes in life and to prepare young people effectively for adulthood whatever their need or starting point. It hasn't always been an easy journey but at the heart of the vision and resulting strategy is a simple premise. The Link School maintain that if this can be achieved in one place in the UK with the current financial resourcing pressures and expectations of the OFSTED framework for schools, then it can be achieved anywhere. It is their hope that other Local Authorities will learn from this case study and begin to work in partnership with parents and schools to provide the educational environments that are so needed and deserved by our PDA young people.