

Thank you for helping me grow. - A mainstream student's experience

Ceri Hamer is the headteacher for a mainstream primary school in Lancashire. Here she tells us about a PDA student and the help and support the school provided to them. The pupil's name has been changed.

Oliver arrived at our school right at the end of the Summer Term in Year 3. His parents said they moved him because he was 'stuck in a rut' and 'needing a fresh start'. The usual transfer paperwork came through and a new system in the area actually meant children were often given places even before the families had a chance to visit. However, his written profile spoke volumes.

On paper I was told to expect a boy who was 'defiant', 'aggressive', 'argumentative' and a pupil who 'refused to do any work'. It stated that he was 'under assessment' for additional needs but the family still felt his relationship with peers had broken down too much and wanted a fresh start for him. Informal feedback from previous teachers had said he had not put pen to paper for 2 years. He showed obvious signs of high anxiety both in school and at home. But one thing really stood out to me and that was his attendance. It was extremely good at 98% despite these challenges. I was confused by this conflicting information and knew that I had to get to the bottom of the reasons for the above behaviours.

One year in to him being at our school, his attendance remained high but so did the reluctance to work. Oliver now had diagnosis of Autism, Auditory Processing Disorder and Visual Processing Disorder. I found myself impressed at his tenacity to continue to come to school every day despite the obvious barriers to learning that he faced. It was clear that he didn't want to be angry. He wanted to be understood, accepted and more than anything - helped. I still felt that there was more going on and that Oliver had a very distinct PDA profile. In order to support him, further adaptations were needed.

By Year 4 his demand avoidance was very clear. He lacked trust in adults and utilised every distraction technique in his armour such as constant talking to avoid doing any tasks he didn't want to do. As a school leader this is where I was able to build a strong relationship with him by giving him a safe space. We devised a 'pass' system which Oliver could use to visit me when things got too much. In this bolt hole he had a choice of activities and we talked. I got to know him - his likes, dislikes and how he needed help. He found his voice and began to use his words which, in turn, helped to calm him.

During the subsequent EHCP process I introduced Oliver's full alternative curriculum. English was a huge challenge for him and in these lessons he did not cope. During our talks I discovered that he hated RE and Art too but absolutely loved DT. We then began planning in his opt out times for a more Oliver-centred alternative curriculum giving him purpose and control of his learning. This alternative curriculum for Oliver was the biggest gamechanger in his ability to access learning. We played to his strengths, replacing lessons if needed.

Oliver was great with his hands and during his last 2 years with us he built a nature garden and a fire pit with his TA. He wrote a diary of what he had made every day and he also read to an adult in the garden a little.

For many educators it may sound scary to think of having pupils not doing core subjects but his EHCP was in support and without these changes, Oliver was a child at risk of permanent exclusion. Of course, it wasn't smooth sailing and there were incidents of lashing out which resulted in some time out of school but it never affected his desire to come to school each day.

After two years of providing his alternative curriculum it was time for Oliver to head off to high school. In my transition notes, I wrote 'Oliver is fun loving and extremely talented at making things. He has a practical aptitude to his learning and a wonderfully kind and caring nature. Oliver likes to be kept busy but may need help with alternatives at times. He likes to be helpful.'

I was incredibly sad to send him off to High School as I had seen the most phenomenal change implementing what were actually very simple adaptations to make. I hope our experience shows that it is possible for mainstream schools to make these sort of changes and the positive impact it can have upon a pupil.

Oliver brought me a gift on his last day and I can honestly say it is the most precious I have ever received. He had heard that my favourite flower was a sunflower and so Oliver had grown me one at home and taken pictures of it as it grew. He said as he gave it to me 'I grew you a sunflower because you helped me grow.'

I am now the biggest advocate for alternative curriculums in mainstream schools and Oliver's story is only one of many where I know it can work. Small changes can make the biggest differences. If you play to a pupil's strengths and you will all reap the benefits. Hidden behind demand avoidance is often hidden talents. It is up to us to find an alternative way for bringing these out.