Supporting students with ASD transition to High School
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Individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have impairments in the areas of social interaction and communication combined with a tendency for inflexible patterns of thinking and behaviour (Volkmar & Klin, 2005). As a result, students with an ASD have unique learning styles and may struggle to cope with various aspects of school. Evidence suggests that some of these students are significantly more likely than their typically developing peers to be suspended or excluded (Barnard et al., 2000), to be the targets of bullying (Myles & Adreon, 2001; van Roekel, E. et al, 2010), to suffer depression and anxiety (Kim, et al, 2000) and to under-perform academically relative to their level of intelligence. Families of children with an ASD in mainstream schools report being concerned by the lack of understanding among school staff, particularly in children at the higher functioning end of the autism spectrum (Whitaker 2007). While these articles show there is work to be done, there is also a considerable body of evidence about what schools are doing to successfully support students with ASD and their families. Some of these are discussed in this article.

Children with ASD often have difficulties in reading social cues and situations meaning they may not know how to respond or behave in many common social environments and fail to predict what might happen in a new setting. This can generate significant anxiety for children with ASD and result in a preference for situations that are familiar and recognisable. Additionally, rigid thinking may hinder their adjustment to the expectations and social rules of a new environment or social situation and are likely to take longer to understand it. Individuals with ASD find changes in their situation or transitions to a new setting especially difficult and challenging.

Moving from primary to high school is daunting for most students. Students with ASD will face additional challenges as a result of their diagnosis and need extra supports. Strategies to prepare students are best begun in primary school and may involve a gradual reduction of supports, an expectation of more independent functioning, the development of self-monitoring and practice in seeking help (Roberts, Keane & Clark, 2008). This article seeks to describe some of the strategies that have been found to be helpful for children and young people in schools, including during the transition from primary to high school. However it should be noted that all students with ASD are not the same and that sometimes what looks like the same behaviour in two different children will actually serve two different functions for them. An analysis of an individual student's needs is always advisable. Teachers and parents could consider asking for assistance through school learning and support teams, from school counselling and other specialist education staff, or from specialist staff in other agencies. That said, the following are evidence-based principles for working with students with ASD that many schools have found useful.
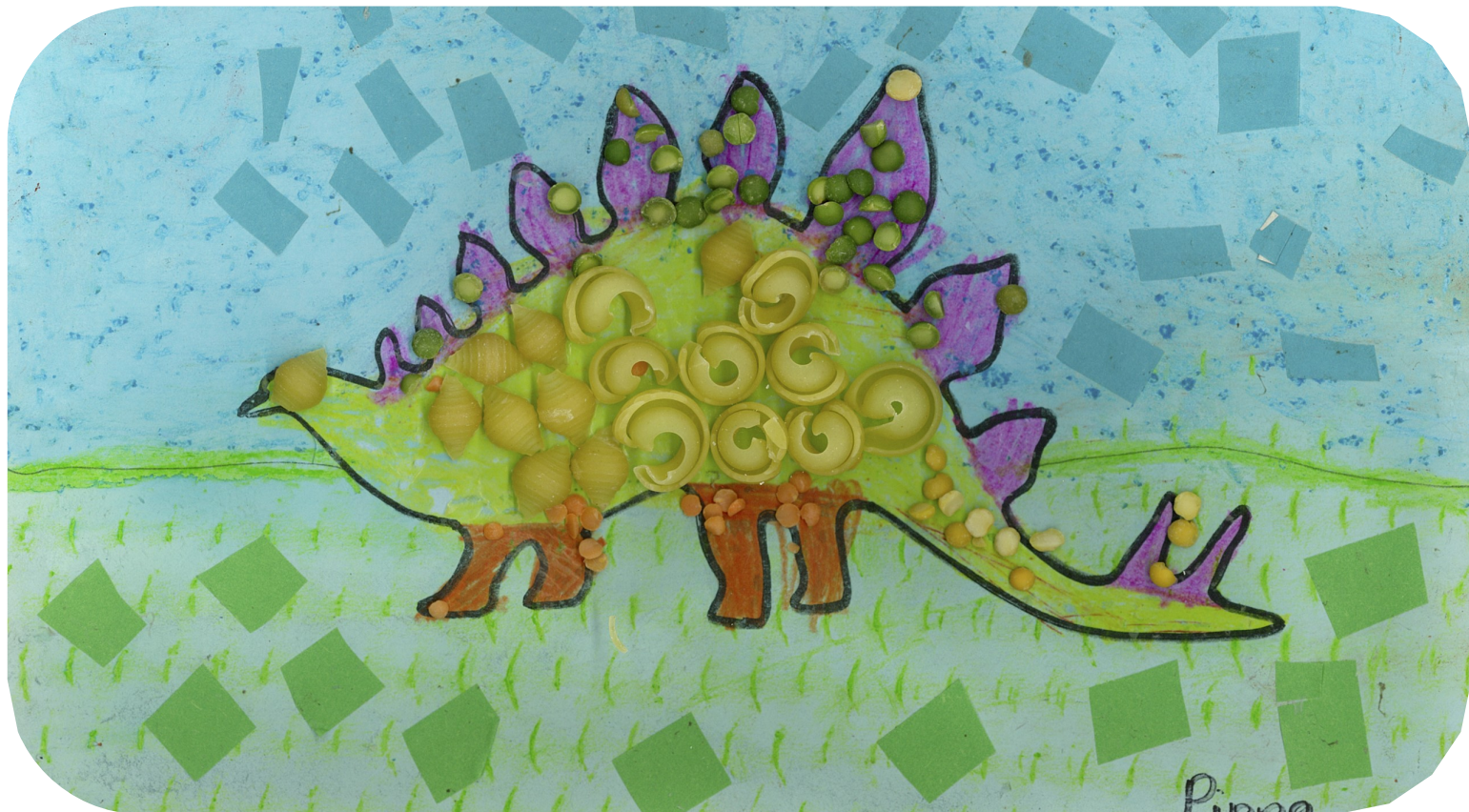
Wherever possible, schools enrolling students with ASD should seek specific training in order to understand the impacts of ASD so they have realistic and appropriate expectations of students. This will also facilitate a consistent approach from staff across the entire school environment. Additionally, it is advisable to include regular, designated time in staff meetings for updates, ensure professional development is maintained and regularly review school policies.

Generally, individuals with autism like order and detail, so keeping workspaces and classrooms clear of clutter and tidy will help them feel more secure and in control. As they like to know what to expect, schedules which help anticipate what is coming next- ; such as picture schedules and visual timetables are especially helpful. These can be broad or detailed and include a sequence of events if appropriate (Smith-Myles et al., 2001). Students will also learn faster and find it easier if visuals are included to support their learning, as verbal instructions may require too much concentration and result in them 'tuning out'. These visuals can also be incorporated into stories to create a story board or cartoon illustration which clearly sets out the steps to be taken. Incorporate visuals into as many activities as possible indicating each step involved. For further information you can go to the following website: https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Visual%20Supports%20Tool%20Kit.pdf

> "Strategies to prepare students are best begun in primary school"

Depending on the child it may be necessary to simplify the language used and check in that you have been understood. Progress logically, one idea at a time, using concrete examples to follow a sequence that is understood. Avoid open ended questions or suggestions, rather provide choices. Keep language simple, specific and real. Ambiguities, abstract ideas, 'turns of phrase', metaphors and sarcasm are all likely to be misunderstood or misinterpreted (Smith-Myles et al 2001; Costley et al, 2012).

Many students with ASD tend to focus very intensely on tasks and struggle to change to a new activity. They may need time to move on and help plan longer term projects as following and understanding complex and multiple instructions is difficult, breaking them into smaller steps to avoid anxiety over unfinished assignments (Smith-Myles et al., 2001). Working with others could be especially draining and their processing time may be slower than that of their peers. These skills can further be hampered by physical problems such as fine motor issues if it is a writing task for example.

Sensory processing difficulties are also common and contribute to the challenges associated with transition periods as the student may quickly become overwhelmed with sensory stimulus in a new environment. An ASD student's ability to regulate their emotions is frequently affected by sensory processing difficulties. It can lead to over-stimulation, anxiety and outbursts. Their capacity to calm down, manage stress, or cope with frustration is impeded on multiple levels as they struggle with social cues, physical limitations, rigid thinking patterns and limited language competence.

In the classroom, teachers need to keep in mind that all behaviour is a form of communication and seek to work out what the student is trying to say. Students with autism generally want to do the right thing and challenging behaviour is usually due to a lack of understanding about something (Smith-Myles et al., 2001). Interpreting the message behind their behaviour will assist both student and teacher.

For teachers maintaining a calm environment so as to reduce anxiety and aid concentration will be a key factor in helping students with ASD. Consideration should be paid to lighting, volume, space, and background noise when arranging work spaces. For instance, it may be helpful to seat these children away from windows and doors and to define teaching areas by using clear physical boundaries and colour coding (Costley et al, 2012).

Incorporating appropriate IT supports to assist students' executive functioning such as iPads, tablets, or smart phones is advised, with reference to the school's policies on devices. Individualised timetables that are colour coded and cross referenced to curriculum materials will be a great help (Costley et al, 2012; Keane et al, 2011).

Uniform visual resources ought to be implemented across the school, prominently displayed, it should be

positively expressed, clear and simple. Creating calm spaces in classrooms and other easily accessible/ monitored areas to accommodate sensory/overload needs. The opportunity for students to participate in targeted playground programs which encourage peer to peer interactions will facilitate social skills. Autism-specific clubs, study groups and homework clubs provide opportunities to engage with the school community increasing the students' connectedness while providing a place to develop life skills.

Creating a Transition Planning Team (TPT) as early as possible in preparation for the move to High School is the most valuable means of ensuring a positive transition. It is advisable to start transition planning for ASD students as early as possible in the senior years of primary school, years 5/6. An effective Transition Team will involve key school staff from both primary and secondary schools, learning and support team members, parents, school counselling staff and any other significant health providers who are part of the students' life.

Gather and exchange as much relevant information as possible including individual profiles, NDIS plans, Behaviour Support Plans (BSPs), Individual Education Plans (IEPs), specialist reports, past assessments and information outlining support strategies. Clearly define the role of the Transition Team and the individuals involved; include meeting dates, a timetable of events or activities and a 'transition pack' for the young person.

The TPT should be prepared to have numerous meetings that will occur over several months and include a range of activities. Remember, it is unpredictability that causes the most anxiety in ASD students, espe-cially if they have issues with problem solving and communicating their needs. The more preparation that is undergone the better.

Begin in primary school by exploring the differences they will encounter at high school and the expectations that come with being a secondary student. Introduce the concept of different subjects being held in different locations, how timetables and scheduling will work. Help them become familiar with using a diary or planner, checklists for specific days or subjects can be useful as can the use of visual cues such as colours or pictures.

ASD students will value the opportunity to get to know their new school through visits and orientation days. A map with visuals of the school which clearly indicates important locations like the school office, library, staff room toilets and lunch area will be of benefit, as will practice time for using the map to navigate during quieter times of the day. The opportunity for students to sit in on lessons or be introduced to key staff such as the librarian and school counsellor/school psychologist can assist students. However, be cautious about overloading the student with too much information as this can become counter productive if it creates stress and confusion. Consistently checking in with the student will be important.

Overall, although transition might be difficult for some students, a varied and detailed plan for transition across schools and agencies is a comprehensive way to remain positive and ensure preparedness for the school, student and their family.

Teacher Tips

- Keep instructions brief and concise and check for understanding.
- Give warnings of any changes to routine, even when changing activities
- Present information in small chunks or by highlighting key points – limit written work.
- Allow opportunities for breaks
- Write down any communication that may be difficult to understand, use visuals if possible
- Provide visual organisers for class and school routines – mini-schedules, user friendly timetables
- Teach diary use and insist on diaries for all reminders.
- Be specific when giving praise and instruction.
- Use the student's interests to encourage motivation either in the lesson or as reward
- Limit time spent on tasks and allow for work to be completed at home
- Provide structure and details for homework and assignments so the student knows exactly what is expected.
- If you see signs of distress, intervene as soon as possible – offer a Break opportunity.
- Keep in touch with parents and provide frequent feedback.

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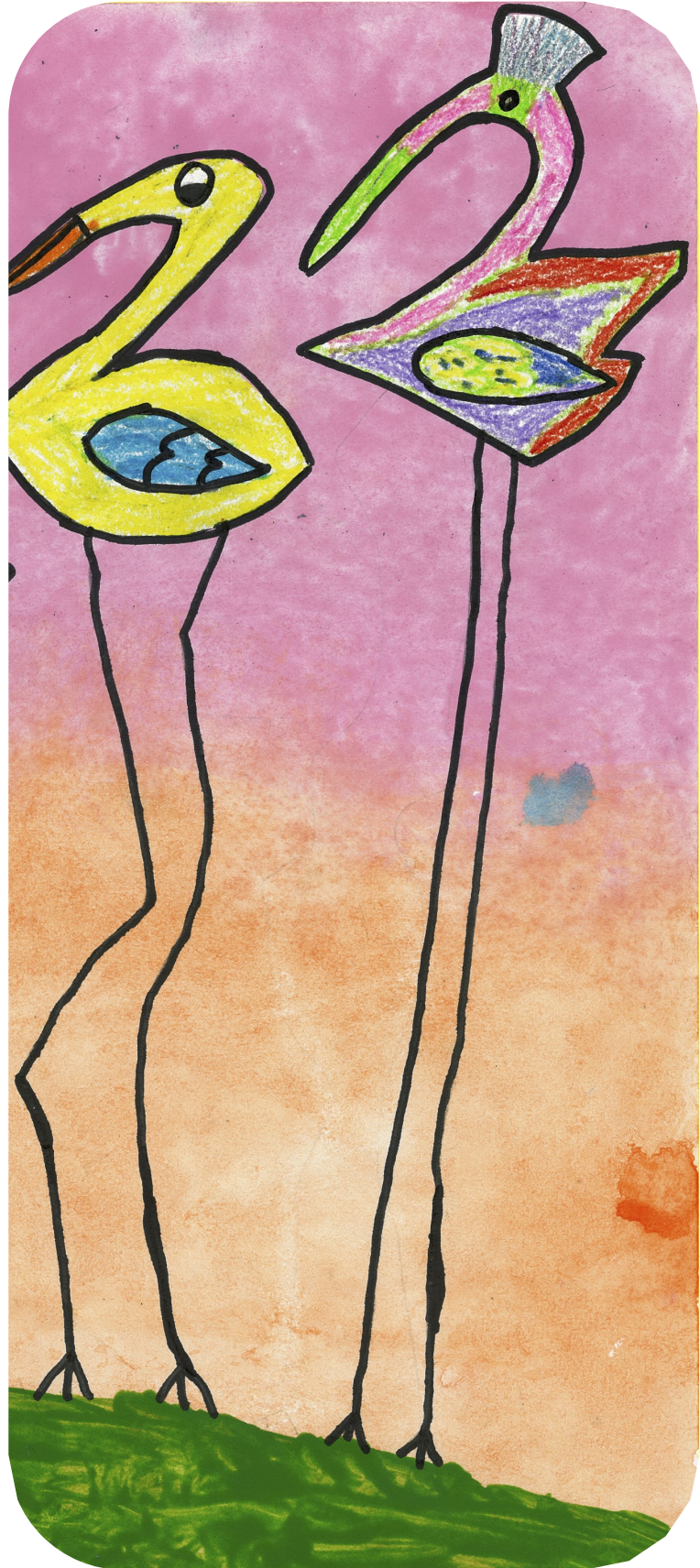
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