



# **Autism Spectrum Disorder in Aotearoa New Zealand: Strategies for Teachers**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

According to Autism New Zealand (n.d.) there are approximately 65,000 New Zealanders with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Despite this prevalence, Goodall (2014) notes "...teachers are still on a long journey to full acceptance of students on the autism spectrum as learners with potential" (p. 133). This is concerning as one of the principles that form the foundation of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) is inclusion. The New Zealand Curriculum states these principles "embody the beliefs about the nature of the educational experience and the entitlement of the student" (p. 37) and Te Kete Ipurangi (n.d.) describes inclusive education as all children and young people being engaged and achieving through participating, learning and belonging. These principles, in addition to the prevalence of people with ASD in New Zealand, mean that teachers must possess an understanding of ASD as well as knowledge of teaching strategies to assist these learners.

This research review considers three studies relating to learners with ASD in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Goodall (2014) revealed that teachers struggle to view these students as learners with potential and were subsequently unable to provide appropriate learning opportunities. Goodall presents strategies for establishing an inclusive environment and examines factors that facilitate effective teaching of students with ASD.

Bevan-Brown (2010) presents the viewpoint of 137 parents of children with ASD. They outlined strategies that proved successful with their children in a school setting. The third study, Kelly (2008), presents findings from an extensive two-year action research project commissioned by the Ministry of Education. This study aimed to identify and promote effective practices around educational outcomes for young people with ASD.

## **COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING**

In her study regarding factors that facilitate the effective teaching of students with ASD, Goodall (2014) concluded that "...an increase in understanding of the autism spectrum and of autistic experiences was mostly likely to facilitate more effective teaching of the students" (p. 133). For teachers to gain this understanding, Goodall proposed the use of a collaborative problem-solving strategy, which consists of the following process.

**Table 1:** Collaborative problem-solving template (adapted from Goodall, 2014, p. 137).

	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Student with ASD</b>
Perceived problem and reasoning.	The teacher and the student present their own perspectives about the identified problem and provide reasoning why this is a problem.	
Possible solutions	The teacher and the student present what they think are acceptable solutions to the identified problem and the rationale behind these solutions.	
Mutually acceptable solution	After listening to each other's perspectives, the teacher and student collaborate to reach a mutually acceptable solution to the identified problem.	

According to Goodall (2014), collaborative problem-solving assists teachers to understand why students with ASD sometimes do not comply with their instruction and establishes a communication system between the teacher and student that facilitates negotiated compliance and learning. Furthermore, collaborative problem-solving enhances the educational achievement of the student as it enables the teacher to gain a greater understanding of the thinking process of the student as well as how they interpret their environment. Goodall argues that awareness of the student's perspective facilitates a "paradigm shift" (p. 138) for the teacher, who no longer views the student as difficult or incapable, but rather a "complex student with a range of skills and challenges" (p. 138).

Goodall's (2014) collaborative problem strategy is convincing because it facilitates effective teaching of students with ASD while it also enables the teacher to gain greater knowledge the student. Goodall's framework would require modification to account for the student's age as well as degree of severity and manifestation of the student's ASD. Some teachers may find collaborative problem-solving difficult as mutual solution-seeking could be seen as undermining their authority or their ability to teach effectively (Goodall, 2014). It is, however, a strategy that all teachers could implement and may also be useful to use with students' classmates for them to gain insight into the perspective of a person with ASD.

## **KNOWING THE WHOLE CHILD**

Kelly (2008) places importance upon gaining a deep understanding of the student, identifying that the most apparent strategy to emerge from the action research project was knowing the whole child. Kelly explains that to build a complete picture of the learner, educators, specialist professionals as well as whānau should come together to provide information from different contexts. From this shared information, Kelly states that the team gains an understanding the student's preferences and dislikes, their habits and personalities, the coping strategies they use when in a different setting, their motivations, their sensory preference, and the ways in which they interpret their environment. From this information, teams can compose and implement an effective individualised

programme, which centres upon deep understanding of the student's strengths, preferences and interpretations. Kelly concludes that there is no single approach for students with ASD and that by failing to understand the whole child, teachers will struggle to identify potential learning opportunities that will enhance the student's educational achievement.

A potential barrier to knowing the whole child is the possible time-poor schedule of teachers. Goodall (2014) noted that time-management was the highest-ranking stressor for teachers and identified that teachers are aware that students with ASD require a significant input of time: teachers need time to teach and time to prepare to prepare to teach and whether teachers were willing to commit this time varied. Goodall adds, however, that strategies emphasising a respectful understanding of the student's perspectives, strengths and preferences have the potential to facilitate more effective time management due to increased student-teacher collaboration.

## **POSITIVE HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS**

Bevan-Brown (2010) identified that the establishment of a positive home-school partnership is a critical strategy influencing the educational achievement of learners with ASD. For many parents, this partnership is invaluable and, as identified by Kelly (2008), parents play an important role in enabling educators to understand the child. Nevertheless, Bevan-Brown notes that educators and other professionals are often dismissive of parents' extensive knowledge of effective teaching approaches and strategies associated with ASD and their opinions and suggestions are regularly disregarded. Bevan-Brown's research revealed, however, that teaching strategies and approaches promoted by the parents are mirrored in evidence-based research regarding ASD. For example, parents promoted these teaching strategies:

- additional academic support;
- 'time-out' seating and breaks;
- utilising strengths and interests to promote engagement;
- advance warning about changes in routine;
- pro-active playtime strategies;
- rewarding effort through positive feedback;
- implementation of appropriate safety strategies;
- and
- teachers role modelling a respectful attitude and understanding towards students with ASD.

These strategies have been adopted by the Ministries of Health and Education (2016) in their guidelines for children with ASD, Bevan-Brown (2010) noting earlier that these suggestions are "simply good teaching practice regardless of whether or not the child has ASD...Everyone will benefit from heeding these parents' messages—it is a win-win situation" (p. 21).

Although it is obvious that a positive home-school relationship will benefit learners with ASD, it is necessary to remember that the degree of parental involvement will depend on the circumstances and the preference of each

family. The Ministries of Health and Education (2016) have highlighted: “Some parents just want to be ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad’ and not the child’s teacher, and this should be respected” (p. 61). Therefore, it is important that the roles and responsibilities of parents, educators and other professionals are explicitly defined and agreed upon.

## **ABANDON DEFICIT THEORISING**

Eliminating deficit theorising was a strong message from all three authors. Goodall (2014) found that some teachers struggle to frame students with ASD as capable learners, consequently learning opportunities for these students were overlooked. This is a serious concern because if teachers do not see potential they will not teach to that potential. Kelly (2008) emphasised the importance of taking a strengths-based approach and of changing the environment to meet the child’s needs rather than changing the child. Furthermore, Bevan-Brown (2010) noted that parents identified teachers modelling respectful behaviour as an important strategy because all adults who work with children with ASD have important roles to play in modelling appropriate behaviours. If deficit theorising is evident in a teacher’s interaction with students, other students will consider this type of behaviour acceptable.

To help teachers refrain from deficit theorising and to take a strengths-based approach, Goodall (2014) suggested that teachers be exposed to the lived experiences of adults with ASD. When confronted by the many examples of well-educated, articulate and successful adults who identify as having an ASD, teachers are forced to reflect upon, and re-evaluate, their perspectives about the potential of learners with ASD.

## **CONCLUSION**

These articles discuss four key strategies that will enhance the educational achievement of students with ASD. These strategies are: collaborative problem-solving; knowing the whole child; establishing a positive home-school partnership; and abandoning deficit theorising. Although many of these strategies are acknowledged as best practice, teachers need to be aware that these approaches may need modification depending upon factors such as the student’s age, the degree of severity and manifestation of the student’s ASD, as well as the circumstances and preference of the student’s family. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to for meeting the needs of learners with ASD (Kelly, 2008; Ministries of Health and Education, 2016), but the crucial element is for teachers, whānau and other professionals to work together and keep the student’s perspective, strengths and preferences at the centre of all decisions, actions and interventions.

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