

## **The Enabling Environment: Intent for Classroom & Breakout Spaces**

Classroom setups impacting thinking. Learning is an ecology: classroom design impacts classroom management, pupil needs, EHC plan provision, curriculum needs, teaching strategies, lesson delivery, resources, and so on.

Classrooms that are organised and structured, are more likely to result in pupils who exhibit on-task behaviour and higher academic achievement levels (Hume, 2007). For autistic pupils, research has shown that the arrangement of the classroom can impact their learning outcomes (Kabot & Reeve, 2010).

Pupils with autism often need additional support in making transitions in a classroom due to limited comprehension of nonverbal cues and anxiety that can accompany periods of uncertainty. The systems and design of a classroom along with the placement and use of furniture can enable a better flow of traffic, decrease unsafe behaviour and allow adults to better supervise pupils (Kabot & Reeve, 2010).

Physical boundaries help to establish a visual cue as to where one type of activity takes place and where to go and these supports can better foster independence and self-regulation (Hume, 2007). Therefore, an enabling classroom environment provides physical boundaries between areas and establishes predictability through visual cues and schedules. This will best serve autistic pupils because less mental effort is exerted on understanding their surroundings allowing pupils to focus more on learning activities (Kabot & Reeve, 2010).

Pupils need to be in classrooms that inspire them as spaces designed to be light and airy, with engaging and meaningful activities. Pupils will have beautiful spaces that make them feel good to be at school - with art, work they are proud of, living plants, and comfortable seating.

Everything about the physical space must be designed so that there is little to distract from teaching and learning. Our shared purpose is to fully meet the needs of every pupil so that they can reach their full potential and play a full part in our community. An enabling environment is fundamental to learning, communication and behaviour.

To address the specific learning characteristics of autism, we limit distractions, both visual and auditory, which can result in sensory and cognitive overwhelm and unsafe behaviour. A distraction limited environment aids self-regulation enabling pupils to give full attention, concentrate, focus and learn at their individual pace.

TEACCH is used alongside other strategies and the national curriculum, to promote the overall development of our pupils, and help them to make sense of the world around them.

## **TEACCH**

TEACCH is an evidence-based academic pedagogy, integrated throughout the Academy. It is fundamental to meeting the needs and shared characteristics of autistic learners.

As a structured teaching model, TEACCH enables the individual as a visual learner to understand their environment and work independently. This means that teachers must correspondingly adapt their teaching style and organise their classroom as an enabling environment through physical and visual structure that 'speaks' to the individual. This structure encourages visual based engagement and communication.

TEACCH is centred on five basic principles that must be in full operation:

- 1.** Physical structure refers to individual's immediate surroundings. Daily activities such as working, playing and eating, work best when they are clearly defined by physically zoned areas of the room, including furniture and visual signage.
- 2.** A consistent visual schedule, through various mediums appropriate to the individual's language level: objects, symbols, photographs, drawings and/or text. This gives pupils a clear expectation of their day for what activity they are doing, with who, where, for how long, when it is finished and what happens next.
- 3.** The work system establishes expectations and activity measurements that promote independence because of the visual and physical structure of the task to be performed.
- 4.** Routine is essential because the most important functional support for autistic individuals is consistency.
- 5.** Visual structure involves visually-based cues for reminders and instruction, with a clear 'finish' to activities.

A common misconception is that TEACCH is designed only for children. TEACCH works well with autistic individuals at all developmental levels and is based on individual assessment. While TEACCH works best in self-contained classrooms, it can be implemented in any educational setting/environment. Many people think that TEACCH is mainly for skills and structure, but it also promotes language development, prosocial behaviour and enables pupils to experience meaningful relationships and enjoyable social interactions.

The TEACCH framework is a structured framework that helps autistic individuals learn, function and reach their goals.

## Physical Structure and Organisation of the Classroom

At Medeshamstede Academy:

- Each classroom door has a welcome sign with the name of the class, its year groups and adults working in the room.
- Every classroom has a 'teaching wall' at the front of the room. This houses cupboards (tall and low), a table for the teacher's laptop, class Smart board and whiteboard. Notes/reminders for adults should not be displayed on this wall. It should be neatly and visually organised.
- There is a vertical visual timetable displayed on the teaching wall.
- Visual, prosocial behaviour cues are displayed horizontally on the teaching wall.
- The Zones of Regulation are displayed on the teaching wall, clearly showing the emotional vocabulary associated with each zone.
- The critical vocabulary of We Thinkers/Think Social should be clearly displayed on the teaching wall.
- Every classroom must have a clearly labelled 'ever-ready box' on the wall by the door. This must contain individual positive behaviour support plans, personalised pupil passports, individual pupil risk assessments, EHC plans, classroom risk assessment.
- Individual communication systems such as PECS books, PODD books, communication boards, phonics and vocabulary mats are stored at pupil's workstations.
- Every pupil has an individual Zones menu, also stored at their workstation.
- Classrooms with their own sinks and toilets must have visual task chain sequences for washing hands and toileting self-care.
- Every classroom has a 'story space' in the form of a reading corner as a zone to relax with soft fabrics, cushions/beanbags and warm colours. Books are carefully and neatly displayed.
- Displays are kept to display boards only and not on walls. Each classroom has a maths, English and topic display. Damaged displays are always repaired at the end of the day. Pupil's work is double mounted on display boards. Display titles are in plain block colours.

- Partition screens are pristine and not drawn on. Any marks on screens, desks, walls or surfaces are removed.
- Classrooms have big windows to let a lot of natural light shine through. Curtains always hang neatly.
- Classrooms will have a horse-shoe or round table where explicit teaching and/or group work takes place, so that pupils can foster relationships and interact during collaborative activities.
- Every classroom has a breakout room. This room can be used when individuals need a quiet space for self-regulation as well as for group work or a more private area for individual work and studying.
- Classrooms with their own outdoor areas are an extension of the learning environment. They contain purposeful, safe outdoor equipment that promotes pupils' physical development, sensory needs and social interaction. Outdoor areas are safely maintained, tidy and risk assessed. They contain an interactive station for sensory play where hands-on learning can be experienced by all pupils.
- KS 4 classrooms will reflect the transition to formal learning, allowing for independence but also providing a nurturing environment and curiosity.
- Every classroom will be properly apportioned for its purpose. It is also important to look at the appropriate role of technology in the classroom.

## **Essential Furniture and Storage**

Too often, too much furniture and too many materials are crowding the classroom. Not only does this create safety hazards, it creates an environment that is overstimulating, conducive to behaviour problems, and difficult to keep clean. Pupils need uncluttered spaces to do their work and clear, safe pathways for moving about. There's an old adage to keep in mind when organising your classroom: *'Less is more'*.

- All furniture and materials should have at least one clear purpose that is relevant to pupil's developmental stage and the curriculum. All furniture should be actively used for some part of each day.
- Classrooms do not contain large teacher desks because the room is conducive to pupil needs and maximising space.
- Storage that is accessible only to the teacher/adults should consume a minimum of all available storage. No pile of papers should get higher than two inches. If that pile grows, it's time for you to sort, file, and throw away.

- Children must be able to move safely and easily around any furniture in the room.
- All furniture should be easy to clean and allow for easy cleaning of the room.
- All furniture and equipment must be in good condition and be safe for children to use.
- The criteria listed above for furniture can be applied to storage space as well. Nothing must be stored on top of tall cupboards. Equipment stored in cupboards/trays must be clearly labelled.
- Scissors and sharp objects must be stored in a locked cupboard.
- Every child should have one storage space for learning materials, contained in their work system, and one clearly named coat hook for personal belongings such as backpacks/book bags and coats.
- All cupboard surfaces must be kept clear at all times and all desks tidy at all times.
- Pupils are taught to tidy the classroom at the end of every session. (This is part of the Think Social curriculum).
- The floor must always be kept clear. There is a designated zone for floor play and small world play.
- Classrooms designed with a hard floor/wet area have a round group table for sensory play (contained in a tough spot) or for art/craft activities. Messy play is confined to the hard/wet floor area to protect carpets and for ease of cleaning.
- Each classroom has named water bottles and nutritious snacks/fruit which must be stored safely in a cupboard.
- Every classroom has an inventory of the resources and equipment that are contained in the room. All equipment must be well maintained and stored safely.
- Every classroom has a clearly labelled 'sensory box' containing fidget toys and therapy bands. (This is different to the attention box/bucket).
- Children are not given therapy balls to work on, unless recommended by an occupational therapist.

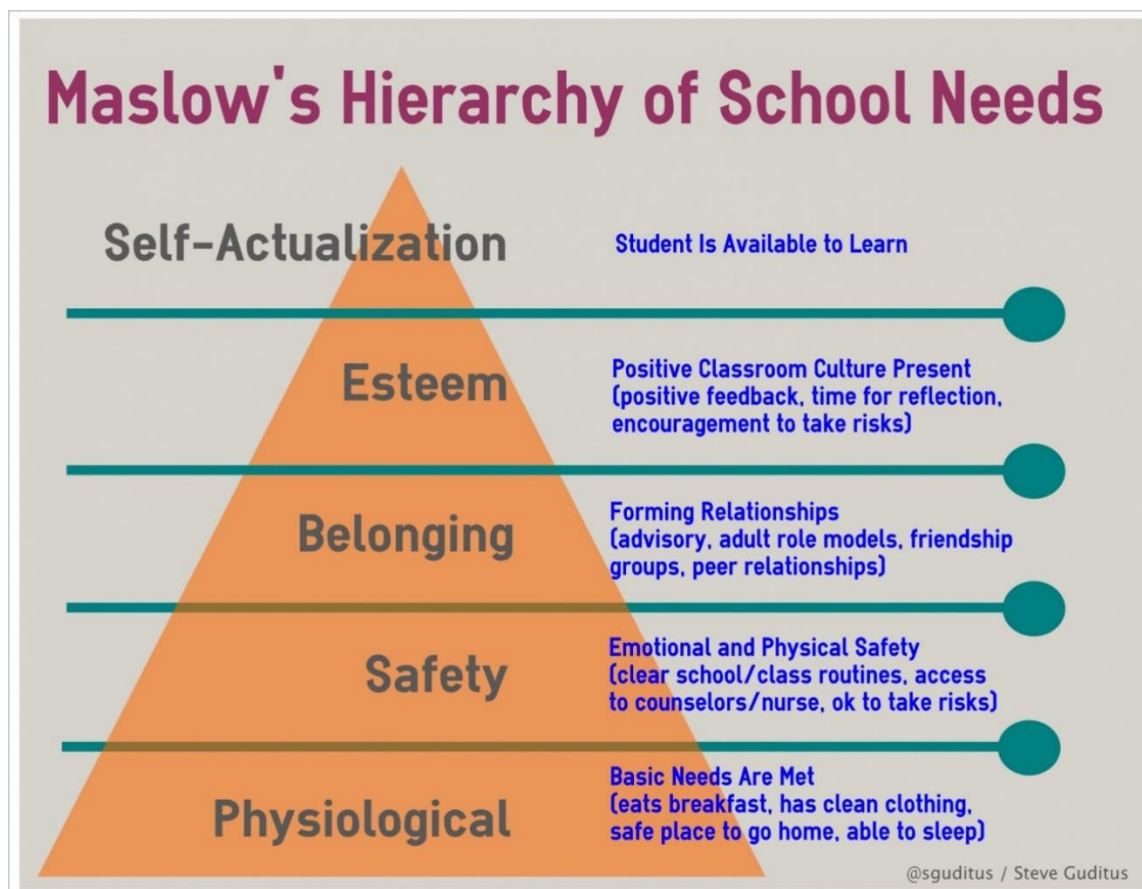
## Therapeutic Approach:

### Applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the classroom

In addition to the enabling physical environment of the classroom, at the beginning of the session, when pupils enter our classroom, we should ensure that their *physiological and basic physical needs* have been met (food, water, sleep and warmth). If all pupils have these needs met, the next stage is *safety*. How safe and secure does a pupil feel in their classroom? Adults greet pupils at the beginning of every session, encouraging emotional literacy.

All pupils need to feel *unconditional positive regard and a sense of belonging* in our classrooms - that they belong to the group and have strong relationships with their peers and adults. The next stage is *esteem*. All pupils need to feel good about themselves. Are we giving powerful verbal feedback to support their self-esteem? Do pupils believe that their peers think positively about them?

Maslow's final stage is *self-actualisation*. In theory, if pupils have all of the previous stages met, they can achieve and create at their full potential. We should not assume that all pupils should be achieving at their full potential once they enter the classroom.



Classrooms spaces are designed to maximise teacher interaction, both with individual pupils and with the class group as a whole. Wubbels et al (2015) argue that teachers differ in the extent to which they establish warm, supportive relationships at these two levels. A teacher who shows much support to the individual may not be able to establish supportive interactions during whole-class teaching. Another teacher may convey much warmth or support when teaching the class as a whole but may keep individual interaction formal and less supportive.

Therefore, it is important teachers plan and reflect to give balance to both individual and whole class interaction in every session. By modelling supportive interactions and emotional literacy in general, teachers communicate to their pupils the value of prosocial interaction and behaviour (Farmer et al, 2011).

Lastly, Covid safety, risk assessment and social distancing is in operation at all times.

### **Useful Websites:**

[Seven Steps for Setting up a Stellar Autism Classroom: Visuals](#)

[Autism Classroom Tours: Guided Video Tours](#)

[How to Set Up an Autism Classroom](#)

### **For parents:**

[Excellent Ways to Create a Peaceful and Calming Bedroom Space](#)