

## LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

# CREATING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

*Education Journal* looks at how schools can cater to students with special education needs

According to recent data from Ebdaah, the number of children being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders has risen from one in every 1,500 people twenty years ago, to one in every 63 today. Whether this is a case of a rise in learning challenges among children, or simply a matter of more awareness is up for debate.

Mo Hart, head of learning enhancement at Horizon School, Dubai says: “There is an increased awareness of specific difficulties these days and so it seems that learning difficulties have increased. Some of this is as a result of improved screening and assessment procedures but I also feel that there is an increase in some learning difficulties due to the lack of access to physical activities which develop children’s gross and fine motor skills which are a prerequisite to academic learning.”

Ebdaah director of education and training Andrew Westerman agrees that while there is more awareness,



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↑ Many of the approaches needed for SEN can actually benefit all learners, says Andrew Westerman.

certain learning disabilities are also on the increase.

“Schools are much more aware of learning disabilities and how to identify students. However, it is clear that some learning disabilities are on the increase. The most obvious example of this is autism, where the numbers have risen dramatically during recent years. It is also clear that many children are entering school with poorer levels of language, physical development, and ability to concentrate than in previous generations. This is not usually due to learning disabilities, but a lack of opportunity to develop those skills.”

Screening students for learning challenges is a continuous process, says

Emma Dibden, head of learning support at Jumeirah English Speaking School (JESS). She explains: “Through a regular schedule of standardised assessments, using international benchmarking tools, we monitor the progress of all students, identifying those working at, and beyond, expectations and those who are facing some barriers to learning.”

JESS uses psychometric tests to screen for potential learning difficulties, and teachers and parents plan together for next steps. Class teachers at JESS also work in partnership with senior management and the Oasis team — the school’s learning support department — to identify and respond to learning progress concerns.

Horizon School, Dubai uses data from GL Education's assessment tools.

"A combination of CAT4, Progress Tests and Baseline for early years as well as PASS (assessing emotional and social welfare) to identify children with potential difficulties provides leaders with a well-rounded attainment picture to analyse.

"Class teachers will also raise initial concerns regarding children they feel may have learning difficulties and refer them to our department. Depending on the difficulties identified children are then screened using SNAP (special needs assessment profile), dyslexia or dyscalculia screeners, TAPs for auditory processing or the Aston Index," explains Hart.

Westerman also highlights the need for trained experts in the screening process. He says: "The screening is to help professionals understand the issues and provide appropriate and specific interventions to help. A trained expert such as an educational psychologist is needed to do some screening and interpretation of results, but suitably trained school-based staff can also deliver screening in some areas."

Once students are screened and confirmed to have a learning difficulty, schools then need to work on providing



↑ Andrew Westerman, Ebdaah.

a "curriculum delivered in a way that is appropriate to their age and stage", advises Westerman.

Hart adds: "Class teachers differentiate learning for the needs of all children in their class, if however, despite class differentiated learning children do not make expected progress, this is discussed with parents and children are put on to the Wave support programme."

Wave 1 learning support is planned for and provided by the class teachers and teaching assistants either on a one-to-one basis or in small groups at Horizon School, Dubai.

"If the Wave 1 support has not made the expected impact on the children's learning, they are then observed and/or screened and a discussion is carried out with the teacher and parents on how



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the student will then receive Wave 2 support. Wave 2 support is provided by a special needs teacher or special needs teaching assistant. This is one-to-one or in small groups and geared towards each child's specific needs. An individual education plan is developed for each child with targets that lead towards accelerated progress and the closing of gaps in their learning. Children on Wave 2 are supported for many areas of learning: gross and fine motor skills, language and communication, self-esteem and confidence, phonics, handwriting, reading and maths," Hart adds.

At JESS, the Oasis team may adapt classroom practice and environment, offer in-class differentiation support or withdraw children for specialist interventions, depending on the individual learning need.

"The content of our curriculum is taught in a manner that suits the individual needs of all our students through modification of tasks, resources and support. The Oasis team are actively engaged in assisting teachers to differentiate planning and prepare appropriate resources," Dibden explains.

"The 'learning conversations' that follow our assessment process, are designed to establish gaps in learning and consequently inform future planning – to personalise learning for our students with AEN," she adds.



↑ A SEN-focused training programme held by Ebdaah.



The Oasis team and class teachers work diligently with all our students to foster independence and to build strong foundations in learning that allow our students to succeed beyond our reaches and into adulthood.”

— Emma Dibden

### TEACHER TRAINING

Training teachers to identify students with special education needs is an important part of catering to children with learning difficulties.

Westerman says: “All staff members need a good understanding of the variety of learning disabilities they are likely to meet in the classroom, including the nature of conditions, issues that arise as a result, and strategies to support such individuals. Many of the approaches needed for SEN actually benefit all learners, and when implemented reduce the need to differentiate the cur-



↑ Teachers at a SEN-focused training course.

riculum specifically for a few individuals. Understanding the problems of dyslexia, or reduced working memory, and modifying the teaching approach accordingly, can benefit many learners without specific difficulties.

“Secondly, staff may need specific training if they are required to teach a student with less common conditions, or those that require specialised responses. Examples might include autism or Down’s syndrome.”

At Horizon, teacher training to address learning difficulties is part of the school’s professional development programme.

“This [professional] development is provided through presentations and workshops in school, led by the special needs department and external specialists. Teachers are also given the opportunity to attend appropriate external presentations, training and workshops to further their knowledge and enhance their ability to support children with specific difficulties. Members of the special needs department meet regularly with class teachers to discuss with, and advise on, the best ways to support individual children with difficulties; these include strategies, accommodations and the use of special resources for specific difficulties,” explains Hart.

Jumeirah English Speaking School follows a similar knowledge-sharing concept. Dibden notes: “There is a commitment within the experienced Oasis team to share our specialist knowledge. We guide and advise our class teachers about various special educational needs relevant to our students.

Teachers are helped to identify the associated potential barriers to students learning and the best adaptations for support. Comprehensive training is provided for teachers through the whole school in-service sessions and drop-in workshops. Additionally, our Oasis ‘Link Teachers’ offer a point of



↑ Screening students for learning challenges is a continuous process.

contact for concerns and facilitate appropriate graduated response to the learning needs of the students within each year group.”

Furthermore, teachers also work on ensuring students with special educational needs receive equal opportunities for academic achievement.

Hart states: “Children are supported in their accessing of the curriculum through modifications, adaptations and support, which put children on the same level playing field as children without SEN needs and ensures they are not at a disadvantage due to their area of difficulty. The progress of students is measured against their starting point, so whilst the ultimate goal is always for children to reach, or surpass, the attainment expectations of the curriculum, if they have that cognitive potential, the main focus on that journey is their progress.

“At Horizon School the progress of children with SEN is in line with the whole school expectation of progress and in many cases exceeds it. The inclusive environment is strong within the school and can be seen in the range of children with different SEN. Children with a variety and range of special physical, behavioural, communication and learning based needs can be seen in every year group.”

“All children are fully integrated into their classes and supported within class the majority of the time. Teachers have an excellent understanding of all their children’s needs and ensure all modifications are in place so that all children including those with SEN are given equal opportunities for academic achievement,” she adds.

Inclusive education is also a core part of the new UAE school inspection framework, introduced in 2015/2016. Schools are inspected on several provisions for students with special education needs, including differentiation, assessment, level of work, grouping, and enrichment programmes.



↑ Mo Hart, Horizon School, Dubai.



↑ Emma Dibden, Jumeirah English Speaking School.



↑ A student receives one-on-one attention from a teacher at Horizon English School.

“A Dubai School Inspection Bureau inspector recently described that ‘high quality provision’ and ‘meeting the needs of all students with special educational needs’ were central to the ethos at JESS. We advocate that all our students should successfully access quality first provision in their classroom.

“The Oasis team and class teachers work diligently with all our students to foster independence and to build strong foundations in learning that allow our students to succeed beyond our reaches and into adulthood,” says Dibden.

Westerman notes the quality of staff is an important element of schools that successfully provide an inclusive environment for students.

“The best resource in any school is the members of staff who work directly with students. This means not only teachers, but a range of other professionals who work together to ensure a high standard. Investing in raising the understanding and skill level of staff is the single biggest thing a school can do to influence the success of students with SEN,” he says. 