



Do you have an issue concerning the special educational needs of any of your students? **Carol Frankl** is on hand to help...

Q

I have been told a new child is coming into my class in two weeks. He has Down's syndrome and is statemented. I have been teaching for five years but I am experiencing anxiety about accommodating and helping a child with complex needs. I feel I should know what to do by now; can you help?

A It is usual to feel unsettled when a child's identified needs present you with a new challenge to add to your teaching repertoire. I recall integrating a young man with Down's syndrome into a secondary school in year 7. His learning was slower than his peers with a spiky profile, sometimes below the standard of the rest of the class. However, it was his other complex needs that we needed to think about carefully. We dealt with issues as they arose, but in hindsight it would have been better if we had planned his social integration more carefully. This lad loved to touch everyone he came across, for example, which caused some difficulties as you can imagine! We quickly put in place sessions with a TA to raise his awareness about proximity and touching and he soon adapted to these expectations in relation to 'big school'. Another issue we faced was his poor organisation. He would come with all his books in his bag for the day, but it was very difficult for him to sort the correct one for each lesson. We solved this by 'buddying' him up with class volunteers for different lessons, who would help him choose the right books and equipment from his locker.

Once we were able to identify his learning needs accurately, we planned accordingly. Our strategy was to build learning around his strengths, being careful to introduce challenges in a measured way that he could handle. His self-esteem in learning was better in some subjects than others, so we looked at how and when he coped well and worked at transferring these skills into lessons where he felt less confident. An important part of this strategy was identifying key vocabulary, having it up on the board and pre-teaching it (lots of the other pupils appreciated this too!)

I have since learned the importance of preparing the class for the arrival of every new pupil. In this case I would plan a class discussion around issues of disability and Down's in



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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particular, emphasising that this student is just 'one of us'. Discussions like this gives classmates a safe place to explore their questions and think about the wonder of uniqueness.

The young man I discussed earlier was very sociable; he developed his place in the heart of the school community and achieved well throughout his five years.

Q I find it difficult to settle my class after the lunch break, especially my SEN boys who find it difficult to switch from football to French! Any suggestions?

A

I can imagine how difficult this transfer can be. Letting off steam in the playground during break and lunch is essential and settling back to learning is a big transition. Regard this part of the day as just that, a transition, and imagine what you would do if you were transitioning yourself from a party to work. How do you prepare? You might picture yourself in the new situation, anticipating how it is going to be. You may be wearing different clothes (difficult to change in this case), or sitting in different surroundings, plus much more. Is it possible to help your boys with this transition to lessons by thinking about the responsibility both you and they can take to prepare?

I worked with a class who were a nightmare to settle after lunch. On several occasions I started by observing what was happening in the playground in the ten minutes before the bell went, and learned a lot. These boys were passionate about their match and didn't want it interrupted by lessons. So I brought aspects of the game into the classroom. As they came in I commented on what I had seen, and asked who won. We started keeping a record of the scores – you have the added bonus of being able to do all of this in French! We discussed together ways in which the transition could be made easier, including giving the boys a five-minute warning that the lesson was about to start. We also involved the whole class in devising short, fun activities to begin the lesson and once everyone was engaged it was much easier to begin the planned teaching.