



Ask the Expert: SEN

Regular TS expert **Carol Frankl** takes on two more dilemmas related to the issue of special educational needs...

Q

How can I be sure that struggling readers are able to access texts in my lessons?

A At the age of 11 when children enter secondary school the minimum reading age that they require to access the first page of any text book is nine years. At this level, however, they will not be reading

fluently with complete understanding. They may become confused by too much detail or description, and have difficulty identifying and processing the most important ideas in the text, especially if the print is small and/or the sentence structure very complex. In some schools the percentage of children arriving in Y7 with a reading age below nine will be between 10 and 30%. Most of these children will have struggled with reading for many years and there is unlikely to be a 'quick fix'. As well as planning to ensure all children can understand texts, you are likely to be dealing with issues of poor self esteem as well.

In my experience, it is really worthwhile teaching all children how to use the texts books and other written work they will come across during their secondary education, as early as possible. Techniques such as skimming and scanning, and paying attention to the first and last lines of paragraphs to gain the essential meaning of reading, are really useful. Pre-teaching of difficult words or subject-specific vocabulary is invaluable. This can be done by creating and laminating word banks of key vocabulary and phrases both for display on walls and to be given to pupils individually. At the beginning of a topic, lesson or week, spend some time talking about these words, their meanings and how they might be used in both reading and writing.

Where possible, working in mixed ability groups for discussion and problem solving benefits everyone. Good readers will explain to those who struggle, and this is a win-win situation, as through explaining to another, reinforcement and over learning happens.

It is essential to teach all children in a multi-sensory way so they can use favourite modes to learn and also sharpen and grow those that aren't so natural. So instead of spending most of your time talking to (or at) pupils, ask them to problem solve in groups or pairs; make available practical apparatus; teach such skills as SWOT analysis, and encourage the use of mind maps, drawings and diagrams.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAROL FRANKL HAS OVER 30 YEARS EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD OF SEN. IN ADDITION TO BEING A PASSIONATE EDUCATOR, SHE IS A REGULAR SPEAKER, A PROVIDER OF SEN TRAINING AND CONSULTANCY, AND FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE SOUTHOVER PARTNERSHIP, ONE OF THE UK'S LEADING INDEPENDENT AND MANAGED SEN ORGANISATIONS, WHICH PROVIDES A MULTI-FACETED APPROACH TO SEN, INCLUDING A SPECIAL SCHOOL (THE SOUTHOVER PARTNERSHIP SCHOOL), AND EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES COMPRISING A SUPPORT-IN-SCHOOL SERVICE, A SPECIALIST SUPPORT TEAM OF EXPERTS AND STAFF TRAINING AND CONSULTANCY. FIND OUT MORE AT SOUTHOVERPARTNERSHIP.COM.

I have a child in my class with Asperger's syndrome. Please explain the difference between Asperger's and autism and suggest some strategies to help him.

A

The simplest explanation for the difference between a student with autism and Aspergers is that the latter will often be described as 'high functioning' or cognitively able. Having a child in your class with Asperger's can be both delightful and challenging. I remember my first

AS student in year 8. I could have rational discussions with him, but he would argue the smallest points endlessly in lessons and I soon realised I had to find ways to keep him learning and ensure the pace of the lessons was appropriate to the rest of the class – some quick and creative thinking was required. One of my first successes was to realise the importance of not setting myself up for an 'argument', so I made sure plenty of discussion took place in groups. Instead of each group reporting back to the whole class, which can be a little tedious, they reported to each other. They would then write their ideas down on strips of flip chart paper and put them on the walls. The class discussion would be led by students as they presented their ideas.

Students with both Asperger's and autism like to know exactly what is happening next and if there are to be any changes in an expected routine, these youngsters will need to be prepared in advance. This can be done through discussion, or if necessary by creating a 'social story', which describes a situation, skill or idea in a detailed way taking into account social cues, common responses and perspectives in a quiet, logical manner so that it can be easily understood (thegraycenter.org/social-stories).

The use of visual timetables can also reduce anxiety. In secondary school it is not often appropriate to do this for the whole class, but they can be offered to those learners who would benefit. My student certainly appreciated knowing at the beginning of my lesson, exactly what we would be doing, when – I would either give him my lesson plan, or just write a brief outline, with timings if possible.