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## Keeping All of Your Passengers on the Plane: creating truly inclusive, human-scale secondary education for all, including those with special educational needs

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**ABSTRACT** Stanley Park High School, Carshalton was designated a Building Schools for the Future 'One School Pathfinder' in 2006, and charged with being innovative in all aspects of schooling. This article, which links with a number of other contributions in this issue of *FORUM* about interconnected practices at the school, will focus on one of the four schools-within-a-school (SWS), Horizon. This SWS is markedly different from the other three because it contains two opportunity bases – Aqua and Ignis – that in total meet the needs of 91 students with an Education and Health Care Plan for Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), a provision that we believe to be unique within a mainstream secondary setting in England.

In the first article in *FORUM* about Stanley Park High School, Carshalton (Taylor, 2017), an analogy was made between the difficult take-off experienced out of Chambéry Airport 20 years ago and the challenges Stanley Park High faced in the early years as a 'One School Pathfinder'. We will return to the analogy with flying for the sake of continuity. In recent years, there has been increasing evidence of students being metaphorically jettisoned, often without the parachute of suitable alternative provision, as planes cruise across the skies. Most of these passengers have crossed the halfway point in their journey, with many having started their descent, but they leave the plane before its final approach.

In 'Do Schools Really Get Rid of Pupils to Climb League Tables?' (Santri & Bloom, 2017), Charlotte Santri and Adi Bloom draw on research published

by Education Datalab that referred to unnamed secondary schools moving students from their school rolls to enhance their standing in league tables. Based on the 2015 external examination cohort, the research showed that 129 secondary schools, or about 4% of the total number in England, would have seen a 5% fall in the percentage of students achieving 5+ A\*-C GCSE grades, including English and maths, if results had included those candidates removed from school rolls before the statutory school census in October 2014. Among the 129 schools, a number were affiliated to academy chains that are routinely held up as exemplars of excellent practice by both Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE). For example, the Harris Federation had four schools in the top 26 nationally with the biggest decreases in GCSE results once the leavers were factored in. The two Harris Academies with the greatest decrease were Harris Academy, Beckenham (11.9%) and Harris Academy Battersea (9.3%).

Drawing on the same research by Datalab, on 21 January 2016 the *Guardian* newspaper (in an article by Warwick Mansell, Richard Adams and Patrick Edwards) published figures showing that mainstream school rolls fell by 12,193, or 2.3%, from 524,093 to 511,900, between the time these pupils were aged 13 to 14 – in Year 9 – to when they were aged 15 or 16 – in their GCSE year of Year 11. According to a recent news article in *Schools Week* dated 9 November 2017 and entitled 'SEND pupils "pushed out" of mainstream schools', an increasing number of the students 'leaving' secondary schools have education health and care plans (EHCPs). This assertion is supported by research undertaken by the National Association of Special Educational Needs which shows that the proportion of students with statements or EHCPs in special schools has grown from 36 per cent in 2007 to 44 per cent for maintained special schools in 2017. For independent special schools, there has been a similar rise – from 38 per cent to 45 per cent. These increases are despite the proportion of pupils nationally who have a statement or EHCP having remained stable at 2.8 per cent for most of the past decade. It is clear that parental preference has a significant role to play in this, but the data could also suggest that secondary schools are becoming less inclusive, with SEND (special educational needs and disability) students being discarded because of ever-tightening accountability measures.

As with a lot of things in education, Stanley Park High appears to be bucking the trend in becoming more inclusive. Based on 2015/2016 data, 6.4% of the students at our school have an EHCP, nearly four times the national figure (1.7%) for mainstream secondary schools. This is significantly above those schools in Sutton that are most similar to us in terms of attainment on entry – Carshalton High School for Girls (0.7%) and Carshalton Boys Sports College (1.4%). At our most recent census (October 2017), 7.19% had an EHCP. Overall, 29.38% of students are on the school's SEND register, just over twice the national average.

Most EHCPs at Stanley Park High are for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). These students are based in one of our two Opportunity Bases: Aqua and Ignis. Established in 2003, Aqua is the senior of the two at

Stanley Park High. It was originally designed for 35 students with a statement for 'mild' autism. At the time, the entry requirement stipulated that students must be able to participate in mainstream lessons for at least 70% of their lessons, typically returning to the base for speech and language, drama therapy and other specialised support. This entry requirement has, in recent years, been increased to 90%.

The majority of the rest of this article will focus on Ignis, a more recent addition at Stanley Park High, having joined our provision in April 2012, one term after we opened our new school. As a result, our first cohort is currently in the sixth form. Ignis is a base for 56 students with 'moderate' autism. At the outset, and due to the level of need, it was never envisaged that these students would access lessons in the three mainstream schools-within-a-school (SWS): Performance, Trade and World. They would be a separate entity and, furthermore, would have little, if any, classroom interaction with their peers in Aqua.

All Ignis students have significant social communication difficulties. These may be characterised by: an inability to read non-verbal communications such as facial expressions, body gestures and changing vocal tones; a professorial, monotone manner of speaking; discomfort at 'small talk' and an unwillingness to see the logic in it; poor ability at eye contact; a penchant for interrupting others; difficulty understanding figures of speech, euphemisms and analogies; difficulty in staying on topic and following the thread of a conversation; giving long monologues when the listener wants them to stop (Carley, 2008). Despite these commonalities, they are all very different people, and many have a subsidiary special educational need.

At the start of their Ignis journey in Years 7 and 8, students spend most of their time in their base in Horizon school, where they study the core subjects and a version of our unique Excellent Futures Curriculum (EFC) (see articles in this issue by Katie Alden, Jackie Thomas and Susan Noble). EFC is a challenge for students with social communication difficulties because of the collaborative nature of the pedagogy. It has been adapted by emphasising a smaller number of the attributes that are the building blocks of the projects. In addition, great consideration is given to the interests of the students because one of the characteristics of ASC is that there tends to be intense absorption in a particular topic or field of interest. This can sometimes be viewed negatively. An individual may often be seen as obsessed, and be driven further into this absorption by anxiety and stress. However, we choose to see the positive side, and to regard the individual as being passionate about a topic or field of interest (Carley, 2008). These passions are many and varied; they can range from *Doctor Who* to high-end motor vehicles.

Myers (2010) argues that skills such as turn-taking, how to speak to a stranger, how to share, how to catch a bus, how to buy a ticket and how to order in a café are often overlooked or given a low priority because many children with ASC are significantly behind in terms of educational attainment, speech and social skills. At Stanley Park, all Ignis students have four lessons

specifically allocated to life skills, with support from a qualified speech and language therapist. Many of these lessons result in students going out into the local community. They go shopping, having made a list and ensured that what they want is within their budget. They take their own money and buy their own items, thereby learning the social conventions, including the illogical small talk with the cashier.

Ignis students also follow programmes put in place by occupational therapists and sensory professionals. Occupational therapy is very important for students with autism because many have problems with fine motor skills (which can cause illegible handwriting), and poor coordination, balance and bodily rhythm. Involuntary reflex actions such as flapping their hands or feet, rocking or making noises are also common (Carley, 2008). To support our students, we use the local Diamond Horse Riding Centre. Research by Bass et al (2009) highlights the beneficial effect of therapeutic horseback riding on social functioning in children with autism. It also engages students who have a love of animals, and is excellent at developing core stability.

Autistic children are very likely to have sensory issues: difficulty processing certain types of lighting, certain smells, tastes, fabrics or noises. They like routine, are prone to inflexibility and dislike change, or things that are not familiar (Carley, 2008). In Years 7 and 8 we prepare students for integration into the mainstream classes in Year 9 for at least two option subjects. In Year 7 Ignis students initially access part of the mainstream environment. For example, they have IT lessons in World school's IT suite, technology lessons in Trade school's construction room, and PE in the Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) attached to Performance school. This provides the students with the opportunity to become familiar with the mainstream environment while accompanied by adults they know. Many students prefer to remain in Ignis during breaks and lunchtime; however, the majority take the opportunity to use the mainstream dining facilities, albeit shortly before the rest of the student body has lunch, and to utilise our large atrium at the heart of the four small schools.

In Year 9 all Stanley Parkers embark on our innovative and responsive Taster Options programme. Students choose four of 27 option subjects in the autumn term, another four in the spring term, and then select four of the eight they have tasted from the start of the summer term. These continue to accreditation in the summer of Year 11. The selection of these option subjects sees the students often journey from their home school to one of the other SWS. This exposes them to forming new relationships with teachers they haven't been taught by before and other students they haven't previously learnt alongside. Although unlikely to be as significant as the transition from primary to secondary school, this moment still has the potential to create anxiety in students, particularly those in Ignis. To help smooth this transition, Ignis students often select only one or two tasters during the first two terms. Initially they are accompanied by a member of staff, typically a Learning Support Assistant (LSA), from Ignis, but over time they are encouraged to make their

journey to one of the other three schools by themselves. Option choices are varied. There is a keen interest in IT, in computer science and, despite any fine motor problems, in vocational subjects such as construction and motor vehicle engineering. Such experiences are vitally important (Breakey, 2006) because only 16% of people with an ASC diagnosis will have a full-time job (Office for National Statistics, 2016).

To support these experiences, employability and independence are emphasised within the Ignis curriculum. Students learn how to write a CV, are taught interview techniques, and have practice interviews. This includes how to listen to a question rather than just how to share a focus interest, how to ask for clarification of a question, and how to receive feedback about the practice interview from a less familiar adult. In so doing, they tackle the difficulty that making eye contact can generate. The success of this is indicated by the fact that all of our current year 12 ASC students, when interviewed for a place in the sixth form, had the interview independently.

Has inclusion worked? If we are honest, the proposed integration of both Aqua (2003) and Ignis (2012) into a mainstream setting resulted in a degree of concern among staff who worked in the school at the time. We felt we were dealing with the unknown, and that integrating students with a broad range of mild and moderate autistic needs would add to the challenges the school was experiencing at the time. Could it become the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back?

Nothing could be further from the truth. The integration of the two bases has done much to enrich our school community, with benefits felt by both mainstream and autistic students. Our first Ignis cohort will be leaving us at the end of the next academic year, having studied BTEC and A-level examinations alongside their mainstream peers. Their success will be partially represented by grades in these examinations. Less evidenced will be the individual journeys they have been on in order to overcome the social communication difficulties they face.

It is simply not possible in this article to do justice to each of these journeys. However, we feel it important to highlight one. Freddie joined us in the spring of 2012. Initially, he spent virtually all of his time in the base, often choosing to be in his own company. He was an aggressive 12-year-old and had wonderfully colourful language. If he didn't agree with something, he would certainly let you know. On occasion, words were not enough; he lashed out. As a coping strategy he would often take himself into one of the small break-out rooms that we have within our classrooms. He would barricade himself in and it would take a considerable amount of time to coax him out.

Fast forward to Year 11 and Freddie had come on immeasurably. He was in mainstream lessons, and at lunch he was happy sitting in our large and sometimes noisy atrium with the rest of Stanley Park's 1300 students. One lunchtime he approached the teacher on duty in our large MUGA to ask whether he could join in with the boys playing football. Despite having clear routines built up over many years, our Year 11 mainstream boys welcomed

Freddie's participation, despite his struggle with aspects of physical coordination. Freddie is now in Year 13 studying Level 3 BTEC Creative Media, IT, and the ASDAN course, having achieved a distinction in Design-Engineer-Construct and passes in Motor Vehicle Engineering, Media Studies and English. He, just like his peers, has achieved so much. There are times when we could have thrown him from the plane, but all of our lives would have been impoverished as a result. Who says inclusion doesn't work?

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