

The Importance of Communication and Movement Breaks for Pupils

How a pupil's unique sensory system can be a gateway to learning



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This article argues that because of a rise in anxiety upon the return to school, it has never been more important for teachers to understand the function and components of a movement break. It discusses inclusion, communication, and sensory processing disorder and how these variables influence a movement break. It also shares recent input from teachers and parents.

Discussions I have had with hundreds of education professionals, especially in special education, always lead back to a simple question: What to do with pupils who find it difficult to cope? How do we cater for the unique needs of pupils aged 4–18 who present with learning difficulties; aversive behaviour; sensory dysfunction; traits of autism, ADHD, or oppositional defiance disorder; or signs of sociopathic tendencies?

And what of those who have a professional diagnosis? What of those who have a physical disability or a learning disability, or non-verbal learners who present with multiple disabilities?

Whatever the difficulty or diagnosis, the question repeatedly posed to me by dedicated educators is the same: What can I do to support inclusion and enhance the wellbeing of this pupil, who at times appears lost in the class, when so many pupils have varying levels of additional needs? Can we can help them to regulate body and mind and ease them into a state of readiness to learn?

Inclusion

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2011) describes inclusion as a process of 'removing barriers so that each learner will be enabled to achieve the maximum benefit. ... Schools with strong inclusive cultures are characterised by ... a commitment to developing students' academic, social, emotional and independent living skills.'

In a general context, inclusion is the extent to which each pupil is integrated in their own unique setting and supported to maintain a state of readiness to learn. The EPSEN Act in the Republic of Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2004) and the Code of Practice in Northern Ireland (DENI, 1998) require the creation of inclusive learning environments in schools in Ireland.

Challenging behaviour can hamper inclusion and is one of the most obvious indicators that a pupil is not in a state of readiness to learn. Since

challenging behaviour is unlikely to go unnoticed, it could be considered to have a valid communicative function (Durand & Merges, 2001). Irish teachers have reported that pupils engage in unique anxiety-based challenging behaviours, and many seminars and webinars are on offer in education centres across the country to upskill teachers in managing such behaviour and understanding sensory needs.

Common barriers to learning, or factors that lead to exclusion, include difficulties with literacy, numeracy, concentration, processing, retention, and computation; sensory processing disorders; challenging behaviour; and diagnosed physical, intellectual, and multiple disabilities – all of which are believed to contribute to difficulties with communication.

Communication and special educational needs (SEN) – what the research says

‘Communication problems appear to be a defining feature of people with learning disabilities,’ according to Purcell et al. (1999, p. 16). Meaningful inclusion relies on good communication, self-awareness for both pupil and teacher, and an insight into whose responsibility it is to repair ineffective communicative exchanges in the classroom.

Good communication can reduce challenging behaviour. However, Goetz (1993) writes, ‘the communication challenge belongs to those with typical communication skills as well as to the pupil who has more limited use of communication’. The more competent the communicator, according to Goetz, the more likely it is that meaning will be successfully and mutually inferred.

Communication is at the core of the curriculum and includes verbal and non-verbal methods of giving and receiving information. Interaction, far from being solely a verbal exchange, involves many elements, all of which must be taken into account (NCCA, 2007). Early learning includes perceptual, sensory, social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development to enable a pupil to interact with others.

Topics of interest and choice-making are important when developing communication skills, where a good communicative environment will provide pupils with opportunities to interact with others, make choices, and become more self-determining (Clerkin, 1993). Choice-making for pupils with disabilities is ‘directly proportionate to the opportunities provided’ (Bambara, 2004, pp. 169–171), which implies that we as teachers need to be versatile, creative, consistent, and open-minded when working on communication and when discussing with pupils what movement break best suits them.

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Sensory processing disorder – what the research says

Before we communicate about the world around us, we must first interpret through the senses. Sensory processing refers to how the nervous system receives messages from the senses and turns them into appropriate motor and behavioural responses (Sensory Processing Disorder Network, 2000).

The implications for teaching those with sensory processing disorder SPD are that the educator needs an insight into the pupil's specific sensory needs when planning educational activities. Pupils with a sensory impairment – 'complications receiving input through the senses' (Slavin 2006) – may have great difficulty communicating with others (Pagliano, 2001).

Identifying and incorporating a pupil's preferred activities into their school day tells its own story about their level of sensory tolerance. It may contribute to interventions designed to support inclusion, as we tailor activities to meet the pupil's regulatory needs, whether this is a single-channel sensory activity based on visual, auditory, tactile, proprioceptive, or vestibular sensory stimulation or a combination (Snell et al., 2006).

Our senses govern our experience from birth to death, protecting us from potential harm and helping us to interpret preferences: favourite foods, smells, and types of movement, for example. The sensory inputs of a single experience may be liked and disliked in equal measure, such as the smell of hot tar, the loud beat of a drum, the taste of liquorice, or the experience of a horror film or roller coaster. Memory helps us to make sense of the world, as previous experience becomes a guiding reference point.

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When it comes to designing a movement break, it therefore makes sense that pupils will learn to develop a behavioural trajectory as a sort of invisible management plan to cope with the external demands of the environment. They may cover their ears, swing on a chair, fidget, vocalise demands for attention, or run around when required to sit.

Sensory deregulation is often a barrier to learning: some of us find it harder to concentrate when there is a fly buzzing nearby, an unwelcome smell, or a flickering light. For a child with communication difficulties and a distorted sensory landscape, coping alone may supersede processing this sensation and articulating it as an inhibiting factor. Pupils create a repertoire of behaviours to help them cope, whether these are connection-seeking or avoidant.

Teacher and parent surveys on self-regulation post-lockdown

In a September 2021 survey of teachers working with pupils with special needs, 65% said that time alone was most beneficial when they needed to regulate themselves:

Read, go for a walk, go to the gym, watch a light-hearted show on TV ... I need quietness to gather my thoughts ... Escape from the noise. Breathe. Talk myself through the situation ... Need time alone to think things through clearly first before responding. (Teacher Questionnaire¹)

The other 35% said they need to feel connected with others to regulate themselves. One said, 'I'm a talker ... I feel better after sharing ... If upset I like a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on if needed' (ibid.). This is essentially the only thing that works for some people.

Children show a similar pattern. In a survey of parents, 57% said their child preferred calm or time alone in moments of difficulty, while 43% said their child needed connection and attention-giving experiences to regulate themselves. The latter parents described symptoms such as ‘worry, anger, feels sick, clingy, unable to communicate, nail-biting, tantrums, weepy, constant talking and questioning, seeking reassurance, pretends to be ill so she doesn’t have to go to school’ (Parent Questionnaire²).

When teachers were asked how they felt the pandemic had affected inclusion for their pupils, they replied:

Attachment anxiety has increased ... increased social/performance anxiety ... schools are far more important than they are given credit for, but we have very little supports from government ... lots of students feel very overwhelmed ... seem younger than they are ... anxiety levels are very high, lack of routine and social interaction has put many students back years in terms of behaviour and communication skills that they have learned.

The more sensitive children definitely worry more ... in a DEIS environment, school as their safe place has been closed too often and for too long, and children have been stuck on video games and electronics for up to 12 hours a day and with adults who were not coping themselves ... Increase in anxiety as a result of uncertainty ... It has really exacerbated some pupils’ anxiety levels ... routine is important for children to feel safe and to emotionally regulate.

Massively affected mental health and social confidence in our school ... pupils have trouble regulating their emotions in school ... caused regression, aggression in some pupils ... they are quieter and less engaged ... disengaged from learning, as the collective psyche appears to have a more short-term worldview, similar to a post-wartime era ... Addiction to phones/technology is noticeable ... trauma responses will become increasingly apparent in the coming months and years ... engagement with their peers has become strained and difficult ... how can one learn if one has anxiety? ... It’s made them less sociable ... I see a big rise in children having gained a lot of weight, and their mobility has been affected ... separation anxiety ... anger issues ... struggling with anxiety. Lower test scores, more school refusal. (Teacher Questionnaire)

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Moving forward, ‘feeling okay’ seems to be an essential component of inclusion and readiness to learn, whether it is cognitive, physical, emotional, or psychological. When considering a movement break for a pupil, let’s first consider variables such as communication skills, anxiety, thoughts and feelings, and the influence of the pandemic and sensory processing dysfunction. Let us then observe whether the child seems more connection-seeking or avoidant in their historic regulatory behaviour.

We cannot overestimate the importance of attention-giving movement breaks. Let us connect and give pupils tailor-made choices about their movement breaks before expecting them to sit in a state of readiness to

learn. That may involve going quietly to water a plant, or having a predictable, structured check-in chat with a preferred adult. We are all hard-wired uniquely, and we cope with distress in different ways; our pupils are no different and have perhaps never been so collectively anxious.

Teacher perceptions are critical to developing inclusive learning environments ... Positive, accepting attitudes create the foundation ... teachers feel that [this] requires inclusive thinking and action at all levels; adequate funding; proactive leadership; responsive support infrastructure; ongoing professional development and time for joint planning; developing collaborative relationships between schools and parents. (Shevlin et al., 2009, p. 8)

While a national movement is always welcome, let's start in our own classroom, creating bespoke regulatory options for our pupils based on their unique needs. Let's cultivate a warm emotional temperature in our setting in order to meet the needs of each pupil, to enable them to regulate themselves, to feel safe and to move towards a state of readiness to learn.

And let's take responsibility for our own caseload during unpredictable times. That way we can teach our pupils self-awareness, self-management, and self-regulatory skills that they may learn only in our classroom – skills that may benefit them for a lifetime.

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ENDNOTES

1. Teacher Questionnaire – Teacher and Pupil Wellbeing <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1gjfot3xK-tYcld9dCAexgX3BNjDwNjoqBWygSRxZb0g/edit>
2. Parent Questionnaire – Child Wellbeing <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Qwfti63HjNygUCxp6gxwtProUebbL6XnXukHaFhHHhU/edit>