



MAINSTREAM AUTISM BASE REVIEW:

**MEADOWS FIRST
PARKSIDE MIDDLE**

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CONTENTS

Summary	Page 2
Observed teaching and learning in the Den	Page 3
Social and Emotional strategies in the Den	Page 5
Building relationships – peer relationships	Page 7
Building relationships – staff relationships	Page 9
Building relationships – parent relationships and wider community involvement	Page 11
Challenges for the Den going forwards and recommendations:	Page 13

SUMMARY

A highly successful provision that meets the needs of its youngsters exceptionally well, run by a committed teacher with vision and staffed by dedicated professionals

Provision for pupils at the Den (Mainstream Autism Base) is exceptional. During the assessment all pupils received a very high standard of educational and emotional support and all pupils were engaged and challenged and all were making progress.

The approach, manner and ethos of all staff in the Den were of the highest caliber. This shared purpose and genuinely collaborative approach reflects both in the excellent teaching and learning on display but also the manners and interactions of the children, who experience models of reciprocal and respectful interaction daily.



The Den focuses on making learning an intellectual challenge but staff realise that learning best happens when it is tagged to emotional involvement and concrete experiences. During the assessment there were several examples of each of these.

Children in the Den progress academically but they also thrive in terms of their emotional regulation and independence. Parents attest to this and it is clear in the movements of the pupils as they engage in daily routines and move around the building.

The practice and ethos of the Den should be highly commended and is a model of best practice. All staff are deeply committed and understand the importance of their role and the work they do. All staff are passionate about the children in their care and speak with pride and passion about their workplace. Miss Datson has fostered a team-working environment which is highly effective in meeting the learning and developmental needs of the children in the Den. This, coupled with a reflective approach and significant amounts of individualized differentiation means that every child in the Den succeeds and flourishes.

Observed teaching and learning in the Den

During the review, an English lesson and a Maths lesson were observed. Miss Datson taught both lessons, closely supported by TA staff from the Den. Teaching and Learning was excellent in both observed lessons and utilised a wide range of engagement strategies and opportunities to reference back to previous learning. Pupils were all engaged and focused in their learning.

Observations of teaching and learning:

- Miss Datson understands the importance of emotional connections in embedding concepts and learning. During an English lesson she used a multi-sensory, kinaesthetic approach to a known story to embed the learning. The lesson involved Jelly Babies, scootering, a “conker” search and a recreation of a junkyard. Miss Datson was ably assisted by TA staff during the activities and also “behind the scenes” while they prepared upcoming tasks and scenarios for the pupils. All pupils were fully engaged and were able to access the well-planned, differentiated tasks that followed.
- The Den fosters an excellent learning environment that caters to the diverse learning needs of the pupils. Den staff utilise regular movement breaks (making use of the enclosed playground nearby) to give relief to pupils and create short learning activities. External motivators (such as timed use of iPads) are used very effectively and contribute to the wider, positive praise-based reward system of the Den.
- The Den uses kinaesthetic learning and experience-based learning as frequently as appropriately possible which results in an engaged cohort of learners.
- All pupils were challenged, engaged and making progress in observed lessons.



- All staff in the Den takes lots of opportunities to use appropriate language and vocabulary to extend pupil's language. Staff were observed explicitly using descriptive adjectives and verbs and encouraging pupils to extend their own vocabulary.
- Lessons and resources are skilfully planned and differentiated. They were visually appealing and fully accessible to all pupils. Resources were presented in a consistent way (using such tools as an upright, clear plastic stand to stick Maths questions to).
- All pupils have individualised, pre-prepared workstations and settle to work quickly and comfortably. The transition from home into school is handled expertly and is a major factor in managing the anxiety and mood of the pupils. It is an excellent model of meeting the transitional and emotional needs of children on the autism spectrum.
- Excellent use of immediate rewards to motivate that are effective and appreciated by pupils such as brain breaks and timed iPad time.
- Regular use of visual timetables to show what is coming up and help manage the anxiety of pupils.
- Much thought has been given to the environment of the Den although there are restraints due to the layout and size of the provision. Areas have been created within the single room of the Den that serve to "break up" the space and give different zones of learning and activities. (e.g. Caring Zone, Book Area)
- During an English lesson the pupils were working on Have You Filled a Bucket Today? This scheme of work is supported by concrete activities (such as actually putting items in a bucket to symbolise a kind act) and is effective in both supporting the children's literacy and helping to develop Theory of Mind. It is a well-chosen resource and meets the children's learning and autism needs effectively.
- The progress of children in the Den is tracked in a variety of ways. They are tracked against age-related expectations as per the National Curriculum (baselined by Teacher Assessment) which are broken down into achievable and measurable steps. The children are also baselined and tracked against the Autism Education Trust Progression Framework for the autism and social/communication differences. Social and Emotional data on each child is also regularly gathered (around every fifteen minutes) by staff to track emotional regulation and independence.

Social and Emotional strategies in the Den

Pupils in the Den were settled and well-focused. During pupil conversations and from observation it is clear that all pupils in the Den during the assessment were settled and content. Given the inherent anxiety that an autism diagnosis brings, this is an impressive achievement. This is achieved by the calm, focused approach of all staff, strong and effective transition rituals (especially so in the morning) and a focus on emotional regulation and anxiety.

Observations of social and emotional strategies:



- Every child has their own One-Page Profile that highlights how they can be supported both academically and socially and emotionally.

- In the morning transition, calm music was used as well as battery powered tea lights on each desk. Each pupil's work was out and ready and all pupils transitioned in calmly, knowing what was expected of them and settling down to their task without complaint. It is an excellent model of meeting the

transitional and emotional needs of children on the autism spectrum.

- Pupils help in the tidying away of resources and are comfortable with these known classroom routines. Pupils show pride in themselves, each other and the Den.
- Staff treat all pupils with respect and dignity and this is reflected in the responses of the children to the staff. There is a palpable feeling of common purpose at play.

- Children were able to cope with the mild disappointment of their videos not showing on the interactive white board with impressive resilience.
- The Den has a number of strategies in place to meet the sensory needs of the pupils. They use physical exercise and movement regularly (such as scootering) and they make regular use of a sensory room in the Den. Music and calm lighting is used, as is aromatherapy putty. There are also a range of specific sensory strategies in place for individuals which they use in both the Den and mainstream lessons.
- Pupils are familiar with – and able to use – a zone of regulation model to identify their emotional state and begin to regulate themselves.



Building relationships – peer relationships

Pupils in the Den were consistently polite and well-mannered to staff and other pupils. Pupils are encouraged to socialise within the Den and with mainstream peers during both structured and unstructured times. A work station is available for use although supported paired and group work is encouraged to model and practice social skills. During a discussion with three pupils from the Den (from Years 4 and 6) they spoke highly of the provision, saying they felt safe and how patient member of staff were with them.

Observations of peer relationships:

- A pupil (D) said that the Den staff have lots of patience. “Most schools tell you what to do” but the Den thinks of ways to “make our learning easier”. D said that the Den does this through prompts, brain breaks and fun PE.
- Another pupil (C) said that when “we do learn they help us by going on trips to make our learning easier”.
- Another pupil (J) said that “most schools in other countries and other times the teacher used to be very strict. If you accidentally spilt your drink on your work they would shout. Here it is the opposite. They would just get another sheet.” J said that sometimes the pupils uses iMovie on the iPads and “we get to do it, not the teachers”.
- The three pupils were all able to talk about the two different zone boards used in class for “how naughty and how excited you are”.
- J mentioned about another pupil in the Den who can be “naughty” and he can swear at the teachers when he is angry. J said that adults in the Den deal with bad behaviour well, giving consequences such as not going on a trip.
- When asked how they feel the Den could be improved, the suggestions included: More tools to help calm down (e.g. fidget spinners) and better Wi-Fi.

- During lessons, pupils were encouraged to work together on appropriate activities. During unstructured times pupils spent time in the enclosed Den playground as well as with mainstream peers in the larger school playground.
- The Den use Circle of Friends to successfully mix Base and mainstream pupils together in a positive, semi-structured way. Mainstream pupils who involve themselves in this are included in Base-wide trips and rewards as a result. A Circle of Friends activity was observed previously which was highly successful for both Base and mainstream pupils.
- The use of Lego Therapy was observed (with three pupils) which was used accurately and to which the pupils responded well. The Lego Therapy session was effective in engaging a pupil who had arrived late and was in a somewhat heightened state.
- The Den and the School have undertaken Autism Awareness with pupils in the mainstream school and run regular staff meetings around aspects of autism.
- Regular feedback is sought from pupils using iPads and electronic “voting” on how they are feeling; these responses are reviewed and tracked and form a useful indicator of personal “hot spots” of anxiety as well as overall well-being progress over time.

Building relationships – staff relationships

One of the key strengths of the Den are the excellent relationships and shared purpose that exist among all Den staff. At the outset of the day it was clear (and has been observed on previous occasions) that all staff share a common ethos and purpose – that of a calm, reflective approach that values the individual – and know their own role in activities as well as the wider purpose. The transition into school was calm and considered and a result of this excellent approach. During a conversation with two Teaching Assistants from the Den it was clear that they relished their work and derived significant meaning from it.

Observations of staff relationships:



- All staff were respectful to each other and went about their work with dedication and a healthy dose of humour. Teaching children with such diverse needs and abilities is emotionally and physically taxing and having peer support and a reflective workplace is vital. All staff should be commended for their ethos and dedication with Miss Datson's leadership highlighted as a major factor in the Den's overall success. Staff called the Den "a fantastic place to work."
- Staff in the Den were made fully aware of lesson content and expectations and helped teach and prepare resources in a way which was smooth, and to the pupils, almost unnoticeable.

- I spoke with two Teaching Assistants in a semi-structured interview. They spoke highly of the Den, of Miss Datson and the other staff. They mentioned that the Den is “in the best place we’ve been” with a “brilliant curriculum” that addresses National Curriculum targets as well as autism needs.
- Teaching Assistants spoke of a “team feeling” and that they “feel valued and part of everything”. They mentioned that Miss Datson’s “creativity and engagement is exceptional”.
- Teaching Assistants spoke of “recognising the individual” and focusing on “experience-based learning”
- Staff are all Team Teach trained although Teaching Assistants spoken to could not recall having to use the physical interventions side of the training. Staff spoke of using de-escalation strategies.
- Staff mentioned that Miss Datson gives a lot of time to parents, even at the evenings and weekends.
- Staff spoke of a collaborative atmosphere where they “all pull together”. They have regular Monday meetings to discuss pupils and upcoming issues.
- There are key-workers assigned to liaise with mainstream staff and there has been some staff training delivered by Den staff to mainstream staff.
- Staff spoke about how the balance of pupils in the Den from Meadows (First School) and Parkside (Middle School) is important although this does fluctuate depending on the year and intake. Staff mentioned that they have only had two girls on roll at the Den.
- Staff said that more teachers from mainstream are coming to the Den for advice and support.
- Staff mentioned that they have, in past, had some pupils in the Den that have displayed very challenging behaviour that have disrupted the learning and emotional state of the other pupils.

Building relationships – parent relationships and wider community involvement

The Den has a regularly-updated web presence on the school website that tells parents key information about the school as well as being regularly updated with photographs. The web pages are up to date and informative.

The Den engages in many trips and projects involving outside agencies (such as banks, animal charities, railways, gyms) and seeks to link learning to real-life situations and environments where possible.

The Den holds termly review meetings for parents/carers. Miss Datson has an open-door policy and encourages questions and enquires. Two whole-family events are run each year where siblings and parents/carers are invited.

During the review two parents were spoken to who both spoke very highly of the Den and its positive impact on their children. They felt that communication was generally very good and they would be eager to learn more about certain strategies used with the Den so they could be used at home.

Notes from a discussion with two parents of children in the Den:

- Both parents spoke of how pleased they were with their children's progress in the Den. One parent spoke of how her child had struggled in mainstream but now his education is tailored to his needs. "The difference made has been great".
- Parents said that they had termly meetings with Miss Datson although she is available to speak to generally.

- One parent said that her child works well in the Den however does not seem to cope so well in the afternoon, mainstream lesson.
- One parent said that their child is starting to ask for help and is beginning to identify emotions. Parents talked about their children beginning to develop independence.
- Parents said they “cannot fault” the dedication of the staff and they praise their focus on emotional well-being and a focus on keeping the children calm and happy.
- Parents said that communication between staff and parents is good with information passed on in planners and by staff at the end of the day if appropriate.
- Parents praised the use of Circle of Friends as a strategy.
- A parent of a child in Meadows First in the Den said that he can struggle to maintain friendships in both mainstream and the Den and he can feel like he is missing out sometimes.
- Both parents said they access the website frequently and it is lovely to see the photographs of the children that are uploaded.

Challenges for the Den going forwards and recommendations:

- Given the mix of ages the Den provides for (both First and Middle School) the physical space available is somewhat limited. The staff have effectively portioned off parts of the room in an effective manner, creating zones for different types of activity. However, having a lesson taking place whilst a Lego Therapy session is occurring nearby is not ideal. Within the constraints of the physical environment the staff make is work as successfully as is able. This limited physical space is likely to be an ongoing challenge and staff will need to continue to be creative in their use of zones and activities.
- Meeting the needs of pupils of quite different ages (First and Middle) within this one space is also a challenge. The Den is currently providing an excellent provision for all pupils through the use of: well-planned timetabling, assigned Key Workers and an approach of mainstream inclusion where possible. This will be an ongoing challenge within the Den especially as ratios of First to Middle School pupils is not predictable.
- The transition to High School is well-planned and involves close collaboration with High School. Anecdotally it is very effective although it would be useful (and would further show the Den's positive impact) if a quantitative measure could be put in place to track transition success. This might be a case of the High School sending back termly data on attendance, inclusion into mainstream and progress for the first year in the new setting.
- The practice in the Den is excellent. All pupils are engaged. All pupils are being challenged. All pupils are progressing. This high level of teaching and learning comes through a provision's ethos and through careful teamwork and high-quality teaching. The practice in the Den is a highlight within the wider school provision and is an exceptional example of how effective a Mainstream Autism Base can be. The knowledge and experience of all staff in the Den in the areas of autism (and SEN more widely) and also engagement through exceptional teaching and learning should be shared widely across the school through staff training and staff meetings.
- Mainstream staff have observed the teaching in the Den and this should continue and potentially be expanded.

- The Zones of Regulation would be an effective emotional and well-being tool to be rolled out school-wide.
- The practice in the Den (particularly around social and emotional and well-being strategies) should be shared with parents in seminars/ workshops. The Emotional regulation system (colour-coded) would be an effective strategy to use at both school and home.