



Working with Asperger Syndrome Students:

Reflections on an 18-Year Journey

By Marie-Louise Nordesjö

In 2002, my article "A successful project for school children with Asperger Syndrome" at the Lundellska School, a large senior high school in Uppsala, Sweden, was published in the *Bulletin*. My opinion was that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) need special classes to reach more of their potential. At the time, the school had 17 students and one assistant; the classes were small with no more than 6 students in each classroom. The students had a peaceful environment in a separate building at the school with as little stress as possible, giving them greater opportunity to concentrate. They were offered a strictly structured pedagogy that contributed to making the students more successful. Because ASD students often are loners, school personnel took extra efforts to increase their feeling of belonging to a group. In 2017, we still have the same concept, but things have changed and we have grown significantly. In this article, I discuss some of these changes and my experience managing this school for 18 years.

Autism as a Basic Disability

Knowledge concerning autism and Asperger Syndrome among teachers in Sweden has grown. An increasing number of teachers have become familiar with the diagnosis and are able to help students get the structure at school that they need. But still many students feel like outsiders if integrated into large classes in which they are not given the support they need. Moreover, they often carry with them many negative memories from earlier years at school, which is why they feel relieved when starting at this school. Students with this diagnosis are in the company of skilled teachers, assistants, and a psychologist, all of whom are tasked with equipping them with the tools and preconditions to enable them to act successfully in everyday life.

The students we work with today have more complex difficulties, and their need for special support has increased. A consistent group of teachers, well-educated and dedicated, has contributed to the positive development of the program. In 2002, we had only one assistant for all the students; now, one in every class serves both teachers and students. Additionally, teachers now have more time to individualize their teaching and follow up the students' efforts.

Although our school clearly has more students now, we have nevertheless succeeded in keeping a calm environment without stress. Students who join our classes after some time usually unwind and feel they are accepted and can get the support they so desperately need. When the students are comfortable, it shows in the results of their studies, and positive development takes place.



Example of a well-structured lesson

The oral introduction at the beginning of a lesson is complemented by written instructions. One has to remember that oral speech is transitory while written text is constant. At the student's arrival at school, the teacher or assistant checks the schedule of the day. During the review the student finds the answers to all her or his questions such as:

- + What do I have to do?
- + When do I have to do it?
- + With whom?
- + For how long a time?
- + What will happen afterwards?

Before the student returns home, the school day is evaluated in a positive atmosphere and the following questions are answered:

- + What did you do today?
- + What are you going to do tomorrow?

An ordinary school day is well structured in order to create security and to enable the students to concentrate on their tasks. The teachers are flexible so that they may meet students' individual needs and take into account their resources. Moreover, elements in the instruction train students in communication and social interaction, such as how to participate in a discussion. Furthermore, preparing the students in advance for change is important. This applies to any change, such as a teacher falling ill, extra-curricular activities, or unforeseen incidents. The students must be given a chance to succeed so that their abilities may develop well. This is why teachers' constructive feedback and support are important elements of the school day.

Students and staff use the same room for breaks, thus indirectly giving the students social training. An increased number of assistants prepare meaningful activities for students during breaks. One afternoon each week, students are invited to "after school." They may choose what they want to do, such as play games, bake a cake (eating not required), assemble a jigsaw puzzle, watch a movie, and so on.

Being affected by autism is exhausting. Certain students or persons may isolate themselves because they don't have the energy to interact with others. This makes it important for the students to practice activities at which they are not particularly strong. Unfortunately, students may not always take part in the training

willingly because their executive functions and their motivation are low. Often they have no internal start-up process, which is why they have to be inspired and cheered on.

In 2011, a new curriculum was implemented in Swedish senior high schools that, unfortunately, makes it more difficult for our students to reach the learning goals. Now students are required to a higher degree to be able to analyze, draw conclusions, and critically study a text. Assignments may be difficult for them to manage and may keep them from reaching the learning goals.

Elements of success

Stable, educated, and experienced staff who show interest in the learning situation of students—both professionally and personally—are crucial to the success of the program, and nowadays students may get still more support from counselors and psychologists. The student counselor at the senior high school has ongoing dialogues with the students in order to prepare them for future university studies or professional work. This cooperation is important as students have difficulties in thinking ahead and planning for the future. The staff also creates routines for the students. Routines help automation, and students are relieved of the need to think everything all over again each time they are asked to fulfill their assignments. Their memory improves, energy is saved, and stress is reduced.

Varying ways of teaching that evolve from the students' needs



Sunny Afternoon in Anacosta © digital painting by Gloria L. Keaton, DC; gkeatong@aol.com, featured in the DKG Fine Arts Gallery.

are also important. Tailored teaching methods, well-calibrated tests and assessment methods, and flexibility in light of the students' working pace are key considerations. Teachers use collaborative learning as a method to increase such capacity to help the students. They visit each other's lessons and give feedback and coaching about what they experienced concerning students' learning as well as teachers' teaching.

A pedagogical survey is performed when students start their first year at senior high school in order to make their individual needs evident. This assessment shows the students' strengths and the areas they need to develop. During courses such as craft and art education, assistants

Marie-Louise Nordesjö, president of Epsilon Chapter in Sweden State Organization, is a trained specialist teacher. She has been in charge of developing and implementing senior high school teaching for students with autism/ Asperger Syndrome for 18 years. Marie-Louise.Nordesjo@skrapan.uppsala.se

often sit together with the students and speak with them; the assistant is often the initiator of these conversations. Each week students and supervisors talk about the development of their studies. They can talk about what has worked out well and what the students need to think of and develop more. The students are given the opportunity to influence the choice of support. Computers and smart phones are of great help for school work. The school has, among other things, a digital archive containing learning material for the different subjects. Supervisors can easily keep in touch with students by means of text messages.

Another aspect of ASD is that students often have difficulty staying in common environments; they isolate themselves instead of taking part in activities. Certain courses, for example those in communication and drama, develop students' social capability. Beyond courses and normal daily activities, however, school personnel also try to expose the students to various environments beyond the school over 3 years. In the beginning, students may make short visits to museums; later they may see movie shows or go to the theater, followed by an overnight trip to the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm. Finally, in Year 3, they are taken abroad. Almost all of our students take part in the final trip.

In conclusion, the project that started in 1998 has become a natural part of the high school Lundellska, and we are well known throughout the district. We have many more students now, but their needs are greater than when we first started. Teaching students with ASD has been exciting, challenging, and frustrating—but most importantly enjoyable.