

Charlotte's special skills are helping New Fosseway School to provide the very best education for the children in its care

Charlotte Joscelyne-May is part of TALK, an independent practice of Speech and Language Therapists who has worked on a regular basis at New Fosseway for over a year. Her skills are invited into the school to complement those of the permanent staff.



Preparing children for independence

Charlotte works with children in mainstream and specialist settings and whilst she thoroughly enjoys the challenges presented in both, she finds a particular satisfaction in helping children who need very practical help in preparing them for independent life. At New Fosseway School, many of her students are those who may never have full verbal communication skills but who will have a far greater chance of independence if they are given the means to interact effectively within the community.

"Every child will have a different degree of need or capability but there is rarely one who could not benefit from intervention to maximise their communication skills," she says. "In a mainstream school I may work with one pupil at a time for a very specific reason, but at New Fosseway, where the majority of students have some communication needs, we use a whole-class or small group approach to benefit as many individuals as possible."

Engagement is vital

Even in a class of mixed-ability children, Charlotte finds that a premise of engaging interest is of most importance. "With children who have autism especially, getting their attention is vital and when you have achieved that you can build on it. On a very basic level I will go into a classroom with a bucket full of sensory toys – bubbles, balloons, talking monkeys and wind-up robots amongst hundreds of others! – which almost instantly grabs the childrens' attention. Having attracted their interest, I can start to move on."

Promoting life skills

Many of the children Charlotte works with are 'visual learners' who may not connect sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing in the same way as most people. "We work on one thing at a time but by sparking their interest in something visual and exciting we can encourage them to engage other reactions. It also brings them together as a group; children with autism typically find social interaction difficult but if they are all focussed on a shared experience it helps them to connect with each other and that is a valuable life skill."

Connection to the wider world

In addition to the classes she holds for children with autism, Charlotte also runs sessions for those with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). These involve a different range of teaching methods but are equally as focussed on increasing pupils' engagement with the world. "Most of the children are non-verbal so we support methods such as Makaton signing and PECS, the picture exchange communication system. Anything we can do to help them connect with others in the wider world is important and providing them with the means of relaying their thoughts and wishes

gives them some autonomy. At the very least, any child should be able to express a preference in terms of what they eat or drink, for example, rather than being given something they might not want. They need to know they can make themselves understood."

Learning from each other

One thing that Charlotte especially admires about New Fosseway School is not just the sensitive approach to the children but the fact that it actively encourages the intervention of experts such as herself to enhance its provision. "We have a very close partnership which benefits all concerned," she says. "The school learns from my input and I can help to train their staff to implement the methods I employ, and at the same time I have learned a great deal from working alongside their staff and the children they care for."

Team work to benefit children

Working with children who have multiple and complex needs can be very challenging but Charlotte enjoys the fact that she and the staff at New Fosseway work as a team. "At the end of the day, we are working together to support the children who need all the help we can give them. I have seen how well the children respond when they are offered our support and if I didn't have that I couldn't carry on doing what I do. I do it because I see the impact it has, and that makes everything worthwhile."



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