

*Helping  
Children  
with Autism  
to Learn*

Edited by Stuart Powell

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**Note:**

Throughout this book pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality. Where real names are used permission has been given.

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# Preface

This book considers how individuals with autism can be enabled to learn through specific approaches to teaching that fall within the context of a broadly consensual view of the nature of autism. The book draws together understandings of how children with autism think and learn and the implications for those who aim to teach them. It is important to note at the outset that ‘teach’ is used here in its informal as well as formal sense – i.e. including parents and carers as well as teachers. The book aims to offer insights into the reasons behind autistic ways of learning and behaving and give guidance about appropriate ways of responding.

The theme of the book is that in autism the very nature of learning is distinctive and that therefore those involved in the care and education of individuals with autism need to begin by trying to understand the child’s perspective on any potential learning and teaching situation. This is not as easy as it might seem because that perspective does not follow the template of a ‘normally developing’ understanding of what it is to learn and what it is to teach. Understanding on the part of the adult therefore requires some fundamental re-assessing of what is happening whenever the child is faced with an experience that is in any sense new to him/her. The contributing authors show how such re-assessing can take place within their various areas of interest.

The premise underlying the book is that while parents and teachers can benefit from guidance as to how best to proceed in caring for and educating individuals with autism, that guidance needs to incorporate an increase in understanding rather than simply an instruction in skills. If they are to be truly effective, those caring for individuals with autism need insight into *why* they need to approach their task in a particular way and *how* some skills and strategies become useful in autism.

Stuart Powell  
University of Hertfordshire  
May 2000

## Notes on Contributing Authors

MIKAEL HEIMANN is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, Sweden. A licensed psychologist and psychotherapist, Dr Heimann's research interests include infancy, autism, and the language development of, and computer-aided instruction for children with disabilities.

FLO LONGHORN has worked in the field of education in the UK, USA and Europe since 1970, with particular emphasis on special education, including expertise in severe and profound disabilities, challenging behaviour and special needs adult education. She has held senior management posts in education, including headships of special needs schools in the UK, and provides special needs consulting in the UK and abroad, in the private and public sectors. For more than two years she was a consultant and trainer at the State Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital, Ettelbruck, Luxembourg. Currently Flo Longhorn is Principal Consultant in Special Needs and Director of Catalyst Education Resources Ltd, based in Luxembourg and the UK, as well as an Associate Tutor at the Special Education Centre of Westminster College, Oxford. She has published nine books in the area of special education and contributed chapters to several others, and in addition has developed distance learning materials for University of Manchester.

ELIZABETH NEWSON is Consultant in Developmental Psychology to the Early Years Diagnostic Centre, Nottingham, and formerly directed (with John Newson) the Child Development Research Unit at the University of Nottingham, where she held a Chair of Developmental Psychology. Their long-term research on parents' child-rearing methods and outcomes, focusing on both 'ordinary' children and those with special needs, led on to the founding of Sutherland House School and to a series of research projects on autism and intervention, including recent work on interventions with two-year-olds and on differential diagnosis in the pervasive developmental disorders. Professor Newson has always been concerned to establish a 'language of partnership' between children, parents and the professionals who serve them.

MELANIE NIND is Senior Lecturer at the Open University. She has worked as a teacher of children and adults with learning difficulties and autism in a range of school and college contexts. Dr Nind's research is primarily in the area of communication development and she has written extensively on the topic of Intensive Interaction.

THEO PEETERS is a neurolinguist who, after a year internship at TEACCH, founded the Opleidingscentrum Autisme (Center for Training in Autism) in Belgium in 1981. Since then, he and his team have been responsible for seminars, workshops and practical training in most European countries and also outside Europe. His Center continues to be affiliated with TEACCH. He has published six books on autism, translated into several languages, two of them in English.

STUART POWELL has worked in mainstream and special school settings both as a class teacher and as a head teacher. In the latter part of his career he has worked as a teacher educator and currently holds posts related to the provision of research degree training at the University of Hertfordshire where he is Professor of Educational Psychology. Professor Powell is Director of the Centre for Autism Studies based at that University. Professor Powell has researched and published widely in the fields of autism, special needs education and critical thinking.

HARRY PROCTER is a consultant clinical psychologist, registered psychotherapist and Head of the Department of Clinical Psychology for children and adolescents in the Somerset Partnership NHS trust. He has developed an approach for working with mental health problems and disabilities based on Kelly's personal construct psychology and has written a series of papers elaborating this approach for adult and child populations. Dr Procter teaches on the MSc course in family therapy and systemic practice at the University of Bristol.

WENDY PREVEZER is a qualified speech and language therapist, and is also a musician. Since 1986 she has combined these two roles in a 'music specialist' post at Sutherland House School in Nottingham, for children with autism. She remains involved with the school on a part-time and consultancy basis, continuing to use and develop the approach known as Musical Interaction. She continued to work part-time for Nottingham's speech and language therapy department until 1997, where she completed a project applying and evaluating the principles of Musical Interaction in a broader context. Currently she runs music sessions with various individuals and groups of children in Nottingham, both with and without special needs, specialising in using music to facilitate social and communication skills. She also runs courses and workshops throughout the country on using musical activities in an interactive approach, and the particular needs of children with autism.

TOMAS TJUS is a lecturer and clinical instructor in the Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, Sweden. A licensed psychologist and psychotherapist, Dr Tjus's research interests include developmental psychopathology and the language development of, and computer-aided instruction for, children with disabilities.

## *Chapter One*

# Learning about Life Asocially: The Autistic Perspective on Education

*Stuart Powell*

### **Introduction**

The title of this book points deliberately to a specific stance with regard to the education of children with autism. It suggests that in autism, perhaps more than in any other context, the very nature of teaching and learning needs a special kind of scrutiny. There is an underlying premise here that what can usually be assumed when anyone engages in trying to teach something to someone else cannot be assumed in autism. The individual with autism needs help to learn. For example, it is not enough to ask from the singular perspective of the teacher, 'How can I motivate this child to learn?' Rather the question needs to be, 'How can I help this child learn to be motivated?' Clearly, to get to a position where an answer to this latter question can be reached there first needs to be some understanding of what is habitually regarded, in this instance, as 'being motivated' and more generally as the process of teaching and learning. Following this there needs to be some consideration of what effect the autism will have on that way of being and that process. In autism effective teaching can only be realised by an initial consideration of the individual's way of learning and its effects on whatever the teacher might plan to do. Education in autism needs to be pursued from the child's perspective.

In this introductory chapter I try to justify the stance described above and the implied way of operating by considering the relationship between *autism*, *meaning* and *self* and subsequent implications for those engaged in trying to help children with autism to learn. In doing this I draw on the writings of others (e.g. Peeters 1997) and make use of some speculative findings (e.g. Lockett, unpublished). I am, therefore, offering an account rather than stating established facts. It is my hope that readers will find this account useful when considering the ideas and practices of the contributing authors. It is not my intention here to suggest any consensual view of the nature of autism nor indeed to include reference to competing theories (for a review of various theoretical approaches to autism see Powell 1999).



## **Meaning**

This section on meaning is influenced by *Autism: from theoretical understanding to educational intervention* by Theo Peeters (Peeters 1997; and Chapter 2 of this book).

### *Making meaning and learning meaning*

Central to the way in which most of us perceive, and act upon, the world around us is our inclination to make meaning of that world. When things are presented to us meaningfully they are easier to understand and remember than when they are presented meaninglessly. Indeed, if things seem meaningless then to understand and remember them effectively we may strive to make them meaningful by imposing a meaning of our own. For example, one way to memorise a random selection of words is to create a meaningful story that incorporates them, even if that story has to be implausible and bizarre in order to incorporate them all.

Meaning is central to our socially constructed way of living. Objects and events have meaning or are given meaning and this enables us to manage our world and learn within it. Yet in a different culture acceptable meanings might differ. Words, gestures, actions, tolerances, objects: all differ in what they mean in relation to the specific cultural context in which they are found. While we might not recognise it overtly, what things mean is largely a matter of what we have learnt that they mean. That learning, of course, is in turn largely informal and intuitive. The young girl gets to know what her father thinks about eating meat because of what he says and what he does, the kinds of expression that he makes when he eats meat (or avoids it) and so on. Other episodes of others' reactions to meat eating are learning experiences that lead to an understanding on the part of the girl about the meaning of meat eating. No direct teaching need go on here (though it might, and indeed it may include scientific understandings about proteins etc.) but the learning is significant and long lasting nonetheless. Meat eating is valued and treated differently in different cultures and subcultures – its meaning is not consistent. So, meaning is learnt in a pervasive, implicit and social way within the confines of a particular context. To a very large extent things mean what people agree that they will mean. Because of constraints on space and the need to focus sharply on an autistic perspective on the world I am sidestepping some significant philosophical and epistemological issues here (tackled elsewhere, e.g. Bruner 1990) and some issues within the literature on autism which relate to the perception and learning of meaning (e.g. Frith and Happe 1994). Whatever issues surrounding this topic remain unresolved it may well be that those with experience of working with individuals with autism recognise that here some of the aspects of the learning of meaning are dysfunctional. Indeed, those with autism are often described as being outside of the culture in which they live, as not accessing the kinds of beliefs, understandings and skills that are typically taken for granted as accepted within a particular society. Perhaps the most obvious instance of dysfunction in relation to

the example in the previous paragraph is the potential for learning from 'kinds of expression'. Children with autism find it difficult to detect the meaning of what is being said from the clues offered by the expression of the speaker. In this sense learning of meaning does not occur naturally in autism. This difficulty in learning about what things mean in the way that is assumed by the non-autistic results in any 'meaning' that is achieved remaining idiosyncratic (and thus limited in usefulness) and rigid (unlikely to change as new experiences are encountered). The child with autism who wears a particular hat whenever he goes to the shops but never when he goes anywhere else is displaying a learnt preference indicating that the hat has a particular meaning, which relates in this instance to shopping. However, the meaning is for him alone, it is not shared by others.

### *Implications of the lack of use of meaning*

#### *Reliance on rote memory*

Lack of ability to use meaning to organise the experiences of the world, and in particular the social world, is likely to increase the load on memory in that the child with autism cannot code lots of information within a meaningful structure. A whole mass of new information can be made manageable by the child without autism because it can be understood as a structure with clear connections; yet that same information can remain disconnected and therefore unmanageable to the child with autism. So, for example, a boy without autism is able to cope with a trip to a new shopping centre because the buildings where goods are sold are understood as shops within which the functions of display cases and shop assistants and the roles of other customers are all readily understood. This non-autistic boy has an expectation that several shops will be visited and refreshments will be taken: for him a shopping trip is a meaningful event. However, in the same scenario the child with autism is faced with a bewildering set of confusing stimuli. Nothing makes sense because understandings of purposes, functions, roles and time constraints have not been learnt. If the child does not have meaning to help him then he will have to rely on rote memory all the time and subsequently will be less efficient at remembering and less flexible in coping with new and changing experiences. The example used here is based on a social event. But the same principles apply in the context of the learning of academic material. New information about Victorian England can be understood when existing concepts about invention, industry, poverty, diet, fashions and games enable the learner to organise the new information in meaningful ways. When children understand about playing games then they are able to understand the nature of 'games playing' in Victorian times even if the games themselves are totally new to them.

#### *Difficulties with prediction*

When a child learns the meaning of something then it becomes possible for her to begin to estimate on the basis of that meaning. Once she has a conception of 'ball' that includes 'bouncing' then she can predict that a ball will bounce once dropped

(and later come to more sophisticated estimations of height of bounce in relation to consistencies of ball and surface and to velocity of throw etc.). If the child can solve, for example, tasks involving partially hidden figures she is showing evidence that she can go beyond the information that is present and determine what the whole of the shape may be on the basis of what she can see. Here she estimates meaning from the clues that are available to her. Being able to successfully complete a partially hidden figure indicates one of the most useful aspects of meaning – its potential to enable prediction. Meaning allows us to understand what the rest of something is like, what something will be like when something else changes it, what something will be like in the future.

Now again, where children without autism typically display the ability to go beyond the information that is given to them, for example to predict, pretend, infer and extrapolate, those with autism find it difficult to do these things. Children with autism will perform less well than children of similar mental age on tasks such as the partially hidden figures task mentioned above. There is a sense in which the understanding of those with autism remains at the level of the perceptual – it is literal and objective. In some contexts literality and objectivity are useful dimensions to thinking; for example, in proof reading text or in working through particular mathematical algorithms. But in other contexts these dimensions are less useful and in some cases can be deleterious to problem-solving; for example in analysing poetry or using humourous analogies to make a point (see Chapter 8). The ability to move away from the literal and the objective to an understanding that things can have meaning beyond what is perceptually available is extremely useful. It is an ability that underpins much of the non-autistic way of thinking and learning yet one that is largely inaccessible for those with autism.

#### *Difficulties in making connections*

It is the meaningfulness of things that enables us to make connections between different events. If ‘understandings’ were to remain at the level of the perceptual, at a literal/objective level, then they would remain isolated in our minds. For example, it is because I know something of the meaning of a violent act that I am able to make connections between a fight in the playground, racial hatred, genocide, the Thirty Years War and violent crime on the streets. Not that these things are the same, of course, but it is meaning that enables me to begin to connect them together in an understanding of how they are similar and how they are different. Without these kinds of meanings connections will always remain simplistic, direct and inflexible and, again, this seems to be the case in autism.

#### *Difficulties with categorisation*

Young children without autism are driven to make sense of the world. Part of this drive involves the need to categorise. Certainly they make mistakes of categorisation – for example, calling all four-legged furry things dogs regardless of whether they might, in fact, be cats or something else – but they learn the rules by which categorisation takes place. And in this learning they seem to be influenced intuitively by meaning rather than perception. They learn that while things might

look the same or sound the same or feel the same they fall into categories that mean what 'we' have all agreed they will mean. So a donkey is not a horse even though it looks like one, feels like one, smells a bit like one and acts much the same as one. Also, children learn about the vagaries of commonplace descriptions of categories of things. They learn, for example, that a coat might also be described as an anorak or a jacket.

In autism, however, the situation described above is reversed. Here children have a tendency to be influenced by perception rather than meaning. This tendency is exemplified by Peeters (1997) when he describes a boy called Thomas who gave names to things that were the same but which didn't look exactly alike. He had different bicycles which he called: 'bicycle', 'wheels in the mud', 'wheels in the grass', 'feet on the pedals'. At one level this may sound creative but he could not understand what his parents were saying to him if they said, 'get on your bicycle' if his 'feet on the pedals' happened to be in front of him.

In autism, perceptually-based rather than meaning-based development leads inevitably to a lack of understanding of socially accepted categorisations. So a child with autism might have real difficulties in accepting that the different things in front of him are conceptually bound within a collective notion of 'bicycle'. Similarly another child might have difficulties in accepting that what she knows as her jacket might equally well be referred to as an anorak or a coat. Her understanding is locked in to the one case that she has come to understand as relating to the label 'jacket'.

## **Self**

In this section the relationship between the development of meaning and sense of self in autism is explored. This exploration is of a psychological kind; there is no intention here to make allusion to the moral, legal or sociological selfhood of individuals with autism. The need to recognise qualities in these respects is returned to at the end of the chapter.

### *Levels of self in autism*

Neisser (1988) has described levels of self: the ecological, interpersonal, conceptual, temporally extended and finally private self. This way of conceptualising self is useful for my purposes because it enables a way of describing self in autism as a matter of partial development. Clearly it would not be correct to say that individuals with autism have no sense of self because we know, for example, that they can recognise themselves in a mirror (provided they are above 18 months mental age). On the other hand individuals with autism do seem to have difficulties in developing a sense of self in relation to others in the world and in particular in relation to the ever-shifting patterns of social happenings. In terms of Neisser's model then it seems that the ecological self may well develop in autism. For example, children with autism often seem to be very aware of where they are in

space, they are very good at squeezing through small spaces and knowing where they will and will not fit. But their difficulties begin at the level of the interpersonal self.

### *The interpersonal self*

#### *Functions of the interpersonal self*

It is the interpersonal self, in Neisser's model, that enables individuals to know that they are having experiences which relate in some way to the experiences of others. For example, the student without autism who sits in a lecture listening to the teacher knows that the words spoken are what he is hearing and that others can hear them too. He also knows, at some level, that those words will be affecting others differently according to the prior knowledge and experience that they bring to the situation. It is this interpersonal self together with the conceptual self that enables individuals to begin to code events as part of a personal dimension. The student makes sense of the lecture, or not, according to how it affects him as a person in relation to others – as someone with more or less knowledge and experience and with certain intentions and not others. In this example the student makes more of the lecture than would be involved by a simple encoding of the words spoken. The event becomes meaningful because he is able to relate what he hears to what he already knows and to what he thinks he will be able to do with the new knowledge, i.e. how it affects *him* and what *he* knows.

Again, the difficulty in autism becomes apparent in the breakdown of the normal synergy between meaning, social mediation and self. The student with autism has difficulty in picking up the socially conveyed meanings (some of which will be extremely subtle and implied) and difficulty in relating his own understanding to that of others. The knowledge that he does pick up in this kind of scenario will tend to be factual, disconnected and impersonal.

#### *Implications of difficulties in developing an interpersonal self*

If, as I suggest, there are difficulties in developing an interpersonal self in autism, and beyond to a conceptual self, then the individual with autism is in a position where events are experienced but at a perceptual level, non-subjectively. In a sense the individual is operating within the ecological level of Neisser's model and is thus acting according to an objective reality that is not mediated by any social implicatures or socially defined meanings.

Such difficulties will mean that there will be problems in learning through social interactions about the self and others as 'mental agents'. In short, the non-autistic learn that they and others have attitudes and beliefs and, furthermore, learn to act according to these things rather than according to 'objective reality'. (They may of course act contrary to prevalent, accepted attitudes but this would be for purposes of rebellion or rejection rather than unknowingly.) This early learning leads to the later, 'sophisticated' understanding that people's actions and behaviours relate as much to their attitudes as to any sense of objective fact. For example, one can

understand that people behave towards those of a different culture and/or colour of skin because of the attitudes they hold towards different cultures and skin colours rather than to any 'objective facts' about these things. All of this learning will be impaired in autism.

### *Experiencing self*

#### *Sense of agency*

One reason for having a self in psychological terms is that the 'I' becomes a unified centre of experience with a past and a future, capable of learning from the first to meet the needs of the second. In other words, the 'I' develops into an experiencing self with a very real sense of experiencing the world from the inside rather than from a detached or 'third party' position (Powell and Jordan 1993).

One of the key ways in which this is apparent is in the way in which people sense that they act on the world around them. People know when they are responsible for the changes in their experience as opposed to when these happen as the result of something or somebody else. It is this sense of responsibility which makes these experiences their own. Russell (1996) points out that there can be no conception of that which 'I know' or 'I believe' or 'I perceive', or indeed that these mental states are 'my own', unless 'I am somebody who wills' ( p.179).

In autism it seems that awareness of being an 'I who wills' is somehow impaired and therefore the conceptions of 'I knowing' and 'I believing' and 'I perceiving' are consequently difficult.

#### *Lack of an experiencing self*

We need to consider the difficulty an individual might find herself in if she did *not* have an experiencing self in this sense: one of the things she might have trouble with understanding is intentional behaviour. If she did not have a sense of her own agency, of her causing effects both in the environment at large and within herself, then it would come as no surprise if she failed to learn about herself and others as individual centres of attitudes, beliefs and intentions in the typical way. In fact, if an individual was in that position then she would have to theorise about minds in order to figure out why others behave in the ways that they do. This kind of theorising would replace the intuitive understandings of how other people 'must' be thinking and feeling in given situations. The girl might need to work out, at the level of theory, what the child in the picture story is thinking and feeling as the wind blows her kite away. Equally if she had trouble grasping the subjective nature of attitudes, she might assume that the world as it appears to her is 'just the way it is' for everyone else. It seems that this may be the position of children with autism. If this is the case then it goes some way to explaining why they present as 'locked in their own world', why they are literal and necessarily rigid in their thinking.

#### *A difference in the way experience feels in autism*

Luckett *et al.* (unpublished) have tried to find out if children with autism have a weaker understanding of the personal nature of attitudes and intentions by getting

them to contrast their attitudes with those of others in ambiguous situations. They adapted a study used with preschoolers by Flavell *et al.* (1990). Most of the children with autism seemed to understand that when someone pulled a disgusted face it meant that a particular drink tasted bad. However, once they themselves had tasted the drink and found that they liked it, they tended to say that the first person must also have liked it. Effectively, they ignored the earlier evidence. Since some of these children were able to pass a standard false belief test, it seems that their difficulty was not with understanding the representational nature of mental states. Instead, it may be that these children did not understand the personal, subjective nature of likes and dislikes; they assumed that the drink was either good or bad tasting *full stop*. They were having difficulty in understanding that their attitudes, indeed their liking, could differ from someone else's. In a sense these children were assuming a wholly objective stance to the world where subjectivity of experience played no part. If this is so, then it points to a difference in the way experience feels for those with autism. In another task children were asked to cooperate with the experimenter in playing a game involving putting down 'stepping stones' (sheets of paper) to enable their partner (the experimenter) to cross the room. It was clear that some children with autism (with quite high verbal mental ages) found it difficult to relate their own sense of agency to their partner's needs and intentions.

Difficulty in learning about social shared meaning is central to the autistic way of thinking and is rooted in the particular way experience feels in autism. Here the experiencing self does not include the 'I am somebody who wills' and therefore the delicate balance between intention to act within any social context and awareness that any resulting act will necessarily involve interpersonal relatedness will be disrupted. The learning of social shared meaning is dependent on that balance being maintained – and so in autism the learning that does go on is distinctive in being asocial, non-subjective and unconnected.

### **Implications for teaching**

If we can accept that there are qualitative differences in autistic thinking, and perhaps that some of these are profound and pervasive, then the following implications arise for teachers and carers.

#### *Understanding the autistic perspective*

To see the world from an autistic perspective is as unnatural for the non-autistic as it is for those with autism to understand the 'normal' social world. It requires suspension of the assumptions upon which we normally operate. We cannot assume that learners will attend to contextual features when interpreting what people mean by what they say and what they do. For example, the child with autism may not be able to identify what a simple wave is meant to convey ('hello', 'goodbye', 'I need attention') from the context in which it is made even though that child can wave and can do so appropriately when cued. Further, we cannot assume

that the child with autism will understand or be able to operate on the basis that how one feels about something is not necessarily how everyone else feels about it.

Clearly it is challenging to try to suspend the very basis for one's own behaviours and beliefs when trying to interpret the behaviour of the child with autism in the classroom. But there is a need to recognise that this is the mirror image of the challenge that faces the individual with autism in trying to cope with the non-autistic world. Taking an autistic perspective means thinking through the curriculum and its delivery from the perspective of someone for whom meaning remains idiosyncratic and where the social conveyancing of knowledge and skills does not function effectively.

### *Learning about learning*

There is a need to work to an agenda about learning what learning *is* as well as to the learning of 'material'. Certainly the teacher can find ways of enabling children with autism to memorise facts. But those same children will not necessarily realise that what they are experiencing may relate to prior experiences, that these particular facts relate to others that they already 'know'. They will not automatically realise that what they are doing now may have relevance for what they may do later. Autistic learning is of a disconnected kind and therefore pupils with autism need to be shown what connections *are* as well as what the specific connections are within the particular learning experience with which they are engaged. They will need visual structure (picture cards, photographs, video) that makes overt the connections between different aspects of their learning and between what they learn and what they can do. They may also benefit from a kind of micro-teaching where what they have learnt can be made apparent by re-running a learning event (involving themselves) on video and having their attention drawn to its significance *for them*.

### *Focus on memory*

From what has been suggested earlier in this chapter it is clear that the role of memory in autistic learning is distinctive. Particular attention needs to be paid therefore to the kinds of memory burdens that are imposed on children with autism in their day-to-day lives and in particular aspects of their schooling. Expectations in this respect should not be based on assumptions derived from the teacher's own experience of how to remember. Teachers need to recognise the effects of what they are doing when they make use of particular teaching strategies and broad educational approaches that involve memory processing. For example, a strategy that resolves an inability to remember in the short term (e.g. carrying a picture depicting the task for the duration of the activity) may create a new kind of dependency (e.g. the child becomes dependent on someone else providing a picture to enable task completion). Here the teacher needs to remain aware of the difficulties experienced by the child at a psychological as well as at a behavioural



level. The teacher also needs to be able to identify inherent possibilities within the task situation for the child to learn about remembering as well as to function effectively. So in the example above it might be possible for the child to begin to choose the picture for herself (from a limited selection) that will enable her to complete the task. Such an act of choosing would mean that the child is beginning to take control over the mechanics of her own learning. In this way she is learning about strategies for remembering and is in a position where she can begin to learn about how and when to employ them.

### *Focus on self*

Again, the role of self in learning in autism may be distinctive. Certainly, what can be assumed with the non-autistic in this respect cannot necessarily be assumed with the autistic. Teachers may therefore need to pay specific attention to the way in which the child with autism's sense of self operates within the learning and teaching situation. The child's attention may usefully be focused on her own actions rather than on the products of that action. For example, in autism it may be important for the teacher to draw the child's attention to the fact that she *is* drawing with a crayon and then that she *has* drawn rather than attending solely to the drawing itself. Praising the qualities in a drawing diminishes in meaningfulness if the child is not fully aware of her own sense of agency and therefore ownership in relation to that drawing.

### *Focus on meaning*

The implications for the psychology of the child with autism in relation to any lack of ability to make use of meaning have been outlined earlier in this chapter. For the teacher this presents a very particular set of challenges. The normally accepted conventions whereby meaning can be best conveyed with high levels of social mediation may not apply; thus children may learn more effectively in asocial contexts, for example such as those involving information technology. Similarly, wherever meaning is assumed the child with autism will be disadvantaged, for example in the unthinking use of humour to emphasise a point (see Chapter 8 for a description of a thoughtful way to use humour). The child with autism may not be proactive in organising the world in such a way as to make it meaningful and therefore manageable. This may result in teachers doing that kind of organising for the child, for example by marking out physical spaces in such a way as to indicate different purposes. In all of this the fundamental issue is that education is concerned with the communication of meaning and specifically meaning which is commonly accepted and commonly perceived as being worthy. Children with autism are outside of these, often tacit, agreements. This means that teachers need to challenge fundamental assumptions about what things mean, how values are placed on them and how that meaning can effectively be conveyed. This challenge

needs to extend, for example, from the social meaning of events such as school assembly to the meaning of numbers and their addition and subtraction.

### *Teaching towards increased independence*

One of the difficulties of working with children with autism is that they may, albeit unintentionally, draw the teacher into an autistic style of teaching in which accurate cues are readily provided in order to trigger memory for disconnected bits of knowledge and disparate skills. Clearly what is needed is a kind of teaching that leads to increasing independence for the child rather than increasing dependency of the child on the teacher to provide the right cues. So, ways need to be found of developing 'independent working' using, for example, visual schedules, aides-memoire and so on. There is a need to address the fundamental issue of how the thinking of these children can be made more effective, always accepting that teachers need to address this issue at the level at which the children are able to operate. It cannot be enough to talk only of containment (of difficult behaviours) and of increasing functional ability (of being able to cope in specified situations). Children with autism are entitled to more than these things. They may need to be helped to learn and that learning may need to start at very functional levels, but the ultimate aim must be to increase an individual's abilities to think and act independently. In the chapters that follow the various contributing authors try to set out ways in which independent thinking can be achieved in autism.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described a sense in which individuals with autism are outside of the culture. I mean this, of course, in a psychological sense only. When they are able to engage in learning it may seem as if they are looking in from the outside and trying to work out what it is that the rest are all doing. In this respect the learning that they achieve will inevitably be the result of considerable effort on their part and their contribution to the process of learning should never be underestimated. But I am suggesting more than that we should be sympathetic to the plight of the autistic. I am arguing for a careful structuring of how educationists respond to autism according to a best understanding of how things are for the individuals concerned. This involves respecting their position as well as striving to understand it. To these ends I use the words of Jim Sinclair (1992) to set the scene for what follows in the subsequent chapters of this book.

But my personhood is intact. My selfhood is undamaged. I find value and meaning in life, and I have no wish to be cured of being myself. Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms... Recognise that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours. Question your assumptions. Define your terms. Work with me to build bridges between us.

Let me take some of the key phrases from this quote in turn. The underlinings below are mine not Sinclair's.

- 'I find value and meaning in life, and I have no wish to be cured of being myself.' It is all too easy to define value and meaning in our own terms and in so doing to fail to recognise that what we value is not necessarily universally valued. Definitions of everything from *learning* to *friendship* to what counts as a *leisure activity* are culturally bound. Teachers should not hold back from trying to make things better for the individual but do need to challenge accepted notions of what counts as 'better'.
- 'Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms... Recognise that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours.' What is required here is that we respect a difference rather than seek to establish a commonality. Education should be about celebrating diversity. While there may be different ways of developing none is particularly 'right' or 'wrong'. But all ways of developing will have implications for ways of learning and responsiveness to teaching.
- 'Question your assumptions.' In daily life assumptions based on particular cultural expectations are made continuously. Similarly, in formal teaching situations, assumptions are made that are based on a template of what counts as learning and are based on a particular view of the pupil as a learner (i.e. as someone actively trying to make sense of the world). In autism both of these assumptions do not hold true and therefore for teachers to base what they do upon them is unlikely to lead to effective teaching.
- 'Define your terms.' Teachers need to define for those with autism just what it is that they really mean and not confuse them by hiding agenda and purpose behind the usual barrage of implication and shared complicity. This requires them to redefine notions of teaching and learning. It is not always easy to let go of accepted practices but in autism it seems essential. There is a need to reassess what is put into a curriculum as well as the kinds of teaching approaches adopted.
- 'Work with me to build bridges between us.' In autism it is all too easy to find oneself working against the grain. There is a need to try to reconceptualise teaching and learning in autism as a matter of the teacher learning about how the pupil can learn. In autism the teacher needs to become a learner first, needs to re-examine her own intuitive responses in any teaching and learning situation and accept the need to join with the pupil and start from where that pupil *is* rather than from where she would like him or her to be.

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