

Five years of learning through alignment:

reflections on curriculum, environment
and relationships in autism education



Executive summary

The past decade has seen sustained pressure on the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system in England. Rising numbers of autistic students, increasing complexity of need and constrained provision have made it harder for schools to meet learners' needs consistently and equitably.

Against this backdrop, [The Cavendish School](#) opened in 2021 as Cambridgeshire's first state-maintained special free school for autistic students with a clear purpose: to create a school designed to support autistic learners rather than asking them to adapt to school.

Five years on, this whitepaper reflects on what the school has learned in practice. As an autism-specific provision delivering the [International Baccalaureate \(IB\) Primary Years Programme \(PYP\)](#) in conjunction with a therapeutic, trauma-informed approach to education, its experience offers insight into what can work when curriculum, environment and relationships are intentionally aligned.

This is a practice-first paper. It presents a tailored approach based on the unique setting of The Cavendish School and shares learning from its teachers' daily practice – what has worked, what the school would repeat and what would be approached differently – with clear takeaways for SEND coordinators (SENDCos) and school leaders to adapt within their own contexts.

Rising need, increasing complexity

A system that often asks autistic students to adapt

Across England, schools are supporting a growing number of autistic students with increasingly complex profiles of need¹. At the same time, many educators report a widening gap between what learners need and what existing systems can provide². This disparity is being felt acutely in areas such as placement availability, attendance, exclusions and mental health.

One significant challenge is the structure of the National Curriculum itself. For many autistic students, implicit learning and subject compartmentalisation can act as barriers to their learning³. When autistic students are expected to make connections between subjects or apply learning without explicit guidance, frustration and disengagement can follow. A lack of explicit context for the common rules, instructions and expectations within many traditional schools can also lead to frustration and disengagement amongst autistic students.

Anxiety is another challenge. With some children facing long waiting times for support from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)⁴, school-based anxiety can contribute to difficulties with attendance and engagement and schools are increasingly required to overcome systemic deficiencies in healthcare provision⁵.

Workforce pressures in the education sector compound these challenges⁶. Recruiting and retaining staff with confidence in autism-informed practice is increasingly difficult, and many teachers report feeling underprepared to meet complex SEND needs within a mainstream environment⁷.

“The system is often set up to ask autistic students to adapt to school, rather than schools adapting to autistic learners.”

Stephanie Smith, Head of School, The Cavendish School and Executive Director of SEND, Eastern Learning Alliance

These challenges formed the context in which The Cavendish School was conceived: not as a solution to every system-wide issue, but as a setting where teaching and learning could be shaped around autistic students from the outset.



What autistic learners need in practice

As the world continues to be shaped by rapid technological advances, the role of education needs to evolve. The World Economic Forum has outlined the core skills that today's young people will need to succeed in the workplace: curiosity, problem-solving and a commitment to continuous learning, among others⁸. In The Cavendish School's experience, an effective education encourages curiosity, embraces questions and emphasises contextualisation through clear explanations. Effective education for autistic learners should be:

1. **Explicit rather than implicit**
2. **Flexible without lowering ambition**
3. **Focused on the whole child rather than academic outcomes alone**
4. **Transferable beyond the classroom**
5. **Rooted in real-world contexts**

The IB has proven to be a strong pedagogical fit for autistic learners at The Cavendish School because it aligns closely with these principles⁹. The **IB learner** profile ensures students' personal development happens alongside academic learning. IB programmes also place emphasis on transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning, which supports autistic students to make connections between subjects that might otherwise remain fragmented.

Conceptual learning within the IB framework provides further context and meaning to a student's learning, so they understand not only what they are learning, but why it matters and how it applies to their daily lives¹⁰. This is particularly important for autistic students who benefit from clear relevance and explicit links to lived experience. Flexibility within IB programmes has also enabled The Cavendish School to integrate therapeutic support and personalised goals into the curriculum.

What is the International Baccalaureate?

For school leaders unfamiliar with the IB, it is an internationally-recognised education framework that offers a continuum of programmes from early years to post-16. It is best known in the UK for the Diploma Programme (DP), but it also includes the PYP, Middle Years Programme (MYP) and the Career-related Programme (CP).

Rather than prescribing detailed content, the IB provides a framework for learning built around concepts and inquiry. Its focus is on helping young people understand ideas in context, how to make connections between subjects and apply learning to real-world examples.

Implementation considerations for other schools

1

IB principles can be applied without formal IB accreditation

2

Plan explicitly for connections between subjects and real-world application

3

Use concept-led planning to support generalisation of learning



Four keys to successfully re-open the door to education for autistic pupils

At The Cavendish School, one of the most significant learnings has been that engagement is the foundation upon which all progress is built. Many autistic students arrive at the school having experienced repeated barriers to school engagement, often linked to poor previous experiences of education.

“Engagement is often treated as something to fix when learning breaks down. Our experience shows that when engagement is prioritised from the outset, many challenges simply do not arise.”

Stephanie Smith, Head of School, The Cavendish School and Executive Director of SEND, Eastern Learning Alliance

Relationships before curriculum


Strong, trusting relationships are the most effective lever for student engagement¹¹. Staff at The Cavendish School prioritise knowing students as individuals and this understanding informs planning, routines and responses throughout the school day. For students who may be distrustful of education due to past experiences, rebuilding trust is essential. At the school, this relationship building starts outside of the school environment: visiting students in locations where they feel comfortable, designating a school liaison with similar interests and/or through activities with Art and Occupational Therapists outside of school.

Therapeutic enriched and predictable environments

One of the clearest learnings for The Cavendish School from the past five years is that therapeutic support is most effective when it is not confined to standalone interventions or sessions. While all of the school's students receive the targeted support outlined in their Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), the school knows that these interventions alone are not enough if the students are unable to apply strategies beyond specialist context.

Therapeutic strategies must be embedded within everyday teaching¹². Strategies should be drawn from occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and therapeutic thinking to inform classroom routines and the wider school environment. This allows students to practice regulation and communication throughout the day, rather than only during scheduled therapy sessions. Students who start their day with sensory circuit exercises are often better able to self-regulate throughout the day, while animal therapy supports social and emotional skills development. Access to fidget toys, adaptive furniture and sensory spaces throughout the school day also support with regulation and engagement.

Predictability is a critical component of this approach. Many autistic students experience heightened anxiety when expectations are unclear or environments feel unpredictable¹³. Consistent routines, visual timetables, clear transitions and shared language across staff teams help reduce cognitive load and create a sense of safety. When changes are unavoidable, they should be communicated explicitly and supported with preparation and reassurance.



Irresistible invitations to learn

Learning is most effective when it connects with students' interests¹⁴. The Cavendish School has discovered that designing learning experiences around students' interests can increase student engagement, when done with intent and structure.

A clear example of this in practice has been its use of *Thomas & Friends* within curriculum planning, particularly in the primary years. Many autistic children have a strong affinity with the Thomas the Tank Engine series and its characters, and The Cavendish School has used it as a purposeful doorway to learning, alongside other texts such as the Queen's Hat.

While teachers retain control over the direction and depth of learning, students take ownership over their learning. Yet, Thomas is not the learning outcome; it is the vehicle through which conceptual understanding is developed. Over time, students at

The Cavendish School are supported to transfer this learning beyond the familiar context, helping them to generalise understanding and apply it to new situations.

How is this done in practice?

Within the IB Primary Years Programme, Thomas the Tank Engine has been woven into transdisciplinary inquiry, most notably through the theme, "Who we are". By exploring the personalities, relationships and responsibilities of each character, students are supported to develop an explicit understanding of identity and community, even social structures. These are concepts that autistic students often find abstract or implicit within the National Curriculum.

Three ways to explore identity using *Thomas & Friends* with your students:

Explore social assumptions

Ask your students to examine the factors that shape identity by discussing their favourite character's age, gender, nationality and language

Examine relationships and organisational structures

Identify positive examples for your students to emulate through discussions about character's qualities such as the leadership of Sir Topham Hatt

Identify social roles and responsibilities

Create connections between the roles and strengths of each engine to build understanding of individual and collective impact on a community



Technology and sensory-informed approaches

When used thoughtfully, technology can remove barriers to learning and support engagement¹⁵. Assistive technology, virtual reality and sensory tools enable autistic students to participate more fully, while normalising the use of regulation strategies as part of their everyday learning. Dyspraxia and hypermobility can make writing painful so electronic devices and speech to text apps can remove distractions from learning. The school has found that a hybrid approach to technology and writing reflects the world beyond the classroom. Virtual reality tours of educational destinations, such as Anne Frank's House, enhance learning and reduce the need for physical trips that can be a source of anxiety or overwhelm for some autistic students.

Adam's story

Adam (pseudonym), a student with atypical autism, a PDA profile, severe sensory processing difficulties and complex emotional needs, had experienced significant school related trauma before joining The Cavendish School. Previous placements and periods of home tuition had not been able to meet his needs consistently, and his family's priority was finding a setting that would not exacerbate existing anxiety or disengagement.

At The Cavendish School, staff focused on creating a safe and comfortable environment. Flexible approaches to uniform, movement around the building, and sensory regulation reduced immediate barriers to attendance. Therapeutic support, including regular occupational therapy, was embedded into Adam's daily timetable, enabling him to recognise signs of dysregulation and use appropriate strategies to self-regulate.

Curriculum design supported engagement and skill development. By using the IB Primary Years Programme, alongside vocational pathways later in school, such as a BTEC Esports and Cooking, allowed Adam to develop transferable skills and independence. Over time, Adam rebuilt trust in education, and now actively chooses to attend school, which marks a significant shift from earlier experiences of school avoidance.

Key takeaways:

1

Identify anxiety triggers across the school day and plan accordingly

2

Prioritise relationships as a core element of provision

3

Embed therapeutic strategies into daily classroom learning

4

Use interests to invite engagement without reducing challenge

Supporting readiness and progression

For many autistic students, exam outcomes reflect not a lack of ability, but the extent to which assessment systems align with their learning and regulatory needs. National data¹⁶ shows a persistent gap in GCSE attainment between autistic and non-autistic students, alongside significantly higher rates of anxiety and absence among autistic learners¹⁷. These patterns point to the cumulative impact of stress, disrupted attendance and assessment environments that are often poorly suited to neurodivergent profiles, rather than to academic potential alone.

To overcome exam-based anxieties, The Cavendish School approaches exams as a process, rather than a single event, and access arrangements as a matter of equity rather than advantage.

The Cavendish School approach

Preparation begins early, with access arrangements embedded as part of the "normal way of working". Students experience exams gradually from Year 9 through structured practice that feels authentic rather than hypothetical. Where possible, qualifications are banked before GCSEs to allow students to experience success and reduce pressure. Weekly and end of unit mini assessments normalise the process of testing to create safe environments for students while the school has discovered the importance of familiar snacks for building energy and supporting sensory regulation.

"Exams tell us far more than a grade. They show us how a student copes with challenge, regulation and self-advocacy; skills that matter well beyond the exam hall."

Stephanie Smith, Head of School, The Cavendish School and Executive Director of SEND, Eastern Learning Alliance

The Cavendish School's Sixth Form model combines academic study with personalised learning goals and life skills development. By having flexible post-16 pathways, the school's students can progress in a way that aligns with their strengths and aspirations. The school offers Open University Level 1 modules to its Year 12 and 13 students. The Open University's courses are designed to be accessible and adaptable to meet diverse learning styles, and can be studied remotely, enabling the school's students to progress to further study or work.

Freya's story

Freya, a student with autism and ADHD, joined The Cavendish School with a history of anxiety linked to exams, social situations and general school attendance. Her negative experiences of education, including increased class sizes and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, had significantly affected her confidence and self-esteem. By the end of primary school her attendance had reduced, and her family were uncertain whether she would be able to sit GCSE exams.

At The Cavendish School, staff prioritised rebuilding trust and engagement before focusing on assessment outcomes. A carefully planned transition, including reduced hours, with consistent support from a dedicated teaching assistant helped Freya feel safe and understood. Her interests were used to create meaningful entry points to learning, while therapeutic support was embedded alongside her academic programme.

Exam preparation followed a gradual, trauma-informed approach. Rather than relying on high-stakes mock exams, Freya experienced regular low-pressure assessments from Year 9, enabling her to develop familiarity and confidence.

Over time, Freya's attendance and confidence improved significantly. She went on to sit her GCSEs successfully, achieving strong results, and has progressed into the sixth form with clear aspirations from further study.

Key takeaways:

1

Start exam preparation earlier than expected

2

Embed access arrangements into everyday practice

3

Separate assessment from threat and failure

Preparing for life beyond education

Preparing autistic young people for life beyond school remains a significant focus for parents and educators because evidence shows that the transition to adulthood can be a vulnerable period¹⁸. Studies from broader literature also highlight that without structured support, autistic adolescents can experience delays in independence, social participation and employment outcomes relative to their peers¹⁹. This means that how schools prepare students for adulthood can influence trajectories well beyond education itself.

Academic success alone does not define positive outcomes for autistic young people. Independence, self-advocacy, employment, and community belonging are equally important.

At The Cavendish School, preparation for adulthood begins early. Skills such as travel training, financial literacy, and self-care are taught explicitly and revisited over time. The "hidden curriculum" of social expectations is made visible so that students can make informed choices about how they engage with the world.

What do we mean by the “hidden curriculum”?

The term “hidden curriculum” refers to the social expectations and unwritten rules that are rarely taught explicitly but are often assumed to be understood. This can include how to manage informal interactions, interpret social cues, understand workplace etiquette, or recognise how expectations differ between settings, such as schools, college or work.

For autistic students, this implicit learning can present a significant barrier. Many autistic students benefit from clear, explicit teaching and may not intuitively infer expectations through observations alone. When expectations remain unspoken, students can experience confusion, anxiety and repeated misunderstandings, particularly during transitions to new environments.

Employer engagement and workplace preparation are approached carefully with an emphasis on understanding environments, expectations and self-advocacy, rather than conformity or masking. Employer visits focus on both the practical aspects of a role and the social expectations of the workplace. The school also explicitly teaches disability adjustments from Year 11 to build students’ ability to identify and advocate for tailored accommodations at college, university or within the workplace.

“Preparing for adulthood is not about changing who a young person is. It is about giving them choice, understanding and agency so they can participate in their communities in ways that feel right for them.”

Stephanie Smith, Head of School, The Cavendish School and Executive Director of SEND, Eastern Learning Alliance

Key takeaways:

1

Teach explicitly what others learn implicitly

2

Start preparation for adulthood early

3

Focus on agency, not masking



Conclusion

Five years on, the learnings of The Cavendish School reinforce a simple message: when schools are designed around autistic students, engagement, progress, and wellbeing follow.

While no single model will suit every context, many of the practices outlined in this whitepaper can be adapted in other settings.

“We hope this reflection supports schools to consider how small, intentional changes to the curriculum, school environment, and teacher student relationships can make a meaningful difference – and invites continued collaboration across the sector.”

Stephanie Smith Head of School, The Cavendish School and Executive Director of SEND, Eastern Learning Alliance

To learn more about The Cavendish School’s approach to autism education, get in touch:

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