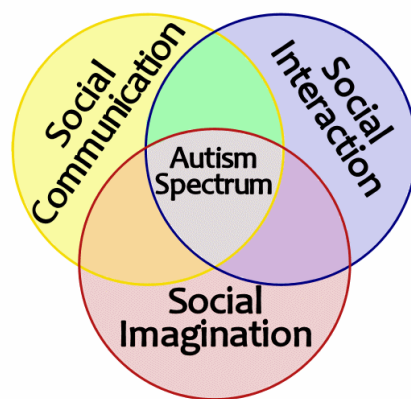


### Rationale Statement

In this rationale statement I will be referring to the research I have carried out on the specific learning difficulty that I have dealt with in my differentiation case study and the strategies I have subsequently attempted to implement while on teaching practice. I will begin by explaining the condition in question, providing a definition and a context for the symptoms. I will then present the specific teaching strategies that I have found recommended through my research into the condition. In order to profile the student in question, I will identify his strengths, needs and interests within in the class room, while also detailing the support systems and resource strategies that were available in the school. I will conclude by outlining the specific strategies I attempted to apply to this student while carrying out my scheme on their class, the reasoning behind them and how I believe now reflecting on the experience, I can improve carrying out these strategies in the future.

The specific learning difficulty I was faced while on teaching practice was a student diagnosed with Autism. Also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Autism is a mental condition that usual presents itself in sufferers from a young age. It can be characterised as a great difficulty in communication and forming relationships in social situations. Autism Ireland defines it as “a lifelong neuro-developmental disability that affects the development of the brain in areas of social interaction and communication. People with autism have difficulties in communicating and forming relationships with people, in developing language and in using abstract concepts. It also impacts on their ability to make sense of the world around them.” (<https://autismireland.ie/about-autism/what-is-autism/>) The reason autism is described as a spectrum disorder is because the symptoms and characteristics

of the condition can present its self in a wide variety of ways and combinations ranging from very mild to very severe. In this sense, two people with this same condition can display very different struggles and have varying skills. There are three main social skill aspects that are considered the most difficult for somebody living with autism; social communication, social interaction and social imagination.



In terms of communication, somebody with autism may have trouble interpreting other people's facial expressions or tone of voice. They may also struggle with their speech ability or can be completely non – verbal. When it comes to social interaction, somebody with autism may find it hard to identify, understand and express emotions. This can result in some appearing insensitive or preferring to be alone rather than seek the company of others. People with autism favour routine and predictability and those who experience challenges with social imagination can find it difficult to foresee what might happen next or to cope in new or unfamiliar situations. It's important to understand though that difficulties with social imagination are not mistaken for lack of imagination. As many people with autism are very creative and can go on to be successful in art practices.

As part of the research for this case study I have come across many recommended different and specific teaching strategies to assist students with these traits of autism. The most common aspects of the advice I came across stated the importance of understanding the condition and separately getting to know the individual student you are dealing with. Considering the impact of the physical education environment and the types of routines in place were also common recommendations I came across through researching a lot of major organisations that advocate for the education of those diagnosed with it. “The art, music or physical education environment can be very overwhelming for students on the autism spectrum. These students may become over stimulated by sights, sounds, touch, movement, smells, temperature and/or size of the class.” (Fogarty, B. (2000). *Tips for Art Teachers, Music Teachers and Physical Education Teacher on Working with Students on the Autism Spectrum.*) In Regards to the specific challenges that can be faced when students present either of the triad of impairments, I came across some good practical strategies. The special education support service (SESS) provides useful, practical teaching strategies for a wide range of learning disabilities including ASD. Such as using visual structuring, that verbal and non-verbal student with autism will respond well to. Most students with autism are visual learners, so it is important to consider the potential use of visuals in all aspects of the teaching and learning. “Children with ASDs respond well to visual structure. A visual schedule gives clear structure to the day because it presents daily activities in a logical sequence. Using a change card, the teacher can help the child with ASD to transition more easily from one activity to another.” ([http:// www.sess .ie/ categories/ autismautistic-spectrum- disorders /aspergers/practical-teaching-strategies-students-asds](http://www.sess.ie/categories/autismautistic-spectrum-disorders/aspergers/practical-teaching-strategies-students-asds)) Any time a lengthy verbal instruction is given, students may have a hard time understanding and

remembering what is being asked. So providing students with a separate handout that has the instructions on it for them to follow, and for you to check their understanding of the process is a very useful strategy. Group discussions can also be problematic for students with ASD “If a pupil with an ASD has problems understanding when is appropriate to contribute to a class discussion, give him his own answer sheet and agree with him beforehand how he will use it. Think about using social stories or comic strips to show the show the pupil with an ASD how his actions affect others.” (<http://www.sess.ie/categories/autismautistic-spectrum-disorders/aspergers/practical-teaching-strategies-students-asds>)

The student that I am referring to in my case study is Alex. He was a student in my 5<sup>th</sup> year class in St Clements College, Limerick city. In the first couple of weeks after starting my placement, I was informed that Alex had ASD and that he did have a special needs assistant on hand if I ever needed her support. The special needs assistant did not accompany Alex to class at any time, but I was told I could seek her help if any situations arose. My first impressions of Alex were that he was very quiet and perhaps shy or introverted. Though once I found out he was formally diagnosed with this condition he behaviour made some more sense within the context. Communication issues were the first thing I noticed as the scheme progressed, Alex would tend not to respond to verbal questions or checks for understanding, though the evidence of his understanding would present its self in his work. The advice I got from my co-operating teacher was to avoid pressuring him into responding or requesting and written class work or home work. The scheme that the class were taking part in was a painting scheme, with a focus on specific colour identification and mixing. Alex showed great

interest in this aspect of the project. He proved to have strengths in this area displaying great focus and determination in identifying colours and discovering how to successfully mix them. Where Alex struggled at times in regards to painting was handling tools and keeping his finished work clean or tidy and sometimes coherent.

The specific differentiating strategies I implemented in response to Alex throughout the scheme can be, on reflection, linked to the symptoms associated with the triad of impairments that came up in my research. Issues with communication between Alex and I was one of the first things I noticed that I would need to differentiate for. The class he was in was small, so I was able to give verbal instruction to the entire class but then spend a good amount of time going around to each individual student to check on understanding and their progress. When I would approach Alex to check on his understanding of tasks at hand, he would be unresponsive and sometimes make it clear he wanted to be left alone. I would tell Alex that I would leave him to work, though I would be back before the end of class to check on what he had done. Unlike the other students I did not want to put pressure on Alex to explain himself as often. When I would check back on him at the end of class, he was much more open to discussing the work he had done. I think this structuring worked for him in terms of allowing him space to begin and carry out some work, and discuss after the affect. I was told by my co-operating teacher that one of the other more mature students in the class was known to work well with Alex, and was able to calm him down if he ever became distressed. I used this information as a teaching strategy on occasions when I was putting the class into pairs for different activities. During several lessons I would attempt to have the class conduct a group discussion, I would put

students into pairs first to write down and discuss notes on the topic and then present and discuss with the class. This strategy of pairing Alex with the particular student worked well I believe because I observed that Alex would take part in the activity and discuss the topic with his partner, and then the partner could call out to the class and relieve Alex of any pressure to do so. On a couple of occasions I gave the class homework, mainly written essay style on art appreciation. My co-operating teacher told me not worry about giving the homework to Alex as he would not be able to complete it. So I didn't ask Alex to do the same homework as his peers. On reflection I realise now after more research though that it was an area of learning that I neglected to include Alex in on. There could have been many other ways of assessing his understanding of the art appreciation the class were looking at in relation to the scheme. If Alex was not used to doing that type of work at home, I could have drafted a separate worksheet containing the images of the artists we were looking at for him to write his comments on in class time. That way I could have monitored his comprehension of the importance of art appreciation when conducting a painting scheme, as mentioned in the learning outcomes.