

KINDNESS

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A tone essay on autism pedagogy

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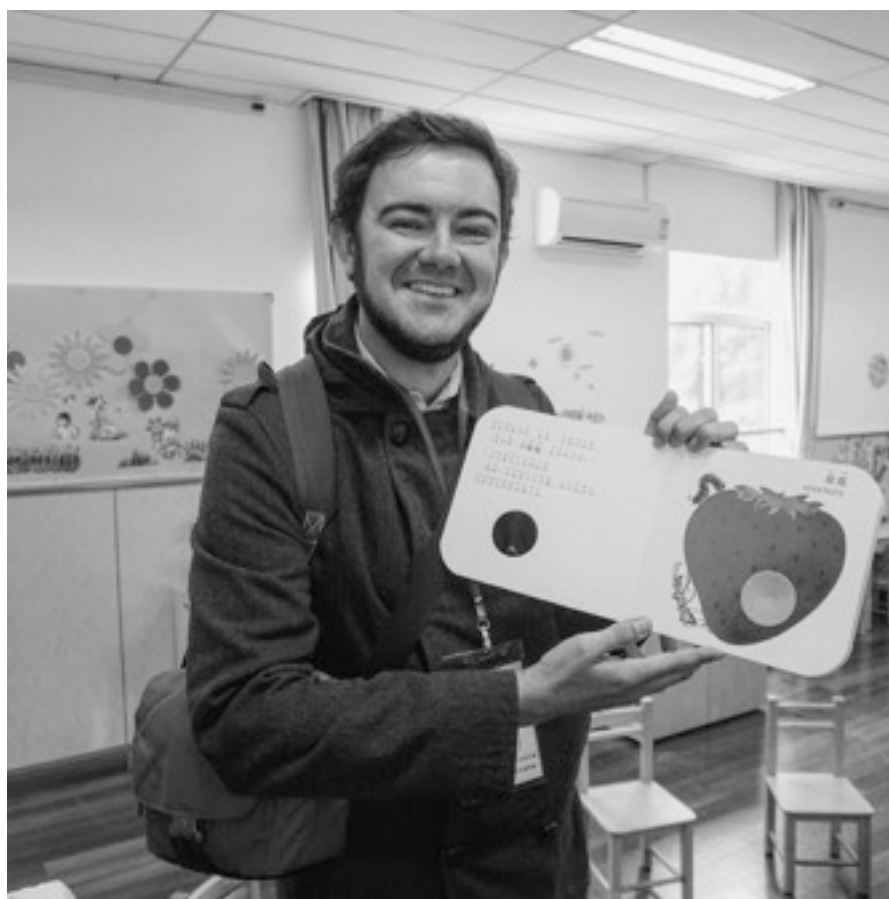
SMITH

# PREFACE

Last month just signaled my ten year anniversary working in autism education. As a student in high school who had all the intentions in the world for being a pipe organist studying Bach for the rest of his days, it was with surprise at first that I found myself rather quickly on a trajectory towards special education, but then sometimes the sharper angles are the most necessary for giving rise to developments. These past ten years of working in autism education have seen me be mentored by astonishingly wise and capable educators, students, families and professionals of every ilk, and incredible friendships too have formed out of these relationships and given shape to who I am and the path that I continue to walk on.

I have had this essay in mind for a few months now, with the intention of using it to pin down and structure a few key thoughts I have on summarising my approach to implementing successful autism pedagogy. I mention in the second chapter of this essay that I visited Shanghai in December of 2015 on invitation from the United Nations to speak on autism pedagogy, technology and accessibility to a workshop collective of specialists and policy makers across fields primarily relating to disability and communications. It was an incredible experience for me, not only as it was my first time visiting China, but also due to the other experiences that accompanied the trip, particularly a visit on my last day in the country to the Shanghai School for the Blind in order to speak to educators from that school and from local Pudong Special School on the utilisation of special interests in the classroom, the contents of which turned into the fourth chapter in this essay. I was filled with such a sense of community, particularly for the community

of educators who work in Special Education and who are doing kaleidoscopically incredible, experimental, creatively kind and clever things that are not only changing the lives of so many young people and their families, but are influencing the very frameworks by which society measures the value of all humanity. The trip left a big impact on me, and it felt in many ways like a bookend to a few years of wonderful, ever blooming experiences, from being invited to deliver international speaking tours on autism pedagogy, through to going on regional road trips with colleagues to visit students with autism in remote areas, I have been very fortunate to have been able to have my horizons broadened and to have been provided the opportunity to engage in all manner of professional roles and experiences that have brought me to where I am now.



This book is most definitely an experiment for me in terms of what I have otherwise published so far. My previous books have mostly been about the fusion of autism pedagogy and using iPad as a way of engaging new modes of academic and core competency instruction. They have been colourful, bright, interactive books with practical ideas and pragmatic prose. This book is different. I wrote it

quickly across a period of four days, of a morning and evening, and it makes liberal use of my fondness for long, fugal sentences that run on beyond most reasonable estimations of breath. But I think that's ok, the heart of what I wanted to say still feels like it's beating between the lines. Excuse too all the images being in grayscale, my love of the books of Winfried Georg Sebald and his fondness for reduced quality grayscale copies of photographs gave me reason to think it was a valid aesthetic decision. We'll see.

To summarise the contents of this book, it attempts to explicate what I consider to be the four key steps in approaching the education of students on the autism spectrum. This is a very personal take on the topic, hence this is not by any means an instructional textbook, but rather it is my own approximation of what I remind myself when I walk into work each day. The four key steps I present across the following chapters are:

- I. Finding out who the student is, continually seeking to learn about them with a view that to understand the student is to understand what they need with regards to educational intervention. We need to be creative about the way we go about this, and to my mind the best resources we have are within a combination of One Page Profiles, Green Walls, strategies that put us in the shoes of the student, and quality communication between home and school;
- II. Being philosophical about notions of disability, of the role of Special Education and Mainstream Education, of the realities we have to work with regarding the current levels of accessibility and implementation of the principles of Universal Design for Learning across both classroom and society;
- III. Recognising the value in creating a harmony between two polar opposite teaching personality qualities, that of the wild, attention grabbing, inspiration fuelled fireworks of The Edutainer, and that of the emotionally measured, objective and orderly Behaviour Detective; and,

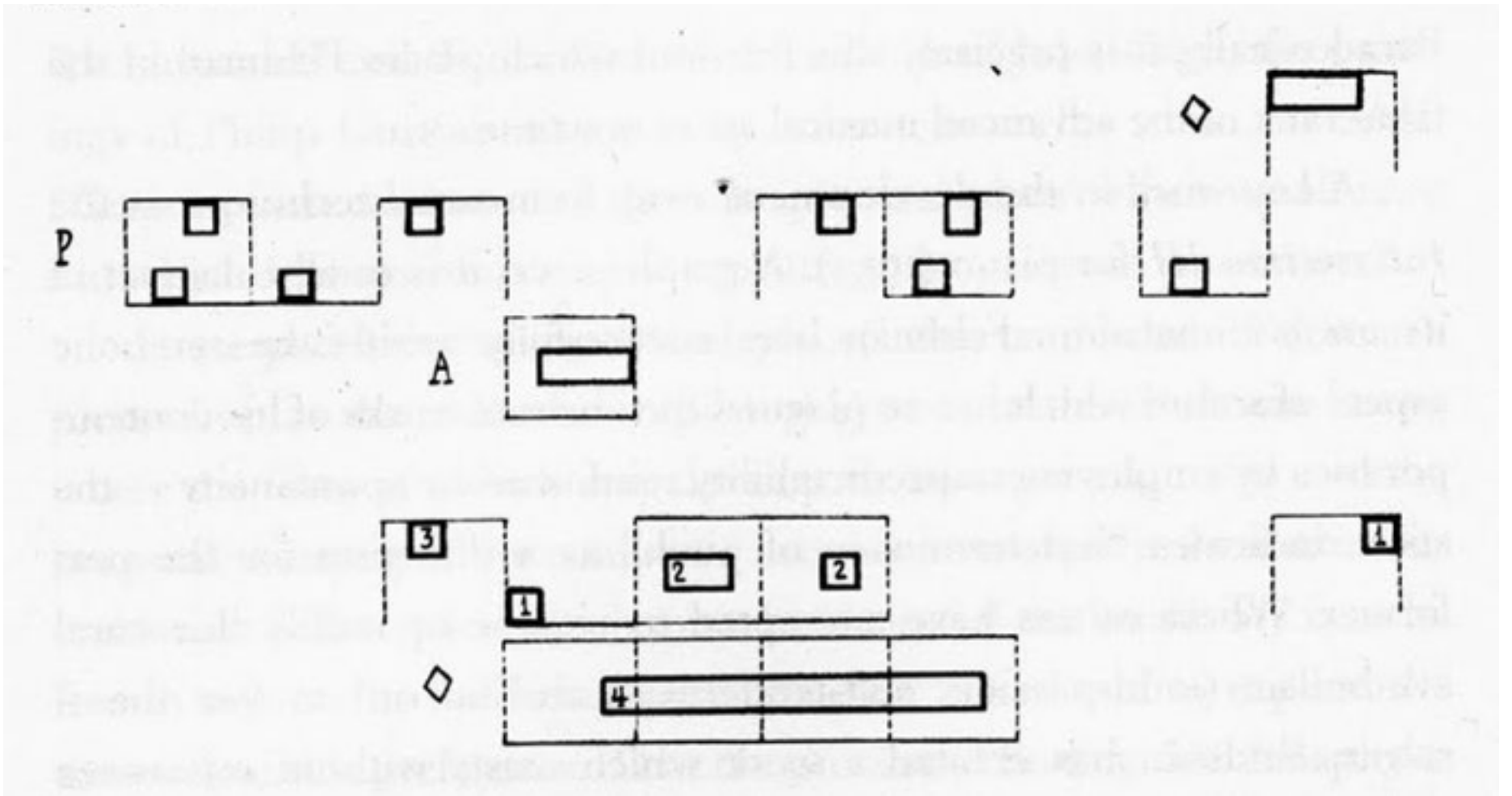
IV. Embracing the special interests of our students and understanding how to utilise these interests for maximum impact across the educational careers of our all our children and young people on the autism spectrum, with a view that these special interests will provide options and avenues into the specialist roles and the quality of life that the world beyond school seeks to enact.

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My appreciation and gratitude as always to my incredible family who support my adventures and tolerate my absurdist modes of husbandry and fatherhood, to my awe inspiring work colleagues who make everything possible, and to whoever produced the fine tiger costume that resides in my office.

*Craig Smith, June 2016*





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# FIRST STEPS AT EASE

There is a stroll palimpsest, a universe beneath the footpath. We walk hand in hand and look out at the built world in front and behind us. Lampposts, chipped concrete walls, clothes line string theory, birds on metal beams, windows, an illuminated sign advertising a food plaza. My daughter is four, and we employ all the folk physics ideas that we have at our collective disposal to investigate an under-

standing of how the basic systems around us work. How do windows work, how is glass made. How do you bolt a lamppost into the ground, where is the switch to turn it on. How does all of this constructed world around us operate. I can't really tell you how a refrigerator works, but between us we can make a good estimation using what we know about how leaves fall and how the sound of thunder travels and how plastic toys bounce down wooden steps. There is an intuitive understanding that we all share about how the built world operates, and our children can be particularly astute with this intuition.

Renee Baillargeon has shown how infants have an innate knowledge for discriminating between two objects with a microscopic intensity of post-birth scientific reasoning that is surely the position at which all observation fueled knowledge is constructed. And, Simon Baron-Cohen has shown how children on the autism spectrum can have a particularly strong capacity for establishing an understanding of the cause and effects of the constructed world using innate engineering processes that tinker within the heart of the youthful mind. Folk psychology can be more tricky, to understand what others are thinking, feeling, expecting, and all the rest. And that's ok, because the reason we're walking around the city today isn't just to focus on how the food plaza sign becomes illuminated, but rather it's so I can learn more about the child beside me.

The phenomenologists got so much right, about how life and the inside of the mind can completely be understood by simply taking a walk around the block. You create your own truth by looking at the jigsaw daylight between the leaves and learning how to authentically frame and communicate what you're processing and then to be able to listen to and realise what reality also looks like to someone else. This walk around the block with my daughter is foremost a process of getting to know all about her. Through maintaining a dialogue around interpreting how the world works, by sharing invented ideas about logical connections and how this interacts with that, through an illumination and a bending of the rules of

our own naive physics, I am getting to know my daughter and how she thinks about the world, what is important to her, what her frame of reference is for reality, and what her dreams are.

This is what is most important as we continue down the street towards the corner where the schoolhouse stands, with a tall brick wall that necklaces the rise of the playground, tagged along its perimeter with a rainbow graffiti of invented names, painted linguistic splash, stencil art of children and balloons and monkeys, like the wall here is a canvas mouth overflowing with urban cardiac swoon. They say that that if you've met one child with autism, you've met one child with autism, but so too if you've met one child, you've met one child. Every individual is an unrepeatable stamp of solo humanity, and with this considered we need to respect the time required to properly get to know the individual children that we meet along our way.

I say to my daughter, Imagine if you don't turn five this year, imagine if instead you jump from being four years old straight to twenty years old. And she says, But I won't have the right appetite, I'll be a twenty year old with the appetite of a seven year old, I'll be thin, and I'll be confused and walking down the street and I'll have to ask someone, Where is my house, and they'll say, You don't own a house.

We round the corner of the block and head home with a little basket full of disjecta we've picked up from the ground, a few metal cogs, some curious seed pods, a couple of particularly veiny leaves, a coil of copper. We'll put them under a microscope when we get home and see how there is so much more beneath the surface of things than we see upon first inspection, and how we sometimes just need the right lens, the right focus, and a little bit of time to see all the wonderfully complex and unexpected details that are fully revealed when you take a closer look.





To my mind, the first responsibility of every educator in the classroom is to get to know each individual child in their care as well as possible. We need to understand each child for the benefit of reasoning what their strengths and their needs are so as to properly understand the role that we are going to have in supporting this child's education for the time they are with us. There can be an inverse assumption here at times, that it is rather our primary role to help children learn academic subject matter, but of course this is upside down: we can consider ourselves to truly be educators in so much as we are professionals specialised in learning about the individual children in our classrooms. Connecting the dots of content and learning how to think are wonderful consequences for children that happen after the main event, after we teach ourselves about who they are and all the complicating factors that impact upon them in composition of their daily realities.

This is a deceptively simple assumption, and one that can be lost in the platitudes of best intentions and fridge magnet philosophies: it is not that our role as

educators is just to get to know who the children in our classrooms are because it seems like a nice, holistic thing to do, but rather it is because if we do not understand how our children work, then we do not understand how to educate them. This is true for all children, but as an educator who works primarily with children on the autism spectrum, let me say that it is a consideration that needs to sit at the forefront of any discussion about the educational needs of a child on the spectrum. Without a quality understanding of who the child is, we have nothing.


There are three key points of consideration that we engage a dialogue on with the children in our school. We want to know what makes our students happy, we want to know how they see themselves in relation to others so as to establish a sense and value of self, and we want to know how students want to be best supported at school. We use these key questions to inform what is called a One Page Profile, a simple document that captures this key information about our students that helps us to begin our education.

We start by using a One Page Profile with our students from the moment they prepare to enter our school for the first time. At our initial Individual Education Plan meeting where we work with our families and students on formulating key goals for us to start working on, we begin with a One Page Profile that has been previously sent home to be drafted with input from our student and their family, which our teachers then further discuss and add to so as to build an authentic representation of the key elements that represent our student. As much input from the student as possible is directly sought, and where this can be a challenge for some of our students, our educators have been using many innovative ways to engage this dialogue to accommodate the range of processing and communication needs our students have. Some of our teachers have begun creating One Page Profiles that are completely visual in nature, with iPad utilisation or by using laminated pictures of things that make our students happy, things that people like and admire about each of our students, and ways in which to best support

our students. Some of our teachers make it a daily task to allow students to reflect upon their One Page Profiles and to edit and update them so they can present the most accurate version of themselves to those they work with in the school environment. Our students, from preschool through to high school, proudly display their One Page Profiles on the walls of their classrooms, as a foundational statement of rendering the educational space as one guided by an understanding of who all the participants are. To this end, our educators similarly complete One Page Profiles that they display alongside their students and share with each other across the school.

STUDENT NAME

What people like and admire about me:



What makes me happy:

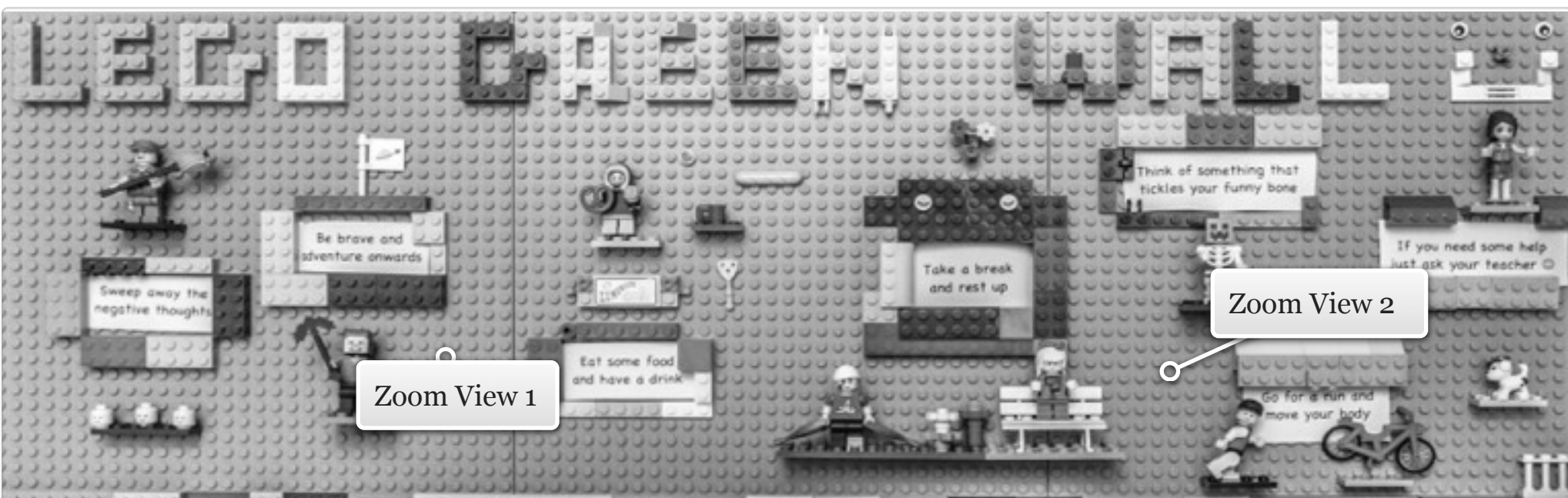
How I want to be supported:

Last year I developed a resource called a **School Instruction Manual (SIM)**, a document that students, teachers and family could collaborate on to provide a model of the school day and the school experience for a student, building on the **Social Story and Comic Conversation work of Carol Gray** to showcase weekly visual timetables, activities at school that students could look forward to, examples of social play that could be engaged across the day, and it also included a student's One Page Profile. As a way of further extending the dialogue that rises from tools like this, so as to further work towards getting to know our students, our Hunter School uses a classroom resource and teaching strategy we call the Green Wall.

The Green Wall is an idea derived from the point at which the **Zones of Regulation program** and our **Positive Behaviour Support** strategies meet. With reference to the Zones of Regulation, an emotional regulation program developed by **Leah Kuypers** that uses four coloured zones to represent four different emotional states with associated regulatory strategies that help students understand and manage their behavioural responses to a spectrum of feelings, the Green Zone represents the emotional state in which you are most settled, happy and proximally positioned to learn. In Positive Behaviour Support, stages of behavioural challenge and response are **represented sometimes as a pyramid** with a large Green section down the bottom, representing the sort of strategies and practices you utilise to provide consistent support in order to manage all behaviours, a smaller middle Yellow section, representing more specific behaviour plans you would develop to support a particular level of behavioural need that can arise from time to time, and a tiny Red section at the top of the pyramid, representing very specific crisis support plans to address particularly challenging behaviours in need of immediate intervention. The Green section of this Positive Behaviour Support pyramid aligns perfectly with the Green Zone in the Zones of Regulation, in that they both represent a state in which proactive strategies are employed to maintain the most

desired state of emotional and behavioural ease in the classroom. To this end, we have established what we term the Green Wall, a physical space on a wall in the classroom that is coloured green with material such as felt or paper, or for the adventurous it can take form as a Lego Green Wall, in which we can present a shared extrapolation of the three key prompts for our student One Page Profiles. This extrapolation on the Green Wall takes form as a collection of behavioural strategies, class rules, respectful agreements and considerations between all members of the classroom, and other inclusions that represent what everybody is hoping to get out of the classroom experience, and how everybody is going to best feel supported in the classroom. The Green Wall is both generalised as a collection of whole class strategies and statements, and it is also individualised to include each student's One Page Profile contents. In a Lego Green Wall version of this strategy, each student may have an individually identified section of the wall that can be used to display all the things the student enjoys, things that represent their sense of self, and how they can be best supported in the classroom, all concretely visualised with Lego resources, working in with the philosophy and practice of Lego Serious Play. Below is a photo from one of our classrooms with green base plates tacked to the wall in order to create a Lego Green Wall with a range of affirmations and positive behaviour support strategies that align with Green Wall think-

**INTERACTIVE 1.1** Lego Green Wall (tap Zoom View 1 and Zoom View 2 for closer details of wall)



ing that students can create individually or as part of whole group activities, finding Lego characters to represent the strategies in either a very explicit, concrete way, such as showing students food and drink they can have when they are starting to feel stressed out, or more metaphorical representations of strategies, such as a Lego character with a broom sweeping away negative thoughts. This process of helping students move from concrete to more abstract modes of strategic regulation is part of a framework I've established called Lego Constructive Thinking, which focuses on using Lego to help with student problem solving skills.

The photo of the classroom on the previous page is of a Primary School classroom, which is of course a considerably different physical experience to the High School environment. The High School setting is characterised by many transitions across campus to different rooms occupied across the day by many different cohorts of student. As such, it can be difficult for some High Schools to implement Green Wall strategies effectively, in which case I recommend the implementation of a Mobile Green Wall. This is a resource that remodels the bones of the Green Wall strategy, with its visual projection of daily required behavioural strategies, agreed upon terms of respect and engagement between peers and other school participants, regulatory prompts and elements of individual One Page Profiles, and establishes this as a portable version that can be taken from class to class. It may be printed within a folder or a school diary, or it may be part of a document such as a **School Instruction Manual (SIM)** that students can take from class to class, or it may be a digital document portfolio on an iPad or laptop. Whatever form it takes, it needs to be something that is readily able to be included in the classroom dialogue between teacher and students, providing a functional way to remind about behavioural expectations, to provide regulatory strategies, and to further provide a window into understanding each individual student we meet and work with across every school day.

There are of course many other ways of getting to know our students. I'm thinking of strategies that creative educators use such as taking the time to spend a day in a student's shoes, walking around the areas of the playground they spend time, following the same schedule, getting a sense for the very real phenomenological lived experience of what our individual students observe, feel and enact across the school day. The more in which we are able to engage this particular space of existential identification, in which we are able to really empathise and be observant to the spaces our students spend their days, the more we are able to achieve our goal of understanding who our students are and how they work in order for us to design functional learning experiences that are suitable to who our students are and for the tools that we can provide them as they flourish into the future. Regardless of the child, regardless of the spectrum or the behavioural challenges or otherwise, it is here that we need to start, our first step always in providing real education of actual value, is in getting to know the child.

With this as our cornerstone, we head now towards the second stage of a model for engaging autism pedagogy, which is to understand our children beyond the labels ascribed to them, to be philosophically broad shouldered enough to carry on a dialogue of Post-Disability and Universal Design for Learning, and to see beyond the current constraints of our society and our classrooms with a view that we may build a future beyond Special Education by considering that frameworks of Inclusion should not be a vision of the Mainstream World with Special Education bolted on to the side, but rather there needs to be wise consideration for the philosophical and pedagogical tenets that make Special Education the infinitely questioning source of humanistic truth I love it for. Onward.



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# MAXIMUM UNIVERSAL

In December of 2015 I was fortunate to have been invited to visit Shanghai to speak at a United Nations workshop titled Information for All - Accessible Knowledge, Information and Communication for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. I travelled with colleague and friend Greg Alchin, a specialist in Universal Design for Learning, to the Sunshine Rehabilitation Centre in the suburb district of Songjiang for a fascinating week of discussions with policy leaders and government officials on the use of technology to foster increased accessibility



across society. Particularly, most all the conversations travelled quickly towards the idea of expanding the discussion beyond disability and to rather consider a Post-Disability space where Universal Design was at the heart of all societal constructs.

In essence this very much reflects what the United Nations Convention of the Right of Persons with Disability have established as the international standard by which we conceptualise disability, by way of engaging the Social Model. That is, rather than seeing disability through a Medical Model of disability that maybe ascribe a person with a diagnosed disability as being inherently different to what is otherwise considered a normal or healthy model of a human individual, a Social Model of disability rather places the emphasis on the social environment as being the dominant factor that creates disability for people. A good example of this is a recent one a colleague of mine was sharing in relation to work she is doing with Indigenous communities in regional Australia in providing educational outreach services to children on the autism spectrum. The Indigenous families she was working with were surprised when school reported that their children had a disability, for when the child was at home and with family they were not observed to be disabled, they functioned within the family and the community with no impairment. It was only when the child started going to school that they received a diagnosis of autism and came under the sphere of disability support and Special Education. In this way, it was the environmental culture and structure of the school that established that the child was not performing in a manner that was seen as normal in relation to the standard for how children might normally present.

This is not to say that the school invented the autism diagnosis for the child out of thin air - the same would apply if the child had Cerebral Palsy and required significant physical support, for example. The home environment and community might be set up to be fully accessible so that the child does not consider the idea

of disability, however were the child to visit a supermarket or the airport or any other space not as accessibly considered, the idea of disability would become more pronounced as they approach barriers to how freely they are able to do what they would like to do. In this way, I challenge the idea that any individual is actually capable of not being considered to have a disability when placed in an environment that does not fully foster accessibility. Those of us who might consider that we do not have a disability would do well to consider all the times we have become frustrated at visiting a shopping centre or a hotel or any given public or private space and complained about how poorly designed something was, how the aisles are too narrow or the counter is too high or the information on the screen is scrolling too quickly, how the information presented at the front desk is too confusing, how they didn't take enough time to explain how it all works. We don't necessarily think, If only I was able to read faster or if I was taller, instead we recognise the design deficit and we call it out for being so inaccessible.

This is not a philosophical trick for trying to deny the reality or the impact of a need such as autism. What it is an argument for however is to see children not as being able or disabled, but simply to see all children as children who have individual needs without a comparison to some semblance of what is normal or what a successful model school student should look like. It is an argument for asking how is this classroom, and ultimately how is this society, accessible to all children and to the learning needs of all. This is what a Post-Disability consideration is focused on, a recognition that there is not one human out there who is less a representation of perfect humanity than anybody else. Hence I believe the role of Special Education should not be to simply provide support to those children who do not fit into the Mainstream Education framework, but rather Special Education should stand tall as a model for what all Education should be, it is a framework of questioning and diagnosing need and creating individualised programs and supports to establish conditions under which all children can develop to the best of

their abilities. Special Education could be referred to as Education Version 2.0, it is the upgraded version of the sort of 1.0 Mainstream Education that still might not be completely caught up on differentiation and the tenets of Universal Design for Learning. This is not to cast shade unfairly on Mainstream Education or to hold all Special Education classes up as models of Universal Design by any means. Rather, it is about highlighting what is necessary to consider when a child walks into any classroom. A child on the autism spectrum should not be considered disabled when they enter a classroom, they should be considered as a child with individual needs that need to be identified and considered and for the educator to be able to have a dialogue about the range of appropriate learning conditions that can allow this child to flourish.

The difficulty with this simple statement is the same difficulty that a person with a vision impairment faces when walking into an art gallery - if the environment is not set up for vision accessibility, no amount of well wishing will allow the individual to enjoy the visual artworks on display. This is how I feel about so many of our current classroom environments - a child on the autism spectrum enters the classroom and yet, even with fantastic educators with all the best intentions in the world, the current structures and expectations of the system are just not always in alignment with what the child needs to be successful. And not just for children on the autism spectrum, of course. You look around most any classroom, from preschool through to high school and university, and it is not difficult to consider that we are providing a less than universally successful and certainly a less imaginative version of education across our systems than we should be capable of coming up with. Why not dream a little, why not imagine a school experience that operates only an hour or two a week inside formal classroom walls, with other periods across the week spent in the community with mentors and families providing a range of developmental experiences that connect with big picture goals for the future. Why not imagine and enact classroom structures beyond

rows and columns of chairs and turning to page twenty seven in the textbook. Just because the trains run on time it doesn't mean we're getting anywhere.

The difficulties associated with some of these themes we're discussing is to my mind one of the inherent difficulties associated with Inclusion at this time. When I conduct Educational Outreach consultative visits, which involve attending to schools and conducting observations on students on the spectrum, consulting with families and teachers and working collaboratively to put plans together to best support the educational success of the student on the spectrum, most all of the visits are to Mainstream Schools who are worried about the challenging behaviours of a student on the spectrum, or about whether they are doing enough to enable to success of a student on the spectrum in the school environment. And so, we all work together to introduce new strategies and processes to address the individual needs of the child. Sometimes we are successful, and sometimes we are not. The times that we are successful, we get a sense it is because all the autism education evidence informed practices that we have in our tool box have all hit the targets they were aiming for - the visual timetables helped provide the student with structure and allowed them to pace themselves and anticipate the expectations across the day, the Social Stories allowed the student to learn, implement and generalise a range of successful social strategies that they were previously lacking, the utilisation of Special Interests relating to what the student is passionate about allowed them a more connected experience with the classroom, and so on. And the times that we are not successful, when all of the above and more have been implemented perfectly, when family and staff and external professionals are all talking together and hitting all the right notes but still the student in focus is just having a terribly unpleasant and unsuccessful time of trying to make it through a school day, I wonder to myself if the child is not here at school too early - perhaps in a couple of hundred years schools will have taken on a different form, and this student would be able to find success alongside all the other

children. This is what educational Inclusion is seeking, to provide classrooms where all children can find success. Except we aren't there yet, as shown by the astonishing rising numbers of students being home schooled, of families and schools battling each other over disability discrimination laws, and by the perpetually changing tides of perspectives on Inclusion and the value of Specialised settings and what the presence of choice means in relation to whether an Inclusive society has a need for other options outside of the Universal Mainstream.

The thing is, Inclusion surely needs to be the goal, it is surely the ideology that respects the rights and the human value of everybody to the utmost degree. But with respect to the previous discussion points in this chapter, and to borrow language from the world of accessibility, too often inclusion can be seen as a process of bolting Special Education on to the side of Mainstream Education. It is as if the perception is that Mainstream Education is just fine the way things are, it's fine with the number of students it has in each class, the number of teachers out the front of the room, the physical layout of the rooms, the timetables, the playgrounds, it's all in good order - but then, a student enters the room who doesn't quite fit the model of what we expect a Mainstream student to be like, they're doing all sorts of things that the status quo of students are not doing, they are subsequently observed to have Special Needs, and then the Special Education practices relating to the needs of this child need to be introduced and bolted on to the Mainstream classroom and then implemented so the child can find success. This bolting on process might mean introducing a teacher's aide, it might mean bolting on a new emotional regulation or social skills program, it might mean bolting on a new home and school communication book to monitor positive behaviour support practices. The difficulty here is, when we bolt on an accessible solution to a product that was not previously designed to be accessible, it is often a poor substitute for what the real solution is - scrapping the old product, and redesigning it anew to be fully accessible. The deeper question here, of course, is whether it is

possible to change existing Mainstream Education classrooms to be environments that are capable of supporting every student who enters, regardless of the individual profile of needs they present with. To ensure the success of Inclusion we need to consider whether the answer is going to be an ongoing process of tinkering with the system, adding this and subtracting that, sanding the edges and remodeling the interior, to adapt to the ever changing demographics of varied learners we have in our communities, or is the answer rather going to be a complete halt to what is currently going on in our schools, allowing us to take the time to step back as a society and say, It is time to start again, We can do this better, Let us redesign education. This catch cry is by no means just relegated to the musings of Special Educators - it is in the same key as the revolutionary messages being shared nightly on Twitter between teachers who are seeking to reimagine the role of technology in schools, to reimagine creativity and well being and the value of being at school at all. And so it always should be, we need disquiet to progress - the question is whether we progress by rearranging the desks in the classroom, or whether we progress by reimagining the inherent human value in being able to truly reach all learners.



My own way of moving forward in this space is to embrace the principles of Universal Design for Learning as a talisman for the goal of reaching all learners. The team at CAST, the **Center for Applied Special Technology**, are a key reference point here, and I heartily recommend reading ‘**Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice**’ as it provides tremendous guidelines for considering how to provide every student with multiple means of engagement, so as to make learning purposeful and stimulating, to provide multiple means of representation for students, so as to make sure that learners are able to engage with content in a number of different and suitable ways, and to provide multiple means for students to express what they know. In the following two chapters of this essay I’ll elaborate on how we do this in our school.

To my mind, to understand the principles of Universal Design for Learning is to also understand good autism pedagogy. There are many direct parallels between the current literature on evidence informed autism practices and the tenets of Universal Design. Lisa Combs, a special educator and autism coach, wrote a terrific article on just this notion, **Opening the Classroom Door for Children with Autism**. In it she extrapolates on the correlations between the instructional strategies recommended by the **National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders** and the principles recommended by CAST for the **implementation of Universal Design for Learning**. The connections between the two frameworks are clear and important to understand - the need in autism pedagogy to represent tasks concretely and visually aligns with the Universal Design notion of providing multiple means of representation, the autism instructional strategy of utilising the special interests of our students aligns with the Universal Design notion of providing multiple means of engagement, and so on. Further work elaborating these connections into shared pedagogical frameworks will be very valuable with a view to heighten the utility of these approaches, particularly as it helps to resolve a consideration that often arises when seeking to implement par-

ticularly autism educational practices in settings where all of the children are not on the autism spectrum. One of the ways we encourage the use of autism pedagogy strategies in classrooms is to say, This is not just going to benefit the child on the autism spectrum, This is just good teaching, This will help everybody. There is nobody in the classroom who will not benefit from explicit social skill instruction, or from the use of visual timetables, or the embedding of emotional regulation strategies, or the utility of special interests. Hence, there is a strategic and philosophical benefit in rendering these strategies not as simply belonging to autism pedagogy, but indeed as those that similarly align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning which, by the nature of its name and its function, applies universally to all students regardless of who they are or what diagnosis they do or don't present with.



**CLEARING A PATH  
FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS  
CLEARS THE PATH FOR EVERYONE!**



This is my way forward, for the students in our school for children on the autism spectrum, for the students with autism that I visit and work with across all educational settings and systems, to not wait for the overhaul revolution to occur and for an unheralded view of education and schooling to present itself, but to rather always hold in my head the considerations I've shared across this chapter - to understand that there is often a limit to what we can do with existing school structures, and that while the goal of Inclusion remains in sight and at times finds wonderful success, we must be careful about how we engage Inclusion, not by way of holding onto the best of intentions and bolting on a few Special Education tricks to the side of an otherwise unfortunately designed system, but by way of reconfiguring our perceptions on what Reaching All Learners really means, and what the inherent human value is of all students to be treated with the respect and optimism worthy of continually dreaming up innovative strategies to enable the success they need. Perhaps one day Special Education will just be Education, and the lessons learned from meeting the needs of some of our most at risk students will provide a reevaluation of all values to the daily practices of all educational settings, realising the goal of maximum universal inclusive success.




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### 3

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# THE EDUTAINING BEHAVIOUR DETECTIVES

The period of time you have between first walking into the classroom with your class, and when you start to speak or act and either establish or lose the interest of the group. If there is a mathematical equation that can spotlight all the mechanics that spin in this brief duration, it would surely exist as a natural tattoo within

$$\Delta M_i^{-1} = -\alpha \sum_{n=1}^N D_i[n] \left[ \sum_{j \in C[i]} F_{ji}[n-1] + F_{ext_i}[n^{-1}] \right]$$

the DNA of what we refer to in our school as The Edutainer. There is quality of spirit that The Edutainer embodies that we seek out as part of the key formula that gives rise to master practitioners in the education of children on the autism spectrum. It is a little too easy to say that they are ninety percent entertainer and ten percent educator, although this does capture the importance that The Edutainer places on engaging the mind of a young student. Not content to simply allow the curriculum subject matter to speak for itself as an object of inherent value, The Edutainer knows that the curriculum is just a stone that means precious little until it is juggled or skipped across a pond. Like all good orators, The Edutainer knows meaning is to be found not in the words themselves, but in the way the words are delivered, it is all in the delivery, this is the crucial factor that either ignites the interest of the class when they first notice that someone is out the front of the classroom, or else gives the class reason to consider other alternatives for entertainment and distraction.

Two years ago when I was speaking to educators in New Zealand I was wrapped over the knuckles by one of the attending participants for using the term Edutainer. They contended that it was a mass cheapening of the value that a teacher brings to the classroom, to consider that a teacher should only function as a tool for entertainment, like a walking version of a less than pedagogically sound video game claiming to be educational while being instead just a two dimensional gimmick. I appreciated the critique, as it is a positive consideration to keep in mind for any intervention that wanders in the classroom with shiny bells and whistles and little substance within, and it also gave me the opportunity to compare the value of what we try to render with the term Edutainer in likeness to the value that we find in play. The value of play and its role in the healthy development of children is now a foundational given in most every educational context, although its realisation in actual classroom implementation is something that from my observations is still quite limited. Parents, educators and therapists all

recognise the ways that children need to be given the opportunity to explore, imagine and make decisions according to a narrative of their own creation, and that genuine educational revelations are generated within this space of pure play. So too should the value of The Edutainer not be reduced to a state of seeing educational benefit diminish behind a facade of clowning around out the front of the classroom, but rather recognising that it is within this clowning around that education actually finds its heart and can begin to bloom. The old adage of what we learn with pleasure we never forget cannot be more true for our motto of what The Edutainer delivers.

I took a mid-morning stroll around our school the other day with the idea of The Edutainer in my mind, and I was so thrilled with all the amazing examples of practice that I observed. In one classroom, a teacher had a long wooden board suspended from the ceiling at one position in the room, with a list of visual numeracy concepts attached to the front of the board, and a student was laying on his stomach on a hammock suspended from another point in the ceiling, and he was swinging towards the board of numeracy concepts while the teacher stood close by and pointed to the board, prompting the student to talk about and engage with the ideas presented while he was able to swing back and forth on the hammock in what looked to all the world like Sesame Street meets Cirque du Soleil.

In another room, a teacher had a green fabric screen suspended across the front of the classroom, and she was sitting with a Tiger head on, with students beside her wearing an assortment of crafted animal masks, as they filmed themselves delivering a morning news report on the ecological state of local bushland environments. The next classroom along was empty, and I looked out to the vegetable garden near the chicken coop to see the class teacher and her students playing in the soil with Lego characters, microscopes and iPads, creating comic strip narratives imagining a space colony of Lego characters who have crash landed on some alien planet that looks like Earth except all the flora and fauna in the area

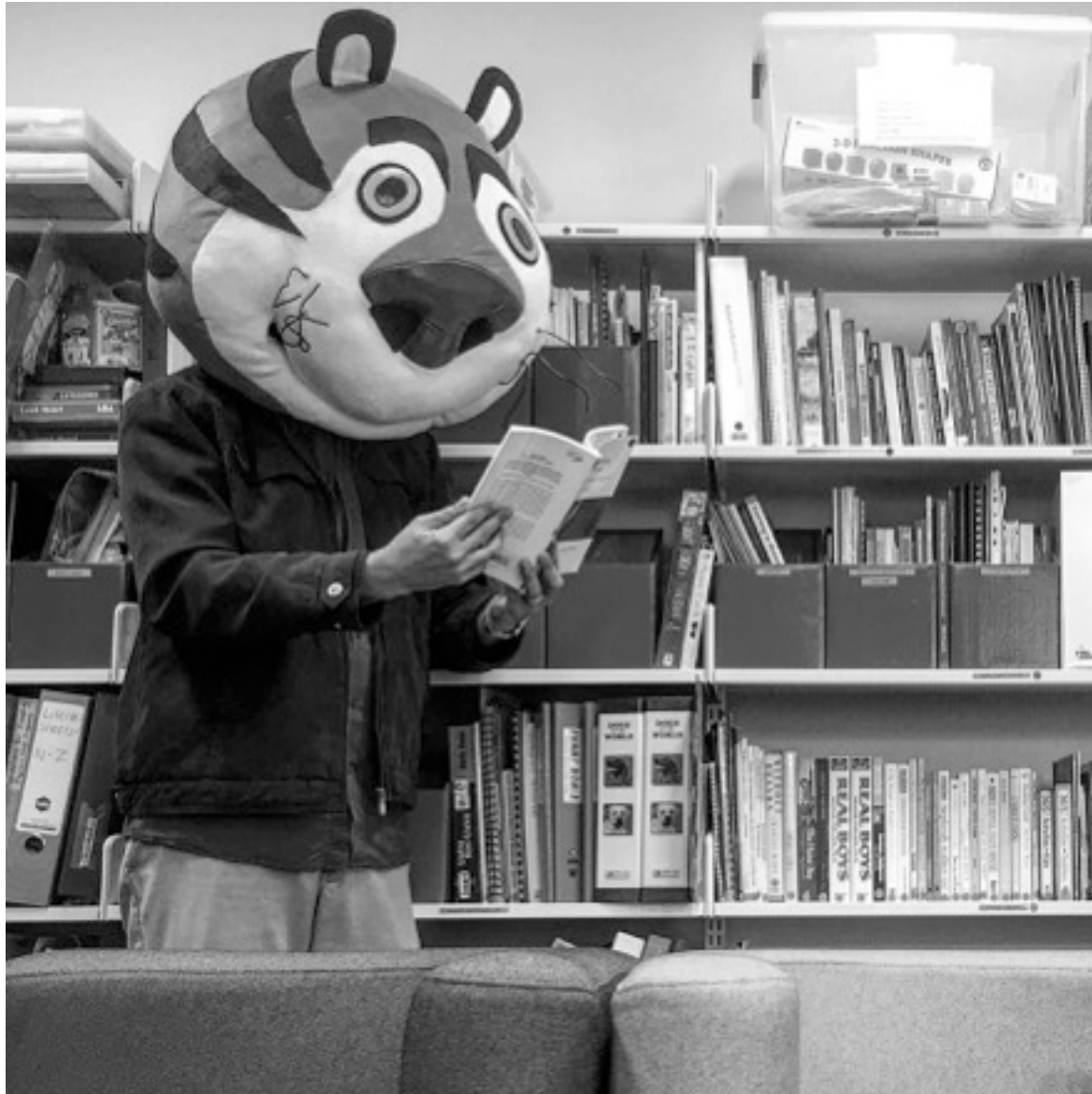
are absolutely gigantic. The teacher told me to check out what another colleague was up to, he and a few fathers who were volunteering for the morning had taken the class for a walk through the bush all wearing Minecraft style costumes created out of boxes, and when I caught up to where they were, the collective of explorers were using loose objects from the area such as large branches, rocks and fragments of metal broken away from a now obsolete nearby rail line, to build a bridge over a metre wide creek running through the bushland that would be capable of allowing a Sphero, a robotic ball that can be operated by a smart device, to roll from one bank of the creek, over the bridge, and down to the other side. A few different variations of bridge were being trialled, and lucky for Sphero being waterproof, as it was spinning into the running water of the creek on a few dozen occasions while the constructions were taking place. The most successful bridge ended up being one that used parallel straight wooden branches to cradle Sphero as it rolled nestled between the branches, replicating in a fashion the physics of the nearby abandoned rail line.

But being an Edutainer doesn't necessarily mean starting every day wearing a Tiger head and building loose object constructions in local bushland, although I certainly wouldn't dissuade anyone wanting to go down that path. Walking past other classrooms, I saw a teacher strumming a pink acoustic guitar and singing a song about how to say hello when you meet someone new, and in this simple act of singing a song to her class the teacher had switched on all the bright lights for her students, I could see the sense of ease and trust that the students were enveloped in, the sense of flow and attention being composed within the culture of the classroom as a result of this musical and very human act of relational connection. This is how The Edutainer works, building on the cores of the previous two chapters - The Edutainer knows who the students in the class are, and employs the principles of Universal Design for Learning to establish connections with every in-

dividual student in a manner not pre-determined by expectations of how a classroom should operate.

What is ironic in part about this notion is that there is actually little more traditional than a teacher singing out the front of the classroom, or constructing a bridge across a stream, or creating stories out of toys in the dirt, or even the physical gross motor trapeze work in the classroom with the hammocks. This is not a new pedagogy riding the wave of some invented future schooling, this is a refocusing of the lens cast into the beating pulse of what is interesting to children and how we can render our current approaches to teaching, with the plethora of curriculum outcomes to be engaged across the year, into a vision of schooling that gives rise to true education, particularly, as always, for those students who are always in the front of my mind, our children on the autism spectrum for whom this style of teaching is not simply a beneficial paradigm, but an absolute requisite for finding any success within and beyond school.

There is to my tonal rejoicing of the qualities of *The Edutainer* a criticism that could readily be made here, that the whole conceptualisation and description of *The Edutainer* is too full of poetry and fleeting descriptions of spirited school practice to actual capture with any accuracy what this philosophy actually entails. To this I would say, with absolutely no intention of trying to slyly dodge the critique, that this is because it is within the inherent quality of *The Edutainer* to represent, for lack of a better expression, more of the art than of the science. If I could sidle up to Nietzsche for a moment, I might borrow his dichotomy from *The Birth of Tragedy* as relating to his description of two polar opposite representations of spirit as established out of ancient Greek theatre - the Dionysian and the Apollonian. In the Dionysian spirit we have a representation of character that is passionate and full of unbridled emotion, not to be constrained within schedules and ordered routines and neat checklists of jobs to get done, the Dionysian is in love with music and inventing wild new ways of representing and engaging the



world and, **as Nietzsche so beautifully put it**, to have chaos in oneself so as to be able to give birth to a dancing star. The Apollonian is at the other end of the spectrum, it is an orderly mode of being, of being calmly attentive to the details, there is more of the science here than of the art in a sense, there is a freedom from unrestrained emotion, allowing for a more considered, gentle glow of structure and form allowed to take hold. It is with little surprise that I would align The Edutainer closely within the camp of the Dionysian, and it is as a result of this that anyone seeking to unlock the spirit of The Edutainer should know that there is no checklist of qualities that allow a measured, scientific approach to engaging this mode of delivery, it is something that needs to be generated from within the annals of ones own personal perspectives on life and on passion for teaching and on the potential of children beyond multiple choice formulations of success. It is in this way very much teaching as art, with all the poetry and dancing that goes into describing it.

This is not all that I am suggesting teaching children on the autism spectrum is about though. The title of this chapter is not The Edutainer, it is The Edutaining Behaviour Detectives. For while we must engage the Dionysian spirit of The Edutainer, we must also consider the need for the Apollonian equivalent, The Behaviour Detective. To transition into a description of the orderly and diagnostic world of The Behaviour Detective, I will make reference to some of the key influences related to student achievement as published in John Hattie's book **Visible Learning for Teachers**.

Of the **top ten interventions** that Hattie establishes, ranking the effect sizes of meta-analyses he scores for his Visible Learning project, the majority are within what we would consider as base requirements for most any special education teacher, but particularly in our setting we would align them very closely with the daily practice of The Edutainer. Having a sensitivity and awareness of Piagetian program is one of the top impact interventions, which involves focusing on the thinking processes of children rather than making an explicit focus simply on lesson outcomes, avoiding the imposition of adult ways of thinking onto children, and being aware of the Piagetian stages that children progress through with their thinking, from the sensorimotor stage through to formal operational thinking. This is the bread and butter of The Edutainer, to focus inherently on the thinking processes of children, respecting the need to engage the interest of children and to then tailor learning experiences that allow children of all ages and developmental needs to construct new levels of understanding and to problem solve situations and scenarios with increasing degrees of complexity.

**Teacher credibility** is another of the interventions listed amongst the top influencers on student achievement and one that strikes directly at the core of what The Edutainer embodies - a projection of confidence with regards to knowing what the plan is for the school day, of sharing this openly and respectfully with students, and in being proud of this plan for the day, knowing that it is not just a



list of boxes to tick, but rather it is something that is going to be a source of inspiration, excitement and challenge for the class. For a student to enter a classroom where this is the tone set immediately upon entering is a very powerful thing, regardless of the perceived processing capacities of a child, you can see on the faces of some of our youngest and most high support need students that they react so very differently when an adult in the room displays mature tenets of trust, of being competent in providing the right classroom experiences, of having an energy and a dynamism that sponsors eager attention and high levels of interest, and of having the sort of classroom immediacy that allows The Edutainer to recognise a teachable moment and to go with it, not to worry about an Apollonian timetable of lessons to get through, but to take a moment of special interest for students and to maximise its impact completely, to run with the moment for as long as possible with a completely Dionysian devotion to passionate curiosity and a fervent exploration of new and unfolding ideas.

Other high impact influencers on achievement that Hattie notes are closely related to the idea of pitching the right level of learning activity at the appropriate processing capacity and need of the child, similar to the aforementioned awareness of Piagetian stages of thinking processes that children progress through, but with a more direct focus on being able to match a particular learning strategy to a child who is projecting a specific need for that intervention. **Response to Intervention** is one framework that Hattie mentions as it has a focus on providing systematic assistance to students who are experiencing challenges with particular areas of schooling, and this again is closely aligned with another framework noted, the use of **Comprehensive Interventions for students with additional learning needs**, which similarly places a focused emphasis on the teacher being aware of the right learning strategy to support a present learning need. These strategies place a responsibility on The Edutainer to be a highly observant diagnosing professional in the classroom, not as a teacher who simply delivers content, but as one who takes

up the goals noted in the first chapter in this essay, on getting to know each individual child on a level that provides insight into who they are, how they function and what the right intervention is going to be to suit the needs of the child. It is something that gets better and more finely attuned in educators the more time they spend observing students in the classroom, which unfortunately is something that can be hard won to come by at times.

I was amazed when I first started to do Educational Outreach work and was afforded the time and opportunity to sit in a classroom and observe what was going on while the classroom teacher was teaching - I felt like I'd received a years worth of professional development in three hours, just being able to sit and watch how students react to the behaviours of the teacher and the behaviours of peers around them, and to their own behaviours as well, and all the little moments that happen within the weave and flow of a lesson that you miss out on when you're the teacher trying to facilitate a dozen different responses all at once. **Jugyok-enkyu**, or Lesson Study, the Japanese professional development framework of teachers observing each other, collaborating together on developing and improving lessons, and then implementing and further observing these lessons in evolving cycles of practice, is an approach that definitely addresses the benefits of this approach to being a better diagnosing professional in the classroom. A variation of this methodology, more specifically focused on teaching a mini-lesson to students, video recording the lesson and then discussing the lesson in collaboration with professional peers, is also mentioned, not coincidentally, as one of the top ten influencers on student achievement that Hattie notes, titled **Microteaching**.

This squarely places us in position to properly address the other half of The Edutaining Behaviour Detective, as this need to be a keen observer and diagnoser of need in the classroom is what constitutes the bones of the Behaviour Detective. I first heard Autism Spectrum Australia's manager of Positive Behaviour Support, Tom Tutton, use the phrase Behaviour Detective as part of a workshop we facili-

tated on the skills involved in being attentive to the core mantra at the heart of behaviour support, which is that all behaviour is a form of communication. When we really understand the deep centre of this simple phrase it takes away the fear and the judgement that can sometimes be directed towards challenging behaviours that students might exhibit. If we can stop from taking a reactive stance towards challenging behaviours by imposing our predesigned expectations of what we assume a child should be like and should be doing in a model of personal reality that we have in our minds, we can instead start by taking on the calm, orderly, emotionally measured Apollonian response of the Behaviour Detective by simply asking, What is this behaviour trying to communicate.

We can learn something of the measured approach of the Behaviour Detective from Seneca the Younger, a Roman Stoic philosopher, statesman and dramatist who was also a tutor and advisor to the Roman emperor Nero. One of Seneca's principle ideas that rose from Stoic philosophy is the notion that when we react negatively and with destructive emotions to an event that has occurred, such as a challenging behaviour that a child has exhibited in the classroom, it is because we must personally believe in a reality where children do not exhibit challenging behaviours, and so we are absolutely shocked and aghast to think that such an incident would occur. Our frustration and at times our anger rises out of wanting and hence expecting the world to be different than it is, however Seneca would note that this is an unnecessary conflict with the agency we have over our own freedom of choice in relation to the trajectory of the universe. We have the freedom to elevate our perspective above the immediacy of the classroom and to be able to take on a bigger world view, to recognise that challenging behaviours are going to occur because children are going to communicate with us in whatever manner is most readily available and most effective to them given their particular skill set at any given time, and that we can be philosophical about this and choose to not be angered or to be harshly judgmental, but to rather understand

that this is just a simple reality, and that we are fortunate to have the power as educators to be able to work out what is going on and to then implement the right response. To hear it in Seneca's voice, Fate leads the willing, and drags along the reluctant.

While the Behaviour Detective fashions the craft of diagnosing need by taking the time to build up a catalogue of observational experience, there are also some very clear processes to follow in order to identify, consider and implement the right behavioural supports and replacements for challenging behaviours in the classroom. Our **Positive Behaviour Support** process uses a simple four step procedure with accompanying documents, all colour coded, that can be downloaded from the website just linked: one, complete an **Individual Autism Profile**, our Green form, that identifies the big picture elements of what makes the child who they are, much along the same lines as the sort of Green strategies identified in the opening chapter of this essay, making clear the quality of life indicators for the individual, their strengths and interests, and other components that give us an insight into how we can establish Green strategies in the classroom to set a foundation of proactive behavioural support that provides the best platform for safety, respect and optimal learning conditions; two, if a challenging behaviour is present we then complete a **Behaviour Form**, our Orange document, that allows us to identify what exactly the challenging behaviour is that we are observing in a child, to identify what the antecedents to the behaviour are, and what the consequences to the behaviour are, in order that we can establish a window into the function of the behaviour and the kind of environmental strategies we can implement and the skills that need to be taught to the child so they don't need to use a challenging behaviour to communicate their needs; three, complete an **Implementation Checklist**, our Blue form, is completed so as to make explicit to all participants in the child's life about their responsibilities and strategies to be aware of with regards to implementation so that our response to the present challenging

behaviour is clear and consistent across all domains; and four, if the behaviour is particularly challenging we need to consider a **Behaviour Response Plan** so as to make clear our level of intervention and response at every step, when things are traveling well and the child is in the Green zone, when things are becoming more elevated or challenging, when things become a safety risk, and how the process of recovery will proceed after a challenging behavioural incident is over. All of this is, of course, a drastically reduced summary of what the components of Positive Behaviour Support involve for a practitioner in the classroom or in any other situation, however having in mind an orderly method of considering and supporting behavioural need is the cornerstone of being a Behaviour Detective, and so it is valuable to look at the documents linked in this paragraph and to read further into the processes involved so as to establish your own Behaviour Detective toolbox and accompanying mindset.

The only thing left to consider, then, is what the synthesis of Edutainer and Behaviour Detective presents as in the classroom, this harmonising of polar extremes, of the The Edutainer, the Dionysian enthusiast, unbridled in energy and creation, thinking in inversions and being hungry for experimentation and capturing the imaginations of students who often leave open only a very small window of error for either considering us interesting or boring, and then on the other side of the equation, The Behaviour Detective, the Apollonian sculptor who works methodically and with emotions in check to consider without moralistic judgement what it is that the behaviours in front of us are trying to best communicate. The Edutaining Behaviour Detective needs to simultaneously hold both these personalities within the state of educational projection required for the most effective education of our students on the autism spectrum and, as is always my universal qualifier, for surely every student. To be a bridge towards the reaching of all learners, thus spoke the Edutaining Behaviour Detective.



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## 4

# PAPRIKA

I came across a terrific book last year, [Savage Park by Amy Fusselman](#). It is a beautifully written book, part philosophy text and part memoir, exploring the idea of play and risk and the spaces in which we play and grow as viewed through different lenses. Primarily the text follows a narrative in which Amy and her husband take their two children to visit a friend in Tokyo. Their friend takes them to

a park in Tokyo, Hanegi Playpark, the Savage Park, in which Amy is amazed to see children playing with fire, building makeshift structures by hammering nails into scrap wood, extending the structures treeward by suspending lengths of rope between branches, the whole scene becomes one chaotic pool of creation and, ultimately, a revelation on allowing children to completely engage in their own versions of play and invention according to their own particular special interests. Not guiding them with soft fall laden playgrounds with safe climbing frames that cause no alarm and no surprise, but rather allowing the natural furtive passions within children to find expression in what was at times a dangerous, risk filled environment.

While considering this setting, and thinking about the sort of loose object play and sense of free invention I briefly described in the previous chapter in relation to the terrific lesson I observed with students and fathers building bridges across creek beds, it also caused me to reflect on the idea of giving students an environment where they are trusted and encouraged to follow their own lead on what inspires them and sparks their interest. For so many of the students in our school they are very firmly guided by their own interests, but the degree to which they can find a trusting and encouraging environment that supports access to their interests has historically been quite mixed. For some of our students they have been in environments where they have been told in no uncertain terms to leave their special interests at the door when they enter the classroom - there is no room for Minecraft in here, stop talking about it and listen to this lesson on rain forests instead. This is a tricky challenge, because there are sometimes the best of intentions for trying to broaden the interests of a child beyond one singular focus of attention, however an exploration of just why special interests are so special to students on the spectrum must be engaged at this juncture.

I remember quite a few years ago now when I facilitated a social club for young people on the spectrum who came together to learn the skills involved in

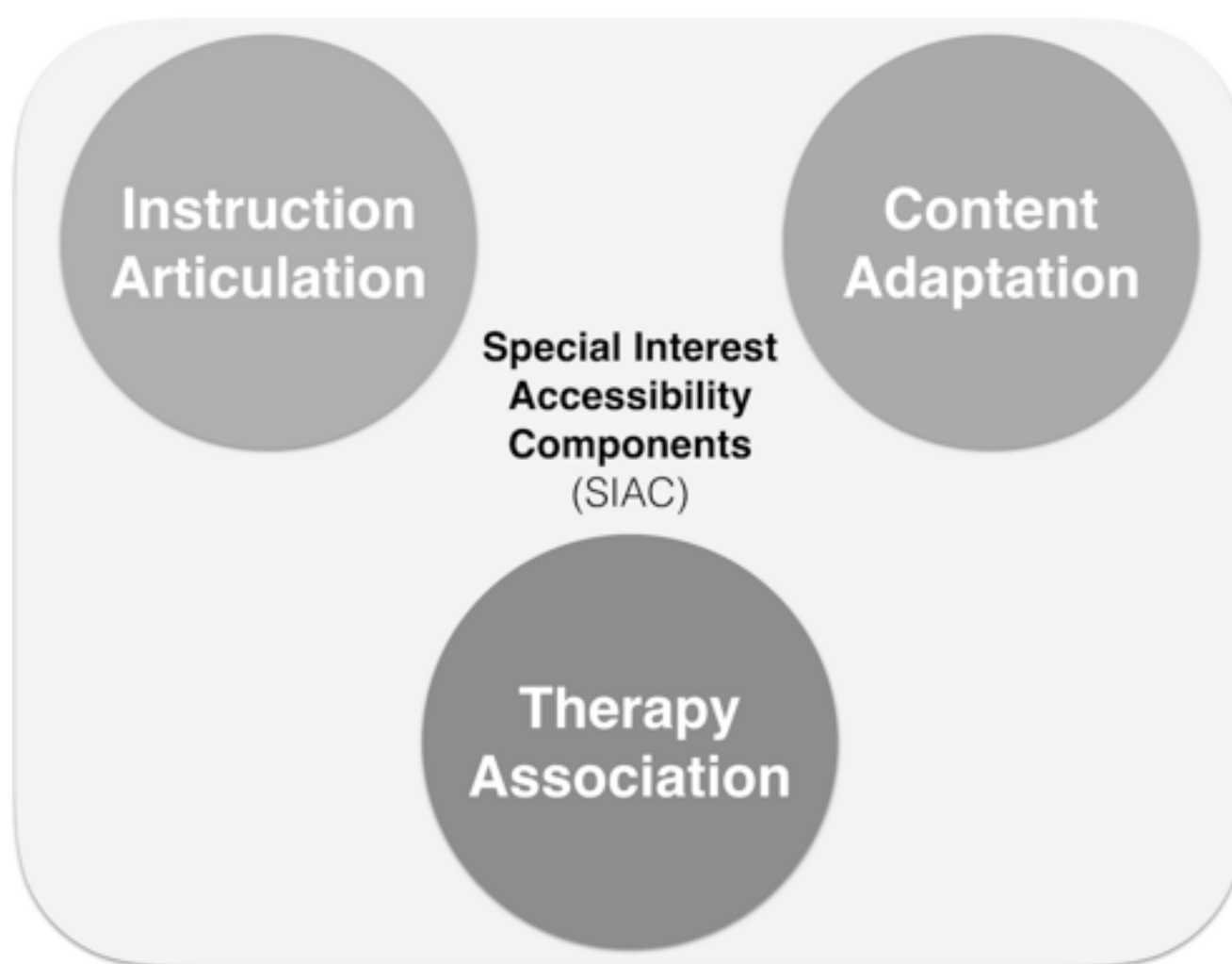
creating a movie, it was just long after the first Twilight movie had been released. A few of the girls in the social club were particularly taken by the Twilight franchise, and worked together to create an absolutely awesome vampire short film. One evening I recall one of the girls in the group coming up to me and telling me how much she loved being able to create something that was related to Twilight, and how she wished there were more opportunities to do this outside of this social club. The way she described her special interest in Twilight has always stayed with me. She described how unsettling she found going to school, she found it incredibly hard to make friends, she was very anxious and shy, she found the academic expectations overwhelming and often did not know what people were asking of her, but with all of that going on, with that sense of unease that coloured her day at school, the one thing that kept her steady and calm were her Twilight books. She told me, I know these books inside and out, I know what every character does, what they are feeling, the whole story, forwards and backwards, and if I was not allowed to have these books with me throughout the day, someone may as well just remove my legs and my lungs and my brain, because I wouldn't be able to function anymore, I would be totally lost and confused.

When she told me this, I recalled a passage from the book *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean, which in part is about the value of being fascinated in something enough so as to allow it to imbue your life with meaning. In the book Susan writes: *'There are too many ideas and things and people. Too many directions to go. I was starting to believe the reason it matters to care passionately about something, is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size'*. To me, this completely mirrored the need for Twilight in the young ladies life as she described it, in her life there were too many ideas and things and people for her to process and manage with ease, and so it was with Twilight, that one thing that she knew so well, that allowed her to whittle the world down to a more manageable size.



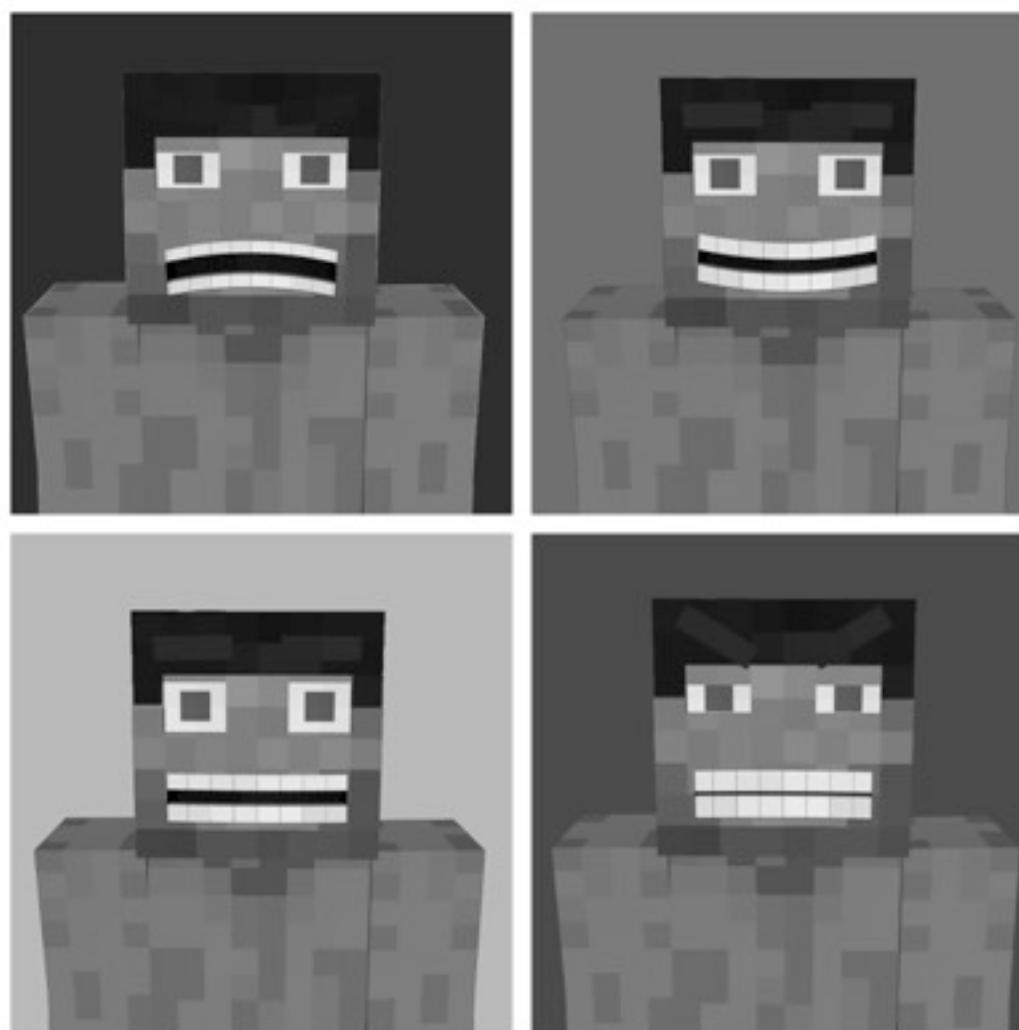
It is hence not, of course, just those on the autism spectrum who find existential benefit in passionately directing focus towards particular special interests. I have yet to meet anybody who does not have a small handful of passions to provide them with a quality of life that gives each day colour and value beyond the necessary calendar routines, and likewise there is no-one who would not be more than a bit frustrated and disempowered to have those passions restricted in arenas that, with a bit of strategic creativity, could otherwise find presence. This strategic consideration is what is of particular fascination to me, it fuels my special interest in special interests - the ways in which we can use the special interests of our students to add value and benefit to their educational, as well as bigger life goals, in and beyond school.

I have put together a very basic framework for thinking about the implementation of student special interests in the classroom, what I refer to as Special Interest Accessibility Components. These components focus on three categories of access that utilise special interest topics to engage student goals - using special inter-



ests for Instruction Articulation, as tools for Content Adaptation, and for Therapy Association.

Instruction Articulation refers to the utilisation of a special interest to assist in providing a direction or an explanation. For example, if Minecraft is a special interest present in the classroom, this could be used in a variety of ways for the benefit of instruction articulation, such as using Minecraft to create wall posters on how to follow classroom rules or follow particular social protocols. We created a **school tour video** in which we built a model of our entire school in Minecraft, with our school mascot, the Hunter Tiger, guiding new students and families around the administration building, the playground and the classrooms, using Minecraft as the special interest component to articulate a virtual social story that allowed new students to experience and get a sense of the school environment before arriving. Recently we have begun using Minecraft to instruct students on the Zones of Regulation by animating the face of the lead character to reflect different emotive facial expressions that align with the zones. Another example of utilising



special interests for Instruction Articulation is the use of characters that our students like, such as those from the Mario Brothers and Sonic the Hedgehog series of video games, to explain social skills in Comic Conversations and Social Stories. For our students there is very often a much closer resonance in being able to engage and be receptive to a favourite video game character explain a social protocol rather than the use of more generic visual prompt clipart.

The next Special Interest Accessibility Component is Content Adaptation, which is when we create classroom learning tasks that, to borrow a phrase from Universal Design for Learning, allow students multiple means by which to express themselves for the purpose of demonstrating their learning. Take a historical learning task some of our classes engaged with this past April in recognition and exploration of Anzac Day. Students were tasked with recreating historical scenes after having researched primary source material of photographs displaying Anzac Cove and other prominent environments present in our World War 1 campaigns. With the heart of the task presented to students, they were then able to freely reference and utilise their own special interest areas to express their learning associated with the task. Some students utilised Lego, a perennially favourite play resource, to recreate the historical photographs, while other students used favourite video games, or art styles reflecting comics they were interested in, while some students dressed up and recorded a short movie that reflected the source material, and any other given manner of engaging with the task. With a mindset for creating differentiated tasks that purposefully allow for students to use multiple means of representation to demonstrate learning, we open the opportunity for students to bring in their own special interests that can freely adapt the task content in a way that provides them with full access to the learning outcomes. To my mind, this is a realisation of accessibility in a manner not often associated with the accessibility model. Whereas accessibility is perhaps most commonly associated with physical, sensory and learning needs, there is an argument

here for considering access to special interests as well within the sphere of personal accessibility. Whereas an individual who uses a wheel chair will require a ramp to access a classroom, the capacity for students to be able to bring their special interests into the classroom is the equivalent of the physical access ramp for our students on the autism spectrum. It is not simply a neat option, it is for some students the only way they will be able to access a classroom environment.



One of my colleagues and good friends, Mark Durie, travelled with me to some regional schools to conduct Educational Outreach work, and we were quite taken back by the number of schools who were not only open to the utilisation of special interests as a model of accessibility for students on the autism spectrum, but were masterfully implementing these strategies to great effect. One student who was fascinated with a particular video game character but who for a period

would not enter the classroom was supported by the staff adapting morning gross motor activities to incorporate the soundtrack for the video game, with printed graphics from the game attached to some of the sporting equipment to help create a sense of ease for the student in being able to experience elements of the game in an environment he was previously quite averse to entering. It provided a space of calm, respectful dialogue between the special interest and the learning outcomes of the classroom space that enabled educational accessibility for the student. It was his physical access ramp into the classroom, and it was also a transitional strategy, for within a couple of days of using this approach, the special interests were able to be faded out of the morning activity and were then incorporated into other aspects of the school day to allow further inclusion across gradual more periods. This is by no means to say that the utilisation of special interests need to be faded out, however given particular contexts and modes of use of there may be times when a high impact use of a special interest is flooded into a situation where a student is having significant access challenges, with a view that utilisation of the special interest would do well to be generalised into other more commonly represented topics or learning materials so as to broaden the range of settings and situations the student is able to more independently access.

The final Special Interest Accessibility Component is Therapy Association. This is when the special interest of a student is used explicitly for the purpose of facilitating a therapy intervention. Consider here the use of Lego to facilitate social communication by way of the **Lego-Based Therapy** model established by Daniel B. LeGoff, Gina Gómez de la Cuesta, GW Krauss, and Simon Baron-Cohen. Or, with a focus on speech therapy, work like that being done by **Animated Language Learning** to remix Disney and Pixar movies into short segments for the purpose of associating visualisations from well known movies with language that children can connect with events and concepts. We did our own work in this similar content area, working with the Pixar movie *Inside Out* to develop an emotional regu-

lation therapy program with learning activities connected with content in the movie.

Pixar are a source of constant anticipation for many of our students as they count down the days to the new movie or sequel coming out, and with Inside Out it was no different, the excitement was palpable as the release day for the movie approached last year and a few of our classes even gained early access to a pre-view screening of the film. As educators we knew what powerful source material the movie provided with regards to visualising so many of the abstract emotional intelligence concepts that can be so difficult to concretely render in the classroom environment. Our utilisation of the Inside Out movie content to provide opportunities for emotional regulation learning was a very natural alignment of special interests as Therapy Association. You can access an iTunes U course we created from these learning activities here, [Explore Your Emotions Inside and Out](#), and an audio recording of me giving a talk about the course and emotional intelligence in general can be accessed here on my [Autism Pedagogy Podcast](#).















One other consideration here is the utility of a tool like a Homework Grid, such as the one below, that establishes functional goals for home in alignment with the special interests that a child may have. In the example below the special interest is Pokémon, and activities that are associated with functional goals such as engaging in social play with parents, setting the table for dinner, going to swimming lessons and learning to relax, are all associated with different elements of Pokémon to allow the same level of entry access to these home tasks as we provided in the classroom throughout the aforementioned examples. Families are already often the most savvy to the special interests of their children and are already familiar with using them at home towards goal setting outcomes and quality of life, so the implementation of a framework such as this to help structure ways of accessing home strategies is often a natural fit for ongoing goal attainment.

### HOMWORK GRID



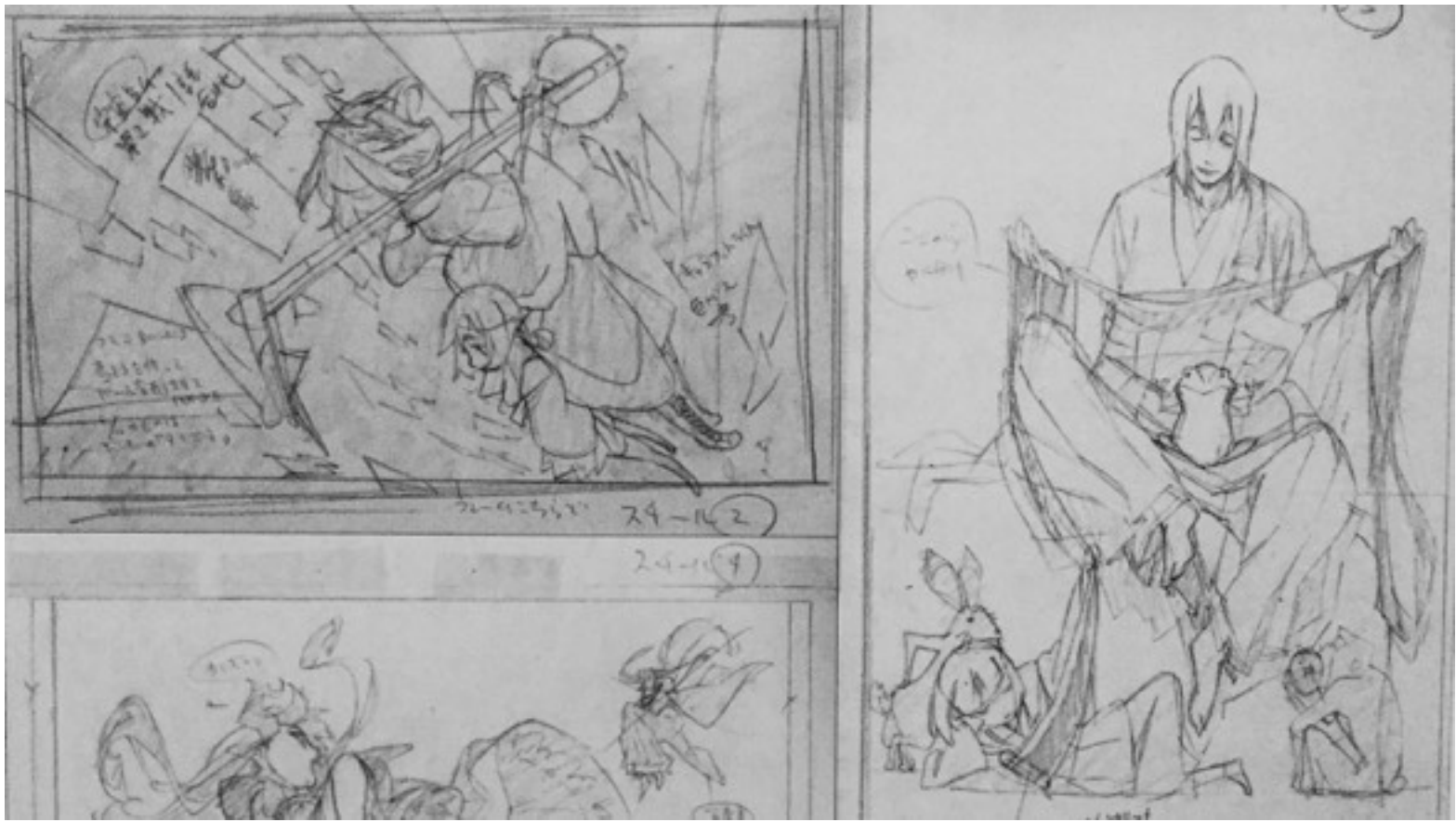
Student : \_\_\_\_\_ Parent : \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher : \_\_\_\_\_

<p>Play a game with an adult.</p>  <p>_____ will play Wii with his mum. X1p/w</p>	<p>Physical Activity</p>  <p>_____ goes to swimming lessons weekly.</p>	<p>Cooking</p>  <p>_____ will set the table once per week.</p>
<p>Read</p>  <p>_____ will read a chapter from his Pokémon novels. X3 p/w</p>	<p>Be read to</p>  <p>_____ and _____ will read a bedtime story to _____ twice per week.</p>	<p>Project Research</p>  <p>_____ will continue his interest in exploring bugs and using his microscope</p>
<p>Tell parents something you were taught.</p>  <p>_____ will share his home diary with parents each afternoon. X5 p/w</p>	<p>Housework</p>  <p>_____ will be like Broom Kirby and clean his room X3 p/w.</p>	<p>Computer / Technology</p>  <p>_____ will work on his Pokedex website. X1 p/w</p>
<p>Meditation / Relaxation</p>  <p>_____ will relax on his Pokémon beanbag X5 p/w</p>	<p>Shopping</p>  <p>_____ will push the trolley during shopping. X1 p/w</p>	<p>Cultural</p>  <p>_____ will go to the museum and the Hunter Valley zoo on alternate fortnights.</p>

It is encouraging to think of the directions that organisations beyond the educational sector are doing to elevate the utility of special interests in the lives of individuals on the autism spectrum. I'm particularly thinking of organisations such as **Specialterne**, a Danish word meaning The Specialists, initiated and developed by Thorkil Sonne, who work to help individuals on the spectrum find suitable jobs that align with the specialist talents they may have that either find alignment with their personal special interests, or may otherwise be part of their learning profile, in circumstances such as described in a 2007 research paper by Klin, Danovitch, Merz and Volmar, **The Circumscribed Interests of Higher Functioning Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder**, where heightened skills around domains of classifying an ordering information, recalling and using facts as associated with visual memory and learning, and other areas of strength were surveyed and identified. The more that there are established pathways highlighting and giving rise to the passions and talents associated with special interest engagement for students on the autism spectrum from a young age, allowing students the accessibility these interests can provide in the educational space and then developing this accessibility further into the post-educational space, the greater the culmination of benefits will surely be, particularly one would hope into the unfortunate current statistics relating to the job market prospects for individuals on the autism spectrum.

It is telling that the etymology of the word autism, the combination of autos or self, and the ismos suffix pertaining to an action or state, hence a state of inhabiting ones own internal self rather than weighing focus more on external social reality, provides us with a window into the high value of respecting the contents within ones own self, and the functional ways that we can respectfully engage this private language of the self in order to to offer opportunities for this private world to find relevance and function in more public ways.





Last year I attended a student art exhibition in a high school. I am forever in awe of what abounds in the minds of high school art students and the technical capacity they have to make manifest the contents of their heads, and one of the artworks that particularly took my attention from the exhibition was a finely drawn artwork of Japanese anime characters by a girl on the autism spectrum. The artwork was of two characters, a samurai and a young girl holding a translucent hammer with coloured balls floating around within, sketched on layers of tissue paper that could be lifted up to reveal different scenes that the characters were inhabiting. On first viewing the characters were facing each other against a background of some suburban township with faint mountains splitting the horizon beneath a shading of cloudscape. Then, as you fold back the first piece of tissue paper, the mountains and clouds disappear to reveal that the air is filled with shards of fine confetti against a wood paneled backdrop, with dozens of faces peering out from where the suburbs used to be, the scene appearing as a ceremony of some kind. And this effect continues on, ever more dazzling as the momentarily familiar is replaced with something completely different, as a scene that feels like everything is in its right place lifts to reveal a scene that feels even more correctly put together,

until you start really analysing each scene to consider what components will possibly be replaced and reconfigured with the next turn of a page.

For me, the effect that was most pronounced in the work wasn't the potential metaphor of the turning page and the transitory nature of the world shifting around our solid, consistent selves. Rather, it was the meaning contained within the kaleidoscope of thoughts that gave birth to the work, of the trial and error of possible worlds, what works in this one, and what if we change the chariot into a neon tube and the bricks into bubbles, now how do we proceed, what shall we do next. It reminded me of a movie I had watched some years before, *Paprika*, a science fiction film that involves a new form of therapy allowing a psychiatrist to inhabit the dreams of her patients in order to help diagnose underlying traumas that are revealed within the dreams. The therapy is made possible by way of a new piece of technology that has been created by a doctor who is presented as a kind natured genius who perhaps has a lack of understanding for the sort of responsibilities that come with creating a device that can inhabit the dreams of others. He has significant social challenges and anxieties that fuel a bit of overeating. In one telling dialogue between this doctor and the psychiatrist who enters the dreams of her patients, the psychiatrist teases him for his eating habits, to which he replies, I consume everything. The psychiatrist laughs and says, I know, you're so open to everything, that's why you're so much fun. I remember being struck when I heard this dialogue in the same way I was struck by the forever new worlds revealed by the turning of the tissue paper drawings. There is an absolute thrill to be found in the maximalism of the universe and the boundless variety of individuals and special interests it continues to send into reality. That's how I want to be, to absolutely consume everything, to be forever interested in the special interests of every student who comes my way, to sit down and learn about who they are and what fascinates them and where they are going as the pages keep on turning and forever new realities keep unfolding before us.

# ENDNOTES

## **Happinball Modway**

My wife and I tell our six year old daughter quirky little stories all the time, and more often than not we turn them into little songs using Beatles melodies. Then, our daughter starts singing the stories, adds in her own ideas, and turns their quirk into something even more surreal, until we're never quite sure where we started or what the heart of the story actually ever was. Very often the stories my wife and I tell are in response to a situation that we felt called for a moral allegory to help explain a situation or a decision to our daughter. Through telling each other stories we not only try to make sense of the world, but we create versions of the world that we would like to inhabit, hopefully in as malleable fashion as possible that allows for a lifetime of reinvention.

I forget if it was my wife or I who started telling the story of the three little robots. It could likely have been my wife, as she and my daughter often draw cute robotic figures in all variety of daily situations, whether saving a cat from a tree or planting a forest on the moon, and I have a copy of another story here that my wife made for my daughter titled Three Little Cats that makes it seem like it must have been hers to start with. But given the way the words swim back and forth and around into Beatles parodies and then into a doodle in the margins of an old book, beginnings can be pretty difficult to track down.

I remember in the story that there are three little robots and they are on a road trip, and they're not quite robots necessarily, I remember my daughter retell-

ing the story as if the robots were actually more like bottled flowers with lights inside, but regardless they're driving a tin can contraption with wheels on a huge road trip across the country. Up the Pacific Highway, over the Macksville Bridge, driving as quickly as a tin can has the capacity to drive along the highway and then detouring onto footpath and gutter and any other avenues when necessary as wild monstrous trucks careen on by. The robots roll, for example, along the concrete slopes outside a fisherman's co-operative, passing two men dragging a cage across a wet slope, the cage filled with fresh orange roughy and yellowfin tuna. And then the fishermen steadily fade out and transition into telegraph poles and fig trees, and the roadscape rises skyward until the three little robots are passing by the very top of a plateau reaching out towards a clear morning cliff edge, and as the three little robots look carefully they can see a multitude of a little objects edging their way towards the edge of the cliff.

As they stop the tin can and wander over to the little objects, the three little robots can see that the objects are in fact many dozens of salt and pepper shakers, or perhaps they're petite spice jars, rattling like little wind-up animals surveying a tabletop, moving ever closer to the edge of the high cliff. The three little robots run over to the cliff edge and look down onto a sea of stone far below, a terrible place for dozens of spice jars to rattle towards, as they were very quickly doing.

One of the robots, a bot with a floppy coffee hat and a tangerine bow tie named Happinball Modway, says to his compatriots that something of course need to be done to stop this terrible pending event. The little robot who was driving the car, a navigator by the name of Pecan Pulsewidth, is a whiz at mathematics, and quickly sets to work measuring the trajectory of the path the spice jars are taking, and the angles of slope  $x$  in relation to field  $z$ , and how it might be possible to set up a series of string line boundaries that can divert the direction of the spice jars gradually away from the cliff edge and back towards a forest beside the highway. Pecan Pulsewidth quickly starts connecting taut pieces of string be-

tween trees and rocks, and a few of the spice jars appear to respond to the boundaries being set up, but many just pass beneath or over the string lines and continue towards the edge.

Another of the little robots, Quizena, who appears fashioned out of the cone of an old music speaker, has an incredible tonal capacity for perfect pitch, being able to recognise whether a boat is sailing at a major or minor scale, or when two different clocks are ticking in octaves. Quizena considers that if particular sounds could be produced, say, like little square wave blips, in order to bounce off of surrounding trees and facing surfaces, the sounds might be enough to distract the spice jars from their current migration and could redirect them to a safer position. From conical spaces on Quizena's front a series of morse code like square waves emit and resonate off of the immediate area around the little rattling spice jars, and like with the strings orchestrated by Pecan Pulsewidth, a few of the spice jars are indeed redirected away from the edge of cliff, very successfully, however there are still many more spice jars that just don't appear to react to the sounds at all.

Now, while Pecan Pulsewidth and Quizena have been using their individual approaches to help escort the spice jars to safer positions on the cliff, the first robot, Happinball Modway, has been crafting another solution. In a safe clearing between nearby forest and highway, Modway has been crafting what can only be described as some sort of loose object baked dinner. There are wooden planks and ropes twisted around each other atop piles of rocks with fire smouldering beneath, and yet they're not just planks and ropes and rocks, they're also sausages and vegetables and potatoes, sprawled out like a crop circle on a grassy plate. The moment Happinball Modway steps away from the completed arrangement, all the little spice jars stop their rattling and turn their shakers towards the loose object baked dinner, now quickly winding themselves back up and causing onward towards their new homeland, migrating towards this overwhelmingly motivating

force in the middle of the clearing, steering safely away from the edge of that crazy cliff.

I wonder now what exactly the original moral my wife and I could have possibly had in mind as we each turned this story inside and out on our road trips with our daughter, however I know for my part there is one particular message I tend to pull out of the fable for my own purposes. It is a simple statement on children, that that there are many children I have worked with who while they do not immediately display a pronounced gift in, say, numeracy or music or chess or sport or whatever field of talent we might scan for explicit societal success in, there are children, many, many children who I have worked with, who are seemingly inherently gifted in the art of being kind. They are kindness savants, always knowing the right thing to say or do in a given situation to create the most gentle or warmly appropriate response for somebody else. They are the Happinball Modways creating loose object baked dinners in order to gently motivate others in the friendliest of ways.

I remember very clearly at the start of my career, standing in a classroom at our school, and some medical students from the local university had come to visit and conduct observations on how we worked with the students in our class. The medical students were interested in what splinter skills our students had - who was the maths genius who could look at a tree and instantly determine the number of leaves, who was the student with perfect pitch who could determine the note an air conditioner was resonating at. And while these skills are no doubt present amongst some of our students, I remember looking over at a student in my class at the time who was drawing a picture and sharing coloured pencils with a neighbouring peer, being very attentive in looking out for just the right colour their peer might need to blend a skin tone or to get just the right aqua for the water, often handing over a pencil that they themselves seemed to be waiting on just because it was the kind thing to do. I remember thinking that this sort of talent

was never of any special interest to those eager for displays of genius. Television variety shows and viral internet clips are overflowing with examples of young children who are able to play Rachmaninoff on the piano, or can recite all the capital cities of the world - but where are the kindness savants? When we are working with children on the autism spectrum, often the skills that we are most concerned with developing are those focused around social skills and emotional regulation, to help our students be as independently successful as possible with control over the behaviours that compose who they are, as they navigate the world of people and situations they encounter. And yet, how much time in most given school days is ever really directed to teaching these skills to children? How many lessons in a school year are reserved for teaching children about kindness? In very recent times there have, it seems, fortunately been a few incoming programs that are attempting to engage these notions in adequately modern ways, and really, surely, something is definitely needed here, because as much as I might have just now romanticised the notion of the child who is inherently gifted with kindness, I don't actually think this is the full story. We all know how much time and creativity families put into teaching kindness to children, and indeed the wonderful teachers out there as well who pass on this virtue as a natural part of their pedagogical vocabulary, so, perhaps no more the myth of inherent genius, and rather instead we should consider the acclaim deserving to highlighting the vibrant talents of kindness and friendship and strong warmth that can so often be drastically overlooked across society.

I think often of what Aldous Huxley wrote towards the end of his life, when he said that it is a bit embarrassing to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life and find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than 'Try to be a little kinder.'

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig works for Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) as Deputy Principal of the Aspect Hunter School in Newcastle, New South Wales. He conducts educational outreach programs across the Hunter Region and regional New South Wales, coordinates universal design and future schools programs, and implements Aspect Practice 'iPad Model Classes'. Craig is a PhD candidate in Special Education at the University of Newcastle and regularly presents at national and international education and research conferences. Craig sits on the University of Newcastle's Special Education Advisory Board, was awarded the 2011 Elizabeth Hoyles Research Fellowship, was made an Apple Distinguished Educator in 2013, has featured on ABC Radio National as a national expert in autism education, and was one of thirty Australian educators selected for the '2015 Hot List' of inspiring teachers as published by The Educator magazine. Craig is the author of a number of best selling education textbooks, including the popular 'Minecraft In Your Classroom' and 'The iPad Model Classroom', as well as online learning courses such as 'Exploring your Emotions, Inside and Out' which was selected as one of the top five global iTunes U learning courses for 2015



He lives in Hamilton with his wife, Teresa, and his daughter, Eliana.