

Afasic Blog – Transition Course

Hi, my name is Will and I have spent the summer doing volunteer work in anticipation of training to become a Speech & Language Therapist. I have worked with Afasic and other charities and would like to tell you about my experiences. Hopefully this will give you an insight into the sector and let you know what to expect when applying for courses and volunteering.

In this piece I will tell you about working on Transition Courses for children with speech and language problems who were just about to start secondary school. Hopefully I can do this in a way to demonstrate how useful these classes are for the children taking part and for the volunteers helping out.

The first course I attended was a big **academy school in Brixton**. It was an impressive building and completely different to the rural comprehensive that I attended. The course was run by a qualified Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) with 3 volunteers and assistance from the academy's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo). The first challenge for me was getting to London. Unfortunately, there were no Afasic courses in my local area, so I trekked down to London to stay with friends and have a go at being a big city commuter for a week. Needless to say, I was relieved that it was only one week!

The school's facilities were excellent and we met early to set up and discuss the week ahead. Thankfully one of the volunteers was a teaching assistant with lots of experience in dealing with students and knows the local area well.

We had 10 students from various local primary schools and only 2 of them knew each other previously. They were about to start at different secondary schools and only one would be going to the academy we were using.

The aim of the transition course is to help the students prepare for high school and be able to manage this big change. As we all know, this is a big moment in any young person's life, encompassing a mix of excitement and anxiety. So we would plan activities to help them cope with the new challenges, so they could look forward to this new stage. These would involve practical tasks such as how to navigate the new school alongside enhancement of social skills so that the students understand how to make friends and be aware of bullying.

The first day was about introducing ourselves so we could become a cohesive and open group. The students were very friendly, but we needed to be aware that they may use different coping strategies to hide their real anxieties, as there were a lot of new people to meet. We discussed our feelings about starting a new school and what they were looking forward to: new subjects, new friends, and what was causing them anxiety: missing old friends, homework, bullying. We would then use this information to help plan the rest of the week.

We played games such as Granddad's Footsteps (which was to become a favourite over the course of the week!) and football and table tennis. Although these are not academic exercises, it is very useful for the students to learn how to play games, as these can be played with new friends at school, or help them to join in with different activities and make social bonds with their peers. It also helps them to develop team work skills, patience and to have fun! One new thing for a secondary school student is a timetable (not a times table, as they thought and started giving examples of

multiplication). We showed them examples of different school time tables and helped them to decipher which parts referred to the classroom number, teacher, subject and time. This will be invaluable experience for them.

The next day, the students were in high spirits, although one student was still reluctant to join in with the others he made significant progress by the end of the week. Another student came back for the second day after saying that he might not be returning. The first activity was a recap of the previous day's work and homework to help reinforce what we had done previously. I discovered that I am terrible at being strict especially when a student is being stubborn. Thankfully, the other volunteers helped me out and I now know that this is something that I need to work on!

We did practical problem-solving exercises, but it can be hard to tell how deep some students' understanding is. Hopefully this will come with more experience on my part, but it can feel like I am just telling them what to do, rather than the students working it out for themselves. Another example of this potential lack of comprehension came when working on listening skills. We explained to the students that eye contact, posture and sitting still are all important parts of showing that we are listening to someone. However, a student can appear to be listening because they are doing all of these things, but when asked a direct question about the topic being discussed, they are not able to answer because they are not really paying attention. Putting this in a classroom context can mean a teacher may think that the pupil has understood something, but in reality has not. Again, this is something that I hope I will get better at discerning through more experience. Student like these can be integrated into the class, but they need more direct contact with the teacher. I am learning more and more about each child's needs.

On Wednesday, the school was being used as a set for the ITV drama "Marcella". Although there was a lot of disruption with cast and crew everywhere and areas of the school being off limits, the students coped with it well. They were very interested to see the equipment and processes behind filmmaking. Unfortunately we were not permitted to play outside, but this kind of disturbance is common in high school and something that they need to be prepared for. We discussed what makes a good friend and how to make friends. I felt that this information would have been helpful for me at their age too! However, they found it difficult to come up with original ideas as to positive attributes for a friend, which possibly highlights how isolated they are from their peers.

We also played the game where you have a sticky note on your forehead with a famous person's name on it and have to guess who you are. The group really enjoyed the game and it was heartening to see how patient and supportive they are with each other. It also seemed to demonstrate their thought processes when it comes to playing the game. The most efficient way to play it is to start with a broad question and then become more specific until you narrow down the possibilities. However, most of the students did not follow this logic and were a bit more random when it came to guessing, e.g. one student's first guess was "am I orange?" It also highlighted that a lot of the students have a lot of knowledge in specific areas that interest them, but not quite as broad a range as you would expect from children their age. A positive side to this is at that when it comes to working, they can have a valuable level of knowledge on a specific subject area, but on the other hand they may find it difficult to create relationships with people who do not share their exact interests.

We also discussed how to make compliments. They all agreed that it felt nice to receive a compliment, but needed help to come up with original things to complement each other on.

A member of the local council did a presentation for the students about what services they require, although I believe it was a bit too abstract for them. One student even complained that Theresa May is a bad Prime Minister and Jeremy Corbyn would be better. This is very interesting, as it shows that although these children have speech and language difficulties, they are still aware of the world and opinions of those around them.

The filming continued on the next day and Anna Friel was on set for her role as the lead and again, the students coped admirably with the disruption, as we had to spend break time playing in the sports hall, rather than outside. We carried out dictionary exercises as they would encounter lots of new words at secondary school and this skill will help them to be more independent. We also played word association games to help with creativity and word comprehension. In the afternoon the SENCo took a class concerning internet safety. The students responded enthusiastically to this change of setting and this serious topic was handled in an entertaining and reassuring way.

On the final day we did a recap of the week's work and asked the students to complete a form so that we could see what progress had been made over the week. This was then fed back to parents via a consultation and can be passed on to the schools. The final activity was a music class, where a specialist teacher worked with the students to create a piece of music which was then performed to all of the parents. They responded very well to this exercise, being patient when someone else was playing and working together well in the final recital. I believe that this experience will be beneficial for the students and may inspire them to pick up an instrument at school.

The week was very enjoyable and highly productive. It was rewarding to work with these young people and help them grow and deal with their anxieties about going through such a big change. Unfortunately, I will not get the chance to work with them again and see the real benefits of the transition course. It is difficult to accurately quantify how useful the course is, as it is very short and the students all go their separate ways after it has finished.

I am sure that it has alleviated their fears to a certain degree and we have done a lot to reassure parents that support is available from people who can help their children achieve great things in life. Especially, as we can pass on information about their specific requirements to their new schools.

I would like to wish them all the best for the future. It was a pleasure to get to know them and I am positive that with some special help they will make the most of the opportunities provided by starting secondary school.