How to deal with Asperger’s syndrome in school:
A comparison between *House Rules* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Emma Borg.
C-uppsats.
Handledare: Anna Fåhraeus.
ABSTRACT

This is an essay about Asperger’s syndrome from a pedagogical perspective. My research question is what is important for a teacher to know about Asperger’s syndrome and why? The essay shows that it is important to be aware that pupils with Asperger’s syndrome might have difficulties in understanding, for instance, social cues and non-verbal language. It also deals with how to use visual methods to teach pupils with Asperger’s syndrome. Both research and examples from novels are used to emphasize individual variations when it comes to the symptoms of Asperger’s syndrome. The essay deals with essential features of Asperger’s syndrome/Asperger’s Disorder such as different social impairments, intense interests and the need for consistency. The discussion alternates between the disorder’s features and events from the novels *House Rules* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which are both novels dealing with Asperger’s.
LIST OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 4
   1.1 Asperger’s Syndrome, A Definition 5
   1.2 Literature Selection and Method 6

2. NOVEL SUMMARIES 7
   2.1 Summary of House Rules 8
   2.2 Summary of The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time 9

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS 9
   3.1 Social impairments in conversation 10
      3.1.1 Asperger’s Syndrome and non-verbal language 11
      3.1.2 Asperger’s Syndrome and conversations 13
      3.1.3 Asperger’s Syndrome and literal interpretation 17
   3.2 A preference for routines and consistency 20
   3.3 A tendency to exhibit intense interest 21

4. CONCLUSION 24

WORKS CITED LIST 26
1. INTRODUCTION

One thing I have experienced during my years as a teacher student is that we are not provided with any courses about pupils with special needs on a larger scale. This is something which is, in my opinion, important to be aware of. During my years as a teacher student I have not ever entered a classroom without a pupil with special needs to some extent. Many of these pupils see a special teacher in some classes, but it is also often obvious that their regular subject teacher does not always have enough knowledge to help them. Thinking about this, made me decide to write about Asperger’s syndrome in a teaching context. The reason why I have chosen to write about Asperger’s syndrome and not any other disability is that since I read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* I have been fascinated by this type of disability. I was also given the privilege to work in a school where many of the pupils have Asperger’s syndrome and I found it very interesting and rewarding to acquire an insight into that type of teaching situation. Since I, at that time, had almost no knowledge at all about this type of disability and how to work with them, meeting these pupils made it obvious that more knowledge about the disorder is important to achieve good results in my daily work in school.

Research about Asperger’s syndrome is rather easy to access, but to apply research to life-like situations I have chosen to read Jodi Picoult’s novel *House Rules* (2010) and Mark Haddon’s *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). The main characters in both novels are teenage boys with Asperger’s syndrome. The method I have used is to look at how Asperger’s syndrome is dealt with in the novels compared to research on Asperger’s and how this can be applied to school situations and the classroom, that is how I can use this knowledge to teach pupils with Asperger’s syndrome. In order to clarify the relationship I see between the novels and the research about Asperger’s syndrome, this essay is constructed by using events from
the two novels that can be linked to but also, contrasted with facts and research studies about Asperger’s syndrome.

1.1 ASPERGER’S SYNDROME, A DEFINITION

Asperger’s syndrome is “one of a group of neurodevelopmental disorders that have effects on an individual's behavior, use of language and communication, and pattern of social interactions” (Conrad Stöppler 1). The most essential features of Asperger’s are difficulties in social interaction. Examples of this are an impaired ability to read social conventions, a tendency to become very interested in (or pre-occupied with) a specific topic and they tend to interpret things literally (Attwood 1). This can be explained by the fact that most people with Asperger’s syndrome have an impairment to their ability to be flexible in their thinking and a delay in their cognitive development (Stokes 1).

The symptoms mentioned above are symptoms which may occur but are not necessarily present in all individual cases. Conclusions about individual dissimilarities can easily be made since most of the research material emphasizes that all essential features of Asperger’s syndrome cannot be applied to every person with the Asperger Disorder. Therefore, it is both difficult and unjust to be general when discussing Asperger’s syndrome. Ruud Hendriks talks about a sociologic vocabulary where it is phrased that “depending on the severity of their condition, autistic children grow up in a more or less complete social void” (401). Also, Francesca G.E Happé talks about dissimilarities in the features of Asperger’s syndrome as due to age referring to Baron-Cohen’s study where only older children passed a so called
‘Smarties task’ (845). From this it is clear that all people with Asperger’s syndrome are not similar to each other.

1.2 LITERATURE SELECTION AND METHOD

Although both novels include several characters, this essay only deals with the main characters Jacob and Christopher since they are the ones with the Asperger’s. Since neither of the novels contains any specific scenes from school or the classroom, the comparisons and contrasts are made using events in the novels which can be applied to the classroom and/or school situations. However, it is important to clarify that the comparisons in this essay are made from the perspective of these two novels only in view of Hendriks’ and Happé’s statements about individual dissimilarities. Most of the secondary literature used in this essay deals with Asperger’s syndrome in the same way. My focus in reading the articles has been to look for literature which contributes to my discussion about what is important for teachers to know about Asperger’s syndrome and why. Because of my pedagogical focus the research articles written by Susan Stokes and Carol E. Watkins are used more than the others since they suggest how to work with pupils with Asperger’s syndrome.

The main idea with this essay is to help teachers and other pupils understand Asperger’s syndrome and the complexity of this type of disorder and this is why I have chosen to read and use articles which describe Asperger’s syndrome and also give suggestions on how teachers can work with pupils with Asperger’s. According to Stokes, it is important for teachers to know about the characteristics associated with Asperger’s syndrome in order to facilitate the work at school since pupils with Asperger’s syndrome have a developmental
disorder which causes them to act differently from other pupils (1). Stokes also argues that one of the most important skills for a teacher to develop is to not misinterpret the actions of pupils with Asperger’s as conniving or conscious (1). With this in mind, the motive behind writing this essay is to search for specific answers to the question what knowledge can help teachers understand and work constructively with students with Asperger’s.

2. NOVEL SUMMARIES

This essay is, in part, a comparison between the two novels *House Rules* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. The reason behind choosing these novels was to use literature where information about Asperger’s syndrome was being given from a first person perspective, meaning the main characters tell the reader about their lives from their point of view. *House Rules* also provides information about the events in the novel told from other people’s perspectives. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* we learn about the other characters although, told from Christopher’s perspective.

Another reason for choosing these novels was that the authors of the books seemed to have done some research about Asperger’s syndrome before writing their novel. Jodie Picoult declares in her preface that she has spoken to a lot of people with personal experiences of Asperger’s syndrome (VIII). On his own webpage, Haddon claims that he has not done any research before writing his novel, although the features of Christopher are inspired by two different people with disabilities similar to Christopher’s (Haddon, markhaddon.com).
The reason why both novels are being used as primary literature in this essay is that they are rather similar in many aspects, but also in some ways different from each other. Both novels deal with Asperger’s syndrome and what it is like to live with the disease but the two main characters of the novels deal with it in different ways. From a pedagogical perspective, the different ways the two main characters deal with their situation can be instructive since, as Hendriks states, dissimilarity in severity of Asperger’s syndrome in different individuals is a fact (401).

2.1 SUMMARY OF HOUSE RULES

*House Rules* by Jodie Picoult is about a boy named Jacob Hunt. Jacob is very interested in crime investigations and everything connected with them. The plot of the book is rather fictive and is basically about how Jacob is accused of a murder he did not commit.

The title refers to a visual list of rules that Emma, the mother, has set up to manage daily life with a teenage son with Asperger’s syndrome. Her son, Jacob, is eighteen years old. He has great difficulty in understanding social hints and he is often misunderstood because of his inability to understand different situations. He is also very literal.

The reader is given information about the events in the book from many different perspectives but the main perspectives are given from Jacob, his brother Theo and their mother Emma and these are the perspectives most used in the essay. In terms of this study, it is significant that the novel brings clarification to how Jacob misinterprets social situations, both from Jacob’s perspective but also from other people in Jacob’s life.
2.2 SUMMARY OF THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is about a fifteen-year old boy called Christopher who has Asperger’s Syndrome. The neighbor’s dog has been murdered and Christopher wants to find out who killed the dog.

The story is told from a first-person perspective and Christopher himself is the narrator. The reader gets to know Christopher through his thorough descriptions of his own social behavior. The most essential features of Christopher are that he is very interested in math, especially prime numbers, his inability to interpret things in any other way than the most literal and also his extraordinarily good memory.

Christopher has, like Jacob, great difficulties in reading social cues and is, therefore, often misunderstood. In terms of this study, it is significant that Christopher himself talks about the events in the novel so that the reader is given his perspective only. The most essential feature of Christopher discussed in the essay is his inability to make non-literal interpretations, which in my opinion relates to the classroom and how those with Asperger’s need to be approached and taught.

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter includes discussions and analyses of Asperger’s syndrome and how it is dealt with in the two novels contrasted with research and other facts about Asperger’s syndrome. The main features that are discussed are different social impairments in general and more
specifically in non-verbal language, conversation skills and literal interpretation, the tendency
to exhibit intense interest in a specific topic and the preference for routines and consistency.
Most of the discussions about the disorder’s features include examples from both novels.
However, in some of the discussions, the examples given are the most obvious ones only and
thus in some sections examples are given from one of the novels only. The discussions focus
on the pedagogical perspective and the information’s relevance to teachers and their work
with teaching pupils with Asperger’s syndrome.

3.1 SOCIAL IMPAIRMENTS IN CONVERSATION

If you were dropped into the UK and you happened to be a Korean or Portuguese, your
confusion would be expected. After all, you don’t speak the language. But if you’re
American, technically, you do. So you’re stuck in conversations that make no sense to
you, in which you ask people to repeat themselves over and over, in the hope that
eventually the unfamiliar words will fall into place. This is what Asperger’s feels like. I
have to work so hard at the things that come naturally to others, because I’m just a
tourist here. (Picoult 184)

This is how Jacob in House Rules describes what it is like to live with Asperger’s syndrome.
In this excerpt, it is obvious that Jacob is aware of his own disabilities and that he actually has
insight into his impairment and limitations. In view of what Happé talks about concerning
feature dissimilarities and age (845), this might be a result of the fact that he is as old as
eighteen and has learned to live his life with Asperger’s syndrome. In addition, in the novel,
Jacob’s mother informs the reader that he is very high-functioning (202). Compared to
Christopher, the main character in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Jacob
seems to have an ability to analyze his own behavior. In a numerous scenes, Christopher
describes his actions but he does not seem to be able to relate his actions to his disorder to the same extent as Jacob. For example, Jacob tells the reader that he knows that people think of him as “the weird kid who stands too close and doesn’t shut up” (Picoult 20). Using Happé’s and Hendriks arguments, that might be due to either Christopher being five years younger than Jacob or to Christopher’s impairments being perhaps more complex than Jacob’s (Happé 845, Hendriks 401).

Dr. Tony Attwood explains Asperger’s syndrome as a disorder where the person is normal intellectually but with a distinct individual profile of disabilities (1). These disabilities most often appear in social interaction, and include such aspects as an impaired understanding of non-verbal language (interpreting eyes, facial expressions etc), trouble identifying social cues and problems with skills in conversations (1). After reading the two novels I would say that, in general terms, both Jacob’s and Christopher’s main features are impaired conversation skills and trouble with understanding non-verbal language.

3.1.1 ASPERGER’S SYNDROME AND NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE

Attwood states that people with Asperger’s syndrome have difficulties in understanding and using non-verbal language such as interpreting eyes and facial expressions (1). This is represented very clearly by Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* when he talks about why he finds people confusing:

> The first main reason is that people do a lot of talking without using any words.

> Siobhan says that if you raise one eyebrow it can mean lots of different things. It can mean ‘I want to do sex with you’ and it can also mean ‘I think that what you just said
was very stupid.’ Siobhan also says that if you close your mouth and breathe out loudly through your nose it can mean that you are relaxed, or that you are bored, or that you are angry and it all depends on how much air comes out of your nose and how fast and what shape your mouth is when you do it and how you are sitting and what you said just before and hundreds of other things which are too complicated to work out in a few seconds. (Haddon 19)

This might seem like simple common sense to a person who does not have the Asperger Disorder since these are signs which are easily read and interpreted in different ways depending on the situation. However, this type of problem is one of the most essential features of Asperger’s syndrome and it is important for teachers to have this in mind to avoid misunderstandings between either a pupil with Asperger’s and a teacher or a pupil with Asperger’s and other pupils.

Stokes claims that people with Asperger’s syndrome typically are strong in their visual processing skills. Therefore she argues that the best way to train and teach a pupil with Asperger’s syndrome is through using visual methods (1). This is exactly what is done in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Christopher has difficulties in reading facial expressions and his teacher at school draws him pictures of different facial expressions and tells him what they mean and what the person who looks like the picture feels. Christopher can keep the pictures with the explanations in his pocket and whenever he does not understand a person’s facial expression, he can look at the pictures (Haddon 2-3). This is also done in *House Rules*, although in a slightly different way. Jacob’s mother sits with Jacob in the kitchen and makes different faces for him to guess which emotion goes with which facial expression (Picoult 7). In terms of my own teaching, I think this can be applied by using role-
play as a part of teaching where the pupils with Asperger’s syndrome can practice how to express and react to different feelings in different situations.

3.1.2 ASPERGER’S SYNDROME AND CONVERSATIONS

Research has shown that individuals with Asperger’s syndrome often want to fit in and have conversations with other people, but they simply do not know how to do it (autism-society.org). The most significant problems are recognizing social and emotional cues and narrow interests which often make them exclude any other topic of conversation (The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke). Because of these impairments, people with Asperger’s syndrome often have a hard time finding friends their own age (Attwood 1, Watkins 1). This issue is obvious in House Rules. For example, when Jacob was thirteen years old he tried to make some friends on the local playground. Jacob’s younger brother Theo talks about it in this way:

The oldest kid I could see was about my age, and he was hanging upside down from the monkey bars. Jacob walked up to him and twisted sideways so that he could look the kid in the eye. ‘My name is Jacob’, he said in his voice, which I’m used to but which is weird to everyone else – flat as a sheet of aluminum, even in places where there should be exclamation points. ‘Do you want to play?’ The kid did a neat flip onto the ground. ‘Are you like, some kind of retard?’ Jacob considered this. ‘No’. ‘New flash,’ the boy said. ‘You are.’ (Picoult 229)

Since the conversation did not go any further than this, it is hard to generalize Jacob’s behavior as typical Asperger’s behavior. He is not rude to the younger boy, and he does not say anything inappropriate. However, it is clear that he does not use a “normal” speech tone which might be the reason the younger boy calls him a “retard”. This is important for teachers
to keep in mind so they do not misinterpret the actions of pupils with Asperger’s as conniving or conscious since their inability to understand and use “proper” conversation cues might contribute to their behavior being thought of as rather ill-mannered (Stokes 1).

In *The Study of Language* George Yule discusses discourse analysis and talks about Paul Grice’s co-operative principle which can be seen as a social rule for how to act during conversation and he states that “an underlying assumption in most conversational exchanges seems to be that the participants are co-operating with each other” (129). This principle has four maxims supporting it which are:

1. The quantity maxim: conversation contribution should be informative but not more or less than required.

2. The quality maxim: you should have adequate evidence to what you say.

3. The relation maxim: you should be relevant in conversations.

4. The manner maxim: you should be clear and brief (Yule 130).

These conversation “rules” are probably not something most people even think about during conversations. They can be looked upon as basic conversation skills. In the following scene in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Christopher is being arrested. When he is at the police station the following conversation takes place:

They asked me if I had any family. I said I did. They asked me who my family was. I said it was Father, but Mother was dead. And I said it was also Uncle Terry but he was in Sunderland and he was Father’s brother, and it was my grandparents, too, but three of them were dead and Grandma Burton was in a home because she had senile dementia and thought that I was someone on television. (Haddon 17)
In this excerpt it is evident that Christopher violates both the quantity maxim and the relation maxim since he is being too informative and most of his information in irrelevant to the person he is talking to. This type of social impairment regarding conversation skills can lead to the person with Asperger’s syndrome being misinterpreted and viewed upon as very odd (Stokes 1).

Another common problem in the conversations in the two novels is questions. To show how a conversation including questions can appear, two scenes from the different novels are included. In the first excerpt, Jacob is being questioned by a policeman called Rich and it is told from Rich’s point of view.

‘Why did you lie to me about going to Jess’s?’ I ask.

‘I didn’t lie,’ he says. ‘I told you I didn’t have my session with her.’

‘You didn’t tell me about the backpack, either,’ I point out. It sits between us, on a coffee table.

‘You didn’t ask.’

Wiseass, I think, just as Emma jumps in. ‘A kid with Asperger’s, like Jacob is going to be painfully literal,’ she says.

‘So if I ask him directly, he’ll answer directly?’ (Picoul 157-158)

In this scene it is evident that Jacob can neither read nor understand social rules for proper conversations. It concerns his inability to tell the truth, i.e follow the quality maxim, if he is not directly asked about it, which in this case leads to him being misinterpreted by the policeman.
In the second excerpt, Christopher is trying to communicate with one of his neighbors while he is doing some investigating about the dog’s murderer. Christopher is the narrator.

‘I see you every day, going to school.’

I didn’t reply to this.

And she said, ‘It’s very nice of you to come and say hello.’

I didn’t reply to this either because Mrs. Alexander was doing what is called chatting where people say things to each other which aren’t questions and answers and aren’t connected. (Haddon 51)

Which I find interesting in this excerpt is that Christopher himself reflects on conversational rules when he describes Mrs. Alexander’s actions as “chatting”. However, his own behavior leads to the discussion not continuing since he does not follow the quantity maxim. This might be one of the most important feature for teachers to know about to avoid misunderstandings at school. For teachers, both scenes above show that explicitness and directness are two key words to have in mind while tutoring pupils with Asperger’s syndrome. For example, it could be a good idea to use so called open questions instead of closed to avoid only yes-and-no-answers (Lightbown & Spada 132).

There is no cure for Asperger’s syndrome. Instead, research has shown that practicing social skills can be an effective way of to better understand social cues and widen interest areas (Watkins 1). Carol E. Watkins argues that social skills training is one of the most important aspects of treatment for people with Asperger’s syndrome, age regardless (1). Furthermore, Watkins states that an individual with Asperger’s syndrome must be taught concrete rules for conversation such as eye contact and social distance. However, it might be difficult to teach
someone empathy but people with Asperger’s can learn rules for which specific sign indicates which emotional state (Watkins 1).

In *House Rules*, Jacob is being tutored by a girl named Jess. Jess is in college and is writing a longer essay about Asperger’s syndrome, therefore she knows a lot about the disorder. Jess and Jacob meet once a week to help Jacob practice his social skills by participating in the types of activities which Watkins argues are the best (1). Jess teaches Jacob how to have a proper conversation and she also gives him ‘homework’. For example, she tells him that he must take initiative of starting a conversation with someone he does not know.

Stokes also argues for social skills training when she suggests some activities for practicing social skills in school. She argues for the importance of visual examples and role playing various social situations, individualized visual social rules cards and comic strip conversations to simplify social interactions (1). My own thoughts about social skills training concern practicing how to walk into a train station and buy a ticket, how to order in a restaurant and other everyday life situations.

### 3.1.3 ASPERGER’S SYNDROME AND LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Attwood claims that people with Asperger’s syndrome often tend to make literal interpretations (1). In *House Rules*, Emma, Jacob’s mother, explains Jacob’s reality as either black or white. There is no room for a less concrete interpretation which is what a non-literal interpretation depends on. It is rather clear that Jacob does not even seem to think in other colours than black and white since all his descriptions of his world are given from only one
perspective. He is not able to see that a situation as an event or an expression could have two, rather different, meanings. As an example of this, Jacob describes that he does not understand why people sometimes choose the expressions they do:

People say thing all the time they don’t mean, and neurotypical folks manage to figure out the message all the same. Take, for example, Mimi Scheck in school. She said she’d die if Paul McGrath didn’t ask her to the Winter Formal, but in reality, she would not have died – she would just have been really sad. Or the way Theo sometimes smacks another kid’s shoulder and says ‘Get out!’ when that really means he wants his friend to keep talking. . . . So maybe when Jess told me to get lost on Sunday, she really meant something else. (Picoult 90)

If one is only able to make literal interpretations, it might be difficult to understand these types of expressions since they are rather ironic. When Yule talks about semantics he discusses conceptual and associative meaning (100). Conceptual meaning is the basic meaning of a word. In the quote above the conceptual meaning to ‘die’ would be real death which is the interpretation made by Jacob. The associative meaning of a word can be anything associated to the word and Yule clarifies that these associations differ from person to person (Yule 100). From this one could draw the conclusion that Jacob understands the conceptual meaning of words, but not always their different associative meanings. In this case, for example, he does not understand the meaning of “Get lost” in this specific context.

Everyday expressions can also involve metaphors. Since a metaphor is a literary figure of speech, people with Asperger’s syndrome might find it rather complicated to understand them. In the same chapter where Christopher explains why he sometimes find people confusing,
The second main reason is that people often talk in metaphors. These are examples of metaphors

... 

We had a real pig of a day.

They had a skeleton in the cupboard.

He was the apple of her eye.

... 

I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone’s eye doesn’t have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget about what the person was talking about. (Haddon 19-20)

The end of the last sentence in this quote should be emphasized: “...it makes you forget about what the person was talking about.” This might be one of the reasons why many children with Asperger’s syndrome are isolated and alone since having conversations is difficult not only because they do not understand social cues and speech rules but also because of linguistic phenomena such as Christopher is describing here. If you do not understand what someone is talking about, one could assume that it is difficult to continue conversing. As a teacher, this should be considered while talking to a pupil with Asperger’s syndrome. Also, this information could help teachers to think of other ways to express themselves to avoid misunderstandings and erroneous interpretations.
As said, the facts about Asperger’s syndrome are important to know about and the examples from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* can help to illustrate what reality is like for someone with Asperger’s. Many children with Asperger’s syndrome would most likely be interested in participating in or even initiating social interaction but because of their social impairments this initiative could only work on their own terms since the interaction as a whole would only work if he/she understands what the conversation is about. Applying this to a school context, it is significant for teachers to be aware of in order to be able to adapt and thus, be able to interact in a way which is understandable for their pupils with Asperger’s Disorder (Stokes 1).

### 3.2 A PREFERENCE FOR ROUTINES AND CONSISTENCY

Attwood declares that one of the distinct features of Asperger’s syndrome is the strong preference for a daily routine and consistency in everyday life (1). Therefore, some people with Asperger’s syndrome have difficulties in managing changes in their daily routines. Watkins suggests that any type of change must be introduced gradually (1). The two novels deal with this feature in different ways.

In *House Rules*, Jacob has several routines that he insists on following. For example, Jacob and his family eat food in different colours on different days. The most significant routine Jacob has is watching the TV-show *CrimeBusters* which starts at 16.30. He would do anything to not miss the daily episode of the show. He always makes sure to be in front of the television in time for the TV-show. If he should find himself in a situation where he cannot watch the show, it would most likely result in an outburst which is described in the novel when Jacob is sitting in court. According to Watkins, this type of change in a daily routine
should have been introduced to Jacob gradually. To prevent this type of outburst, his mother and/or his lawyer should have prepared Jacob beforehand by letting him a few days beforehand that a trial might take time which could result in a day without watching CrimeBusters (Watkins 1).

Watkins’ suggestion about gradually changing routines is also applicable to teachers and their work at school. Changes in the school schedule, could be presented to pupils with Asperger’s syndrome as soon as practicable to prevent outburst or any other type of break-downs. In addition to Watkins’ method, Stokes has several suggestions for how to make a school day work for pupils with Asperger’s syndrome. For example, it is important to provide a consistent school environment, an individual visual schedule which provides the pupil with information about the specific day might be useful, some assignments should be modified after the pupil’s individual needs and in addition to this a “finish-later”-box may be helpful as a visual reminder of which assignments should be handed in (Stokes 2).

3.3 A TENDENCY TO EXHIBIT INTENSE INTEREST

Attwood declares that it is common that people with Asperger’s syndrome to develop an intense interest in, more or less, unusual topics (1). This is evident in both of the novels. In House Rules, Jacob, for example, is extremely interested in crime scenes and forensic science and hardly a day goes by without him watching a TV-show called CrimeBusters. Resembling to Jacob, Christopher in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is highly interested in investigating who killed the dog. Both main characters are interested in crime as a riddle to be solved.
An intense interest is of course impressive in terms of deep knowledge. However, one could assume that having this type of intense interest in only one specific topic might cause problems in other school subjects. As a teacher, it is fairly easy to hand out assignments in, for instance, free writing with no further instructions but: “What is your favourite…?”. Stokes argues that this is exactly what teachers should not do to pupils with Asperger’s syndrome. Introducing the pupil to topics not related to high interest areas is a way to expand the pupil’s knowledge and understanding of other topics than his/her own special interest. Furthermore, Stokes claims that this can lead to an increased ability in conversation skills by being able to maintaining a conversation and ask questions about topics chosen by other people (1).

According to Melissa Conrad Stöppler, obsession is quite common for people with Asperger’s syndrome (1). In the first chapter of *House Rules*, the reader meets Jacob’s mother who tells the reader about how she comes home to a total mess. The mess is caused by Jacob, as an attempt to install a crime scene with himself as a murder victim with different clues which his mother is supposed to solve (Picoult 3). Further on in the novel, his intense interest in crime scenes comes even closer to being obsessive behavior and when he finds his tutor Jess dead on her bathroom floor, he decides to recreate the crime scene and leave clues for the police detectives to solve. It ends with him being accused of murder. His behavior is defined in the novel like this: “The intense fixation on a subject that someone with Asperger’s has can be overwhelming and obsessive – to the point where it impedes function in daily activities or even crosses the boundary of the law” (Picoult 558). This is not mentioned in any of the research material I have read. Instead, this seems rather to be a way of using the feature of the disorder in a fictive way to make the plot more interesting.
The main character in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Christopher, also has an intense interest in the same area as Jacob. Most of the plot in the novel is about how Christopher wants to find out who killed the dog. Christopher takes the role as a detective when he starts visiting neighbours and asking them if they know who killed the dog. His high interest in investigating the murder also shows when he describes his thoughts about the crime, for example

1. Why would you kill a dog?

   a) Because you hated the dog.
   
   b) Because you were mad.
   
   c) Because you wanted to make Mrs Shears upset.

2. I didn’t know anyone who hated Wellington, so if it was a) it was probably a stranger.

3. I didn’t know any mad people, so if it was b) it was also probably a stranger.

4. Most murders are committed by someone who is known to the victim. In fact, you are most likely to be murdered by a member of your own family on Christmas Day. This is a fact. Wellington was therefore most likely to have been killed by someone known to him.

5. If it was c) I only knew one person who didn’t like Mrs Shears, and that was Mr Shears who knew Wellington very well indeed. (Haddon 53-54)

This excerpt shows that Christopher analyses and draws his own conclusions about the crime and there is no doubt that this is an intense interest of his. Further on in the novel, Christopher’s father forbids him to continue his investigation but Christopher carries on despite his father’s request. Therefore one can tell that his interest in investigating the crime is
intense since he chooses his own interest before his father’s demand. This, can be seen as a sign of obsessive behaviour.

4. CONCLUSION

My aim with this essay has been to search for answers to the questions what is important for teachers to know about Asperger’s syndrome in relation to working with pupils with this disorder at school and why. I have shown that regarding social impairment, more specifically difficulties with non-verbal language, conversations and literal interpretations, it is evidently effective to practice social skills where the pupil can learn concrete rules for social and emotional cues to prevent misinterpretations during conversations in for example a classroom. Furthermore, the methods that should be used are visual methods since many children with Asperger’s syndrome learn better visually than through listening.

As regards to the preference for routine and consistency, this essay has shown that teachers should provide pupils with Asperger’s syndrome with different types of visual equipment. This is especially significant on days when the normal schedule is disrupted by some other occasional event, for example theme days at school. It is also important for teachers to remember to introduce changes in the daily routines gradually to prevent the pupil with Asperger’s syndrome from having a break-down.

Moreover, concerning people with Asperger’s syndrome and their tendency to have an intense interest in a specific topic, I have shown that individual variance occurs. The interest of course varies in subject from individual to individual, but it may also vary in intensity. This is
clearly seen between Jacob in *House Rules* and Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. The suggestion for teachers in order to widen a pupil’s focus when they show obsessive tendencies is to introduce them to new topics which are not close to other topics in their special interest’s area.

Both Jacob and Christopher have an intense interest in different specific topics, but I would say that Jacob’s interest tends to be stronger in its intensity than Christopher’s. This is another example of how different the disorders can look. Regarding awareness, Christopher’s situation seems more severe than Jacob’s and when it comes to their intense interests Jacob’s situation appears more severe compared to Christopher’s.

A further conclusion is that the above discussion about Asperger’s syndrome from a pedagogical perspective provides teachers with keywords such as *explicitness*, *directness* and *visual methods*. Having these words in mind and being aware of their implications for teaching methodology could facilitate the work in school.

Concerning what is important to know and why this essay has brought both answers and new questions. Most research about Asperger’s syndrome only deals with children and teenagers with Asperger Disorder. It would be interesting to do some research about adults with Asperger’s syndrome, perhaps comparing those who have been trained in social skills to those who have not. It would also be interesting to do some classroom research regarding the same issue, to see if there would be any dissimilarities between pupils being given social practice and those who are not.
WORKS CITED


Watkins, Carol E., “Asperger’s Disorder”, Maryland: Northern County Psychiatric

Yule, George. The Study of Language 3rd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2006. Print.