The colour conundrum

Approximately 380,000 boys and 23,500 girls in the UK education system are colour-blind. Karen Sullivan looks at supporting colour-blind children in the classroom.

Ross often becomes embarrassed or angry if someone asks him to describe the colour of something, but Kathryn says that it is important to use colour descriptively, to enable him to work out the saturation and brightness of colours, which helps him to marry what they say with what he actually sees.

Kathryn notes that many children do not admit to struggling with colours. They would rather attempt to join in than draw attention to themselves. This can, however, lead to frustration and anger, when the measures designed to support learning actually undermine it.

Schools taking note

As a result of Kathryn’s efforts, a number of schools have begun to screen students at entry point, in order to offer appropriate support. This month, Kathryn will be helping to screen 1,275 boys from Aylesbury Grammar School in Buckinghamshire using the Ishihara test (see further information).

Suzanne Kennedy, deputy head and SENCO, said: “For boys who are identified, we will notify their parents and, depending on the extent of the condition, put an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in place so that teaching staff are aware of their condition.”

“The IEP will give guidance to the teacher as to how to modify resources to help the student to access the work more effectively. We will also consider exam access arrangements.”

“We believe that colour-blindness should be a recognised SEN. As with other SENs, there is a spectrum from mild to severe, but schools should be made more aware of the condition and how to support students.”

By secondary school, many children have become adept at covering up their condition – not only failing to bring it to the attention of teachers and even parents, but also learning quite sophisticated coping strategies that mask their difficulties.

Anne Greenwood, matron at Magdalen College School in Oxford, added: “We recognise colour-blindness as a medical condition, so that as long as parents have informed us that an Ishihara test has been carried out, or we’ve done our own, boys can be given extra time for chemistry practicals, etc. We screen everyone in our first intake. On average, we pick up one or two in each class of 20.”

What can you do?

First of all, consider screening children as they enter your school. A local optician may be able to arrange this, as can the visual impairment team in your local authority. Alternatively, contact Kathryn (see further information) for details of online testing.

Bright light can make it easier for children to recognise colour so colour-blind children should be seated in good natural light. Also, avoid using colour-on-colour books and other support materials. Black on white is most appropriate for colour-blind children.

In sports and games (including board games), ensure that children can see who is on their team, and that they can see the ball or the “men” on the board.

Checking computer settings, web pages and computer-based teaching aids to ensure that the child can pick out the relevant information is important. Colour-blind children can immediately access them. Use patterns rather than colours for maps, and ensure that they are well labelled rather than being solely dependent upon colour.

Be aware that coursework presented by colour-blind students may seem dumb to the restricted colour palette that they have and the student may lose marks for presentation understanding why.

Buddies should be organised for colour-blind students to help with colour choices, science experiments, art and D&T projects, and anything else that involves colour. Schools should also talk to parents about how they can support their children at home and at least take care to ensure that no child is teased or bullied for using incorrect colours.

What about the future?

Colour-blindness is an under-recognised and little understood condition, particularly by children. It remains rather perplexing that this condition is not considered an SEN, as it has a clear impact upon a child’s ability to learn. In the meantime, however, it is worth taking on board the guidelines suggested, to ensure that any colour-blind children at your school are taught in the most accessible way possible.

Karen Sullivan is a bestselling author, psychologist and childcare expert. Email KESullivan@aol.com.

Further information

• Colour Blind Awareness: www.colourblind-awareness.org
• Ishihara: www.colorvisiontesting.com/ishihara.htm