Title: What does ‘good’ provision for pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder look like? The search for a model of good practice.

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) in the faculty of humanities.

Lucy Charters
2014
School of Education
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ABSTRACT

With an expansion of knowledge and interest in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), widening diagnostic criteria and an increasing number of students being diagnosed (Frith 2003), it is important to address whether schools are meeting the needs of this population adequately and to examine which methods are most effective in achieving this end. The aim of the study was to develop a clearer insight into the special educational needs of young people with ASD and how these needs can be best met in educational settings.

Questionnaires were distributed (through parent support groups) to young people with ASD to ascertain their views regarding how young people with ASD need be supported at high school. The findings from the questionnaires were used to derive a theory/model about which factors/criteria constitute to good practice for supporting pupils with ASD. The main factors were found to include: knowledge and understanding of staff, good communication with parents, an inclusive ethos and the existence of a ‘safe haven’ within the school for these pupils to access. To ‘test’ this hypothetical model of good practice, a case study of an educational setting deemed by parents and pupils to be ‘successful’ in meeting the needs of pupils with ASD was undertaken in order to investigate the robustness of the model and also to potentially identify any additional factors to strengthen the model of good practice. Many of the factors identified in the model were found to be present in the identified ‘successful’ school, yet other significant features included: good relationships between staff and pupils, between pupils and peers and between members of staff in the school and also an emphasis on supporting the emotional wellbeing of these pupils. The case study found that these relationships as well as an inclusive school ethos were pivotal to the success of the school. However, it was apparent that an element of inclusion dissonance existed across the school: the perceived commitment of staff to achieving inclusion for these pupils was not always seen in reality. Two criteria for ‘success’ were found to be: the emotional wellbeing of the pupils and the level of social inclusion they experienced.
DECLARATION

No portion of work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree of qualification of this or any other university or institute of learning.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the pupils, parents and school staff who worked with me throughout the research project. Without their enthusiasm and commitment I would not have the knowledge, understanding and insight I feel I have gained throughout this journey.

Special thanks is accorded to the manager of the enhanced provision who went out of her way to make me feel welcome. Her commitment to the young people in her care and her desire to support them is commendable.

I would also like to thank my family for their support and encouragement throughout.

Finally, I would like to thank Garry Squires for his helpful and supportive encouragement and advice.
# Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>AET</td>
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<td>AS</td>
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<td>Autism Spectrum Condition</td>
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<td>ASD</td>
<td>Autism Spectrum Disorder</td>
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<td>BPS</td>
<td>British Psychological Society</td>
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<td>CoP</td>
<td>Special Educational Needs Code of Practice</td>
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<td>CSIE</td>
<td>Centre for Studies in Inclusion</td>
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<td>Department for Children, Schools and Families</td>
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<td>DfE</td>
<td>Department for Education</td>
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<td>DfES</td>
<td>Department for Education and Skills</td>
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<td>Educational Psychologist</td>
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<td>HFA</td>
<td>High Functioning Autism</td>
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<td>HMSO</td>
<td>Her Majesty’s Stationary Office</td>
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<td>LA</td>
<td>Local Authority</td>
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<td>NAS</td>
<td>National Autistic Society</td>
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<td>SEN</td>
<td>Special Educational Needs</td>
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<td>SEND</td>
<td>Special Educational Needs and Disabilities</td>
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<td>TA</td>
<td>Thematic Analysis</td>
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<td>UK</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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PREFACE

Graduate and post-graduate qualifications

(1996) BSc Psychology
(1998) PGCE
(2004) MSc Educational Psychology

Summaries of previous assignments submitted in part-fulfilment for this degree of Doctor of Educational Psychology:

1st Year Assignment: The educational experiences of secondary school pupils with ASD.

This study used semi-structured interviews to gain an insight into the educational experiences of five pupils between the age of 11 and 16 with a diagnosis of autism in a mainstream secondary school. The data gathered revealed that all of the five pupils faced significant challenges, including bullying, difficulty forming and sustaining friendships, difficulty finding their way around school and difficulties with teachers who did not have a clear understanding of their ASD-related difficulties. Four of the five pupils felt they would feel less stressed in school if they had somewhere quiet to go at lunchtimes and all pupils felt that teachers needed to have a clearer understanding of their diagnosis. Only two of the pupils felt they would benefit from their peers being informed of their diagnosis, whilst the other three did not wanted to be treated differently by their peers.

2nd Year assignment: The use of functional analysis to reduce the challenging behaviour of children with ASD.

This study used functional analysis with three children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) who were exhibiting challenging behaviours. The aim of the study was to determine whether functional analysis was effective in providing appropriate intervention strategies to reduce the challenging behaviours of the children. Data was collected before and after the functional analyses through structured observations and rating scales to measure the changes in the frequency of the target behaviours. The functional analyses revealed that the behaviours exhibited were serving a range of different and very specific
functions for each child, other than simply to a) escape demands and b) obtain attention, which has generally been found in earlier studies which have used functional analysis with challenging behaviours e.g. Iwata, Dorsey, Slifer, Bauman and Richman (1982), Lalli, Casey & Yates (1997) and Richman, Wacker, Asmus & Casey (1998). The analysis of the data collected implies that the frequency of the challenging behaviours decreased for two of the children, yet there was very little change in the frequency of the behaviour exhibited by the third.

3rd year assignment: _A comparison of the experiences of pupils with Asperger Syndrome in a secondary mainstream school with pupils with Aspergers Syndrome in a specialist resourced provision unit._

This qualitative study aimed to develop an insight into the experiences of young people with Asperger Syndrome (AS) in two different educational settings: a mainstream high school and a resourced provision (a specialist unit set within a mainstream high school) for pupils with Asperger’s Syndrome. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from seven young people aged between 13 and 18, their parents and also a member of staff who supports each of them (AS). The interviews were analysed in accordance with the principles of Content Analysis. Considerably more positive accounts were heard by the young people and their parents from the resourced provision than from those who attend the mainstream school. The success of the resourced provision (and also what was reported to be lacking from the mainstream school) appears largely to stem from the provision of individual tailor-made support systems for each pupil and the knowledge and understanding of staff about AS. The lack of knowledge, skills and understanding of staff was a recurrent complaint from the pupils, their parents and also from the staff themselves from the mainstream school. The researcher concluded that achieving high quality provision of secondary education for pupils with AS requires achieving a balance between alleviating stressors within the busy environment of a secondary school and helping them to develop coping strategies to enable them to cope in such stressful environment.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale
Over the last 15 years educational inclusion has emerged as a key issue in educational policy both nationally and internationally (Booth and Ainscow, 1998). Signed by 92 governments, the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1994) outlined a commitment to adopt the principle of inclusion as a ‘matter of law or policy’ (p.ix). Subsequent legislative change in the UK has sought to ensure that children with special educational needs (SEN) are educated in mainstream schools with typically developing peers, rather than in separate special schools ‘unless it is incompatible with parental wishes or with the provision of efficient education for other children’ (Department for Education and Employment, 2001, p.1). The UK government published a Green Paper in 1997 entitled Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs (Department for Education and Employment, DfEE, 1997), which initiated a wide-ranging review of children with special educational needs (SEN) and highlighted the government’s drive towards the principle of inclusion. The ‘Special Educational Needs and Disability Act’ was then introduced in 2001 which required schools to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to enable children with SEN to be educated and included in mainstream school life (Her Majesty’s Stationary office, HMSO, 2001). In 2004, the government’s new strategy, Removing Barriers to Achievement, set out ‘the government’s vision for the education of children with SEN and disability’ and ‘provide clear national leadership’ (Department for Education and Skills, DfES, 2004, p.9).

Most recently, the Green Paper, Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability, was published in March 2011. The proposed changes represent the greatest reforms in SEN in England for over 30 years. It proposes that SEN statements will be replaced by a single assessment plan covering education, health and social care, identifying the package of support in each area. The plans will be for children from birth to 25 years meaning that further education colleges will have the same duties as
maintained schools to safeguard the education of young people with SEN. Parents will be given the power to support decision making in terms of controlling personal budgets and stating support required and seeking placements at any school of their choice, provided it is deemed appropriate.

Over the same period there has been an observable increase in the number of children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). It is now very likely that many of these children, particularly those at the higher functioning and more verbal end of the continuum, will be educated in their local mainstream schools. Although national statistics on type of special need were not routinely published at that time, smaller scale research indicated that the numbers of pupils with an ASD diagnosis had more than doubled between 1997 and 2001, and that the majority of the newly diagnosed pupils were being placed in mainstream rather than special schools (Keen and Ward, 2004).

National statistics on type of SEN have been collected from local authorities in England since 2004 and have shown a 20% fall over the past few years in the number of pupils in mainstream schools with statements of SEN, issued following a statutory multi-professional ascertainment process (Office of National Statistics, 2004, 2009). By contrast, during this period the number of pupils in mainstream schools with a statement for ASD increased by 17%, more than for any other category. It is worrying, therefore, that several sources have expressed particular concerns about the needs of these pupils not being met in educational settings e.g. Volkmar et al. (2005) and Mesibov and Shea, (1996). Children with ASD have been found to be particularly vulnerable to peer rejection and bullying (Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). They also challenged the expectations and skills of staff in schools, where teaching and learning are seen as ‘essentially a social interactive event’ (Tutt, Powell and Thornton, 2006, p.70).

It is therefore important to address whether schools are meeting the needs of this population adequately and to examine which methods are most effective
in achieving this end. In recent years research is beginning to emerge concerning the experiences of children and young people with High Functioning Autism (HFA) or Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) within mainstream schools.

The literature highlights some of the problems experienced by some pupils with ASD such as bullying, social isolation and loneliness (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Connor 2000, Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). It is suggested that this particular group of children and young people may be intellectually capable of accessing the secondary curriculum yet they will probably require a range of academic and social support systems in order for them to succeed both academically and also in terms of transitioning to greater independence (Carrington & Graham, 2001).

Also accompanying the increased recognition of ASD is the lack of guidance and advice for school staff and advisory services as to how to craft and implement appropriate and effective strategies and interventions for pupils identified as having ASD. Teachers and teaching assistants must have understanding and working knowledge of the school-related social, behavioural/emotional, cognitive, academic, sensory, and motor characteristics associated with ASD so that they can effectively meet these pupils’ complex needs. However, research has found that although many teachers say they are committed to the philosophy of inclusion, they do not feel they have the necessary training or support to provide effectively for these pupils (Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari, 2003). The National Autistic Society has said that, “the lack of understanding and appropriate provision means that children with (AS) are losing out” (NAS, 2003b, p.5).

In the local authority that has requested the research there is currently no specialist provision for pupils with ASD and further information was requested as to how such pupils can best be supported. I was specifically requested to research whether the needs of high school pupils with ASD can best be met within a mainstream school (with improvements in, for example, ASD training for staff) or whether the Local Authority should be investing in creating a
specialist ASD provision. Within this particular population of pupils there have been an increasing number of reported incidents of permanent exclusions, incidents of bullying, school refusals, depression and other mental health problems, alongside parents increasingly requesting out of borough specialist placements because they feel that the local authority cannot meet their child’s needs in their mainstream schools.

A small-scale study conducted by Charters (2009) compared the experiences of pupils with AS/HFA in one of the authority’s mainstream high schools with the experiences of pupils with AS/HFA in a resourced provision from a neighbouring authority. The use of personal stories and reflections by the pupils, their parents and school staff from both settings provided a useful insight into the different experiences of the two groups of pupils, believed to have similar needs, but receiving different educational provision. A considerably greater number of positive accounts were heard by the young people and their parents from the resourced provision than from those who attended the mainstream school. The success of the resourced provision (and also what was reported to be lacking from the mainstream school) appeared largely to stem from the provision of individual, tailor-made support systems for each pupil and the knowledge and understanding of staff about ASD. The quality and regularity of communication between home and school was also considered a pre-requisite for being able to meet the individual needs of each pupil. The lack of knowledge, skills and understanding of staff was a recurrent complaint from the pupils, their parents and also from the staff themselves from the mainstream school.

Following this small-scale study, the LA has made the decision to focus upon improving the range and quality of provision available for pupils with ASD within the LA. In order to increase the likelihood of the success of its provision the authority has requested further research be undertaken to elicit a clear picture of “what good looks like”, i.e. which factors constitute a model of successful provision.
1.2 Research Questions
Determining the questions that are most significant for a topic and gaining some precision in formulating these questions has required a great deal of thought and preparation. They were derived and altered several times after reviewing more and more literature on the topic. As Yin (2003) states:

The purpose of a literature review is not to determine the answers about what is known on a topic; in contrast it is to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic… (p.9)

The main research question is as follows:

1) Which factors are believed to contribute to a model of successful high-school provision for pupils with ASD?

And further sub-questions are:

2) How do we define ‘success’ when we are seeking to create a ‘successful’ educational provision for pupils with ASD?
3) How do the practices of specialist settings facilitate or constrain social inclusion of pupils with high functioning autism?
4) Could the model be applied to all educational settings?

1.3 Overview of the Methodology
Approximately 70-80 questionnaires were distributed via the co-ordinators of several ASD parent support groups across the North-West of England to elicit the views of pupils with ASD and their parents as to which factors they believed contribute to a successful educational provision for pupils with ASD. All of the questionnaire items link back to the main research questions and were constructed using the themes derived from the results of an earlier study undertaken by the author in 2007. Since I was hoping to elicit clear and detailed views the majority of the questions were open-ended, with closed
questions used where open-ended ones were considered unnecessary. Twenty-seven of the questionnaires were completed and returned. The data from the questionnaires was then analysed using the process of thematic analysis, the process of generating a thematic ‘map’ of all the data by sorting it into different themes. This data was then used to construct a hypothetical ‘model’ of good practice by identifying the main components of a setting which makes it ‘successful’. A setting for use as a case study was then identified from the suggestions provided by questionnaire respondents as to which settings they believed to be successful. Only a small number of settings were identified by more than one respondent, and a choice was then made on the basis of its geographical location in order to make the case study manageable in terms of time. The case study consisted of observations and interviews with a sample of three members of staff, three pupils and three parents to ascertain their perceptions about the factors which contribute to the school’s success as well as any limitations. This data was then analysed using thematic analysis and the themes compared with those from the hypothetical model to identify common and uncommon features and thereby ascertain the robustness of the model.

1.4 Overview of the Thesis

The thesis describes a research project aimed at generating a model of good practice for the purpose of being developed by the local authority where the researcher is employed as an EP to improve the educational experiences for pupils with ASD, in particular high school aged pupils. Firstly, an in-depth literature review was conducted in order to gain a greater understanding of the political and social factors as well as the narrower areas of individual experiences and problems associated with this population of pupils in schools. A hypothetical model of good practice was then constructed using the themes emerging from the views of the young people with ASD and their families as to which factors constitute good practice for supporting pupils with ASD. Its robustness was tested through a case study of a school deemed as being successful in supporting pupils with ASD. The findings are then discussed as to how they can be adapted for both the practical use of the Local Authority
and also for my daily work as an Educational Psychologist (EP). The limitations of the study are also discussed, as are ideas for further research.

1.5 Definitions

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an umbrella term introduced by Lorna Wing (1996) to encompass all the different subgroups within the autism spectrum, ranging from classic Kanner's autism to Asperger's Syndrome (AS). The term pervasive developmental disorder (PDD-NOS) is also included within this and refers to individuals who share aspects of autism but who do not demonstrate all the required behavioural features to meet the full criteria for a diagnosis of autism.

As one of the major classification systems (Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Diseases: DSM: American Psychiatric Association) is due for revision, there are increasing challenges to the way ASD is characterised in relation to an underpinning developmental triad. Wing (1996) had suggested a triad of difficulties in:

- Reciprocal social interaction and social and emotional understanding
- All aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication
- Flexibility in thinking and behaviour and social imagination

The constituent symptoms of this triad have been very useful in informing parents and staff how pupils on the spectrum are likely to require additional support, but there are now arguments that suggest that alternative groupings would be more reliable and valid e.g. Van Lang et al. (2006) suggest a triad that would have all the social difficulties as a single dimension then a new 'problems with play' dimension. Other studies have shown the overlaps with other diagnostic groups; for example, Barrett et al. (2004) demonstrated the overlap between autism and receptive language disorder and Klin et al. (1995) showed the similarities with those with Non-Verbal Learning Disorder. Another unresolved issue is how far sensory processing problems, that many
see as central to the condition, (Bogdashina, 2003), are in fact a core part of ASD.

There is a growing consensus that the broad category of ASD is the most pragmatically appropriate for planning and delivering services to children on the autistic spectrum (Department for Education and Skills: DfES, 2002; Jordan, Jones & Morgan, 2001). While the term ASD is useful, however, distinctions between subgroups, such as Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism (HFA) can be important as the differences between individuals within these subgroups may have different implications for services. Those with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome (AS), for example, may be more at risk of mental health problems during adolescence (Hebron & Humphrey, 2013). There is on-going debate and research into the distinctions between these subgroups and it is known that some children may not be correctly placed within the correct subgroup at diagnosis.

There is currently debate in many authorities, schools and agencies as to which term to use – autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or autism spectrum condition (ASC). Some local authorities have opted to change the term to ASC. It has been suggested by the Autism Research Centre in Cambridge that ASC might best be used by those in education and that ASD might best be used by those in health. It could be argued that changing labels will not achieve much if attitudes and resource allocation remain unchanged. In my view it would seem to be more helpful to focus upon increasing understanding of the autism spectrum and the variety within it and to try to develop fairer and more effective ways of resource allocation to support actual identified needs, rather than to define categories. For the purposes of this report, the more widely used term ASD will therefore be used.

1.6 Prevalence

As Jordan (2001) has pointed out, the broadening of the diagnostic category (from classical autism to ASD), to include a broader spectrum of both ability and degree of autism, has led to an enormous growth in the number of children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Prevalence rates
for childhood autism and other autistic spectrum disorders are believed by researchers in the UK to be approaching one per 100 of the general population (Baird et al, 2006). Based on a prevalence rate of 1 in 100, it is now estimated that approximately half a million individuals in Britain have been diagnosed with the condition and that 133,500 of these are children and young people under the age of 18 (NAS, 2009). This suggests, therefore, that most schools will have children on the autistic spectrum on their rolls and that most teachers can expect, at some point, to teach them. However, current exact figures do not exist on the actual number of children and adults on the autistic spectrum in an authority, or in the UK as a whole. The definitions and diagnostic criteria for the different subgroups within ASD are qualitative and largely dependent on observation and the skills and knowledge of those the child meets. There is no medical, biomedical or psychological test for ASD and so there is a possibility for under or over-identification. Prevalence figures depend on the assessment tools and methods used, and variations between studies will reflect methodological differences (Baird et al, 2006).

1.7 The Impact of Receiving a Medical Diagnosis
Perspectives on medical labelling vary across the inclusion literature. Two main perspectives exist: a ‘rights-based’ perspective that argues for an end to all educational segregation and calls for the inclusion of all children and young people; and the ‘needs-based’ perspective that draws attention to the lack of research evidence in support of mainstreaming and the potential dangers of exclusion that can arise from it (Lindsay 2007; Low 2007). Rights-based inclusionists argue that categories of disability and the labels used to identify them are not neutral or objective but are social constructions based upon what society consider as ‘normal’. Rights-based inclusionists also argue that these medical diagnoses highlight differences and lead to associations with specific identities (Graham 2006). In the case of ASD, these identities position children and young people as ‘deficient’ or ‘impaired’ which attracts negative judgments and lead to a ‘deficit model’ in which problems and learning come to be seen as problems solely within the child, rather than problems within the learning environment and wider contexts that could be altered (Ho, 2004).
However, in contrast, some ‘needs-based’ inclusionists argue that there is much to be gained by a diagnosis of autism, both for the individuals themselves but also for those who support them, including teachers (Jones et al, 2008). A diagnosis also triggers practical and financial support from a range of agencies, such as educational support services, enabling relevant adaptations to be made and appropriate interventions to be put in place to meet their needs (Jones et al, 2008). However, this can only happen if ‘difference’ is recognised (Graham, 2006).

Though a consensus has not yet emerged on this debate, its existence alone is highly significant in terms of its impact upon pedagogy and intervention. For example, rights-based inclusionists reject the idea of ‘Special Pedagogy’ for groups of learners as they imply that these learners need ‘special’ teachers in ‘special’ contexts and that this enables mainstream teachers to absolve themselves from the responsibility of teaching and supporting them (Florian 2007). They argue that this reinforces exclusionary practices. There are further arguments that, in specific reference to ASD, the needs associated with learners with ASD are shared by many other learners who do not have ASD but who present with mild difficulties within one of areas of the triad of impairments (i.e. a difficulty with communication, social interaction or flexibility of thought and imagination) (Davis & Florian, 2004). This strengthens the arguments against labelling and specialist educational settings.

However, needs-based inclusionists would argue that there is a crucial difference between a presenting problem and the underlying reason for the problem and therefore certain blanket interventions for say, social interaction difficulties, would not necessarily be appropriate for pupils with ASD. Research also recognises the fact that not all teachers have the necessary level of understanding to recognise the ‘ASD-content’ of the behaviour and that autism can often be a ‘hidden condition’ (Frith, 2003). Since many of these children ‘look’ like others, it is easily assumed that they think and process like others and have the same underlying difficulties. However, Jordan (2005) would argue that children and young people diagnosed with ASD have a unique and distinct way of thinking, communicating and
interacting that can ‘interfere with functioning and distort development’ (p 111). These arguments therefore suggest that a diagnosis is imperative to implement appropriate intervention for each individual. Ravet (2009) suggested that:

Teachers who do not understand the diagnosis of autism will find it difficult to anticipate, recognise, understand and address the degree of distortion of development they are dealing with……… thus without access to knowledge and understanding of autism, such teachers will make the mistake of seeing the surface behaviours of the child in isolation. They will fail to see that this is simply the tip of an iceberg underneath which sits not only a constellation of communication difficulties but their interaction with the other areas of the triad (p.675).

HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE 2006) also acknowledges this;

The challenges facing education and other professionals, and the young people (on the spectrum) whose needs are being addressed, are considerable. The key issue is to see past the presenting issue, often behavioural in nature, to the communication disorders beyond that and to find out what works for each individual concerned. (2006, iii).

This suggests that teachers may not always recognise the specific needs and difficulties of a child and young person with autism, which in turn could potentially lead to exclusion by limiting teaching and learning when using more generalised pedagogies.

1.8 Summary
This chapter has focused upon the aims of the study and the rationale for embarking upon it. It is evident that there has been a significant increase in the number of children and young people diagnosed with an ASD and, with the push towards inclusion, a significant increase in the number of these pupils accessing mainstream schools. The following chapter considers the
literature surrounding the experiences of pupils with ASD and highlights some of the barriers to learning and problems experienced by some pupils with ASD such as bullying, social isolation and loneliness. It also considers the evidence available on different types of educational provision and whether the characteristics of the provision received by pupils differ according to whether they attend a mainstream school with or without a specialist ASD resource base.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Interventions
Given the diversity within the spectrum and between individuals, there is no evidence to suggest that a single educational intervention is useful for all children on the autism spectrum, and there is no single intervention that would on its own be sufficient to meet all the needs of a particular child on the autism spectrum (Jordan, 2008; Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006). Education needs to be individualised, to allow for different needs and for different teaching goals at different times. There is a consensus (e.g. The National Autism Centre, NAC, 2011) that there is an evidence base in education for interventions that:

- are based on individual assessment
- involve parents/carers
- are behavioural
- focus on social understanding and communication
- are developmental and structured, using visual supports

2.2 The Range of Provision for Pupils with ASD
Through my role as an Educational Psychologist with a specialism in the area of autism, it has become apparent that Local Authorities have responded in different ways in terms of the placements they have established and funded. The NAS (2009) survey cites the following provision:

- mainstream schools with or without additional adult support
- generic special schools or units for pupils with learning disabilities with or without additional support
- specialist schools
- specialist units or classes which are specific to the autism spectrum, within a mainstream school. Pupils on the autism spectrum might be in integrated classes throughout the school but have a designated base where they can be taught for some of the time (resourced provision).
- advisory /outreach teams for pupils on the autism spectrum
In the Local Authority where I practice as an Educational Psychologist, there is no specialist provision for pupils with ASD and the fact that other neighbouring authorities do have specialist provision is increasingly leading to confusion, and sometimes distress and anger for parents who are not able to access services they would like in their area. This is consistent with increasing numbers of testimonies of children, young people and their families of their difficult experiences in mainstream schools. It is leading to some parents and professionals to question the efficacy of mainstreaming for some children and young people with ASD and to argue for a wider and more flexible range of educational provision. Increasingly, the Local Authority is having to provide funding for children to attend schools in different authorities, and there are some children who are attending residential schools in a different part of the country in order to get their needs met. There are also rising rates of exclusions, bullying incidents, school refusals, depression and other mental health problems.

There is little evidence as yet, to suggest what the relative benefits are of each type of placement. Many assumptions are made about the value of mainstream or special or specialist placements in the absence of firm evidence. There is little evidence for which pupils benefit most: from mainstream or specialist provision or how best to support inclusion. At the moment this appears to be being assessed on an individual basis on what is known of the pupil’s needs and the resources potentially available.

Specialist provision for autism includes schools, units or classes which have been specifically set up for pupils on the autism spectrum and where the majority on roll are on the autism spectrum. This category also includes mainstream schools which may have been designated as having an autism spectrum focus, and may house a specialist unit or resource base within it for which the children and young people with autism can access to varying degrees, depending on their level of need and also the philosophy of the school. Resource bases can offer a well-graded progression of inclusive experiences matched to individual need and married with training and support for mainstream staff (Hesmondhalgh and Breakey, 2001; Jordan, 2005).
2.3 Inclusion and Integration

The focus on inclusion in education over the past decade means that many children and young people with ASD are now taught in mainstream classrooms rather than in special units and schools (AET, 2008). The Autism Education Trust (AET, 2008) found that 41% of pupils with a diagnosis of ASD are educated within a mainstream school, indicating that it is crucial that teachers and support staff have adequate skills and knowledge to be able to provide an inclusive educational experience for this growing population of children. Contact with typically developing peers is thought to be crucial in assisting children with ASD to develop social and communication skills, but physical placement in a mainstream school alone is not necessarily sufficient for successful socialization and inclusion. Literature highlights the important differences between integration and inclusion. The term integration is often used to describe merely the placement of a child within a setting, which could simply be locational (i.e. at the school but with little or no involvement with typical peers); social (i.e. involvement with typical peers at break times only) or functional integration (i.e. synonymous with inclusion – whereby the child will work and play together with typical peers). For inclusion to take place, educational provision must adapt itself according to the child’s needs (Batten 2005). Where training and resource needs are not met, the principle of inclusion is undermined. It will lead to integration without social inclusion or educational progress at best and destructive behaviour and exclusion at worst. (Barnard et al, 2000).

The AET’s definition of inclusion in schools suggests that making adjustments to the school to acknowledge and address the particular needs of the individual pupil on the autistic spectrum is crucial:

School inclusion is the process of including and educating a pupil within a school, (mainstream or special) where the school is able to recognise and assess the pupil’s particular needs and is willing and able to be flexible in how the curriculum is delivered and to adapt the routines and physical environment the pupil is expected to operate in (AET, 2008 p20).
Inclusion, as defined above, requires staff training and information on the autism spectrum to understand why modifications and differentiation are necessary. Simply placing a child on the autism spectrum in a school is locational integration not inclusion. Staff and others need to try to ensure that the child or young person is genuinely included in work and play opportunities and care needs to be taken where additional adult support is provided that the child is not excluded from opportunities for peer-peer interaction (Batten, 2005).

Humphrey (2008) suggests that inclusion refers to the quality of educational experiences both academically and socially, with a specific focus on the levels of participation, acceptance and achievement.

Ochs et al (2001) distinguished between positive and negative inclusion: finding that in many classrooms a form of neglect occurred in which others sometimes disregarded or paid no attention to the child with ASD. This stemmed in part from the partial invisibility of pupils’ social and cognitive difficulties, and partly from the teachers’ and classmates’ lack of preparedness to recognise and attend to these difficulties. The study also concluded that those children whose diagnosis was fully disclosed enjoyed more consistent social support in the classroom and on the playground.

The Autism Education Trust (AET, 2008) examined current practice for supporting those on the autistic spectrum and found that in some mainstream schools, pupils with ASD were expected to fit into existing routines and structures, and that this might be insisted upon, with distressing results for the children, the staff and their families. The study highlighted how some staff assumed that a pupil will eventually behave ‘normally’. However, since being on the autistic spectrum is largely a disability in social communication, it is not likely pupils on the autistic spectrum will behave like other pupils in many respects, and I feel that to have this expectation could potentially lead to conflict and distress.
2.4 Parental Voice
Research involving parents of children on the autism spectrum (Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers and Yuille, 2006), found that close to a half of the parents they interviewed felt they did not receive adequate support or information to make an informed choice about the options available for their son/daughter in terms of educational provision, and most said that the choice was very limited. Out of area placement, long travelling time to school and the need for social and emotional support were cited as areas of concern, as were needs for improved school staff training, social and emotional development and transition planning. Difficulties in being heard led to a high reported level of dissatisfaction, including many parents reporting to Tribunal proceedings (of whom 79% were successful).

The AET study found that some parents and parent organisations have concerns that the delegation of SEN funding can result in schools not using the money for the purposes for which it is intended. This signals the need for transparency and a discussion with parents as to how money is allocated with reassurances that its use will be checked. One particular parent from the study expressed concerns that those in their LA involved in making decisions relating to assessments of their child were the same people involved in managing SEN budgets. The parent suggests that this potentially gives rise to a conflict of interest which may not work in favour of the child. Several parents from the study felt that the LAs were not listening to them, but were instead more concerned about their budgets. These themes were echoed in a report from the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee: Special Educational Needs (2006). In its submission to the Committee (NAS, 2005 paragraph 51), the National Autistic Society expressed its concerns, drawn from comments received through its advocacy service, that the delegation of funding to schools is making it more difficult for children with complex needs to access support.

2.5 Barriers to Inclusion
Whilst there is some evidence that pupils with ASD can benefit both academically (McGregor & Campbell, 2001) and socially (Harrower & Dunlap,
from being placed in mainstream settings, the majority of research findings suggest otherwise. At present, pupils with ASD are considered to be more difficult to include than other groups of learners (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). Teaching pupils with ASD may require specific adaptations and approaches that not all teachers are familiar with (Leach & Duffy, 2009). The literature tells us repeatedly what happens when teachers are not trained to understand the needs of a child or young person with autism. The outcome is generally that many learners will fail to meet their potential and will experience isolation, frustration and exclusion and their teachers will be thrown into frustration and stress (Batten & Daly, 2006; Jones et al 2008).

Research indicates that teachers generally have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of pupils with ASD (Humphrey & Symes, 2011a) yet report tensions with dealing with the difficulties they have in social and emotional understanding. These tensions can determine the quality of teacher-pupil interactions (Emam & Farrell, 2009), making teachers less likely to have positive relationships with them. Robertson, Chamberlain & Kasari (2003) found that the more negative these relationships, the less likely the pupils are to be socially accepted by their peers.

2.5.1 Difficulties arising from the school environment

The secondary school environment itself can be a considerable source of stress and anxiety for several reasons. It is a setting where students move frequently between classes, each with its own different members of staff and composition of students and therefore for learners with ASD who have a need for order and predictability, this can be extremely stressful (Humphrey & Lewis 2008). It is widely recognised that pupils with ASD can experience sensory sensitivities and that within the school environment one that causes most distress is sound sensitivity. Clinical observation and personal accounts of individuals with ASD suggest that there are three types of noise be very sensitive to sounds: sudden unexpected sounds, high-pitched continuous
noise and confusing, complex sounds such as occur in the school corridors at transition times (Atwood, 1998).

2.5.2 Behaviour and exclusions and the autism spectrum

Pupils with ASD are amongst the most likely to be excluded from school (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2005; DfES, 2006) with 21% being excluded at least once (Batten, 2005). Behaviours are frequently exhibited by children and young people with an ASD that present as challenging to other people and it is not always clear to people, particularly those without a good understanding of autism, why the behaviours have occurred, but many appear to compare the behaviours with typically developing peers (Robertson et al, McGregor & Campbell, 2001). However, as already discussed earlier, research widely indicates that school is a stressful and anxiety provoking place for many such pupils and it is accepted that current practices within mainstream schools may contribute to disaffection and exclusion among such pupils (Connor 2000).

The DfE’s SEN Information Act (2013) reported that 4.8% of pupils with a diagnosis of ASD received a fixed term exclusion in the 2011/12 academic year. In a survey published in 2011 by the NAS entitled Great Expectations it was found that 17% of children with SEN had received a fixed term exclusion from school and for half of these children (48%) this has happened on three or more occasions.

The Audit Commission’s: ‘Against the Odds’ (2010) states that less than 1 in 5 of the LAs responding to their national survey said they collect data on permanent exclusions by type of need. A recommendation followed that:

*All LAs collect data on permanent exclusions of pupils with statements, by type of need (p28).*

In 2006, drawing from a survey of its members, of whom 1300 responded, the National Autistic Society’s: ‘Make Schools Make Sense’ (Reid & Batten, 2006) reported that:
• 1 in every 5 children in this sample on the autistic spectrum had been excluded from school
• 67% of these had been excluded more than once.

Whilst this is probably an over-estimate of the actual percentage (as those who respond to surveys on provision are more likely to be those who want to voice their concerns, rather than parents who are happy with provision), discussions with LA officers and ASD outreach teams do report that children on the autism spectrum are more likely to be excluded than children with other types of SEN. Parents reported the two biggest reasons for exclusion related to their child’s behaviour which was described as disruptive, unacceptable, noisy, violent and aggressive and/or a lack of staff training and understanding of ASD. The report suggests that staff without much knowledge of ASD might misinterpret the behaviour of children by comparing them through a typical lens. Those who understand the autism spectrum are more likely to use terms such as frightened, highly anxious, stressed or sensorily challenged. A parent from the AET study suggests that:

*We need to view challenging behaviour as a panic attack* (p41).

This is a very helpful reframe as it suggests that support rather than sanction is required.

### 2.5.3 Social Support and Bullying

The opportunity to interact with typically developing peers is often cited as one of the main benefits of children with SEN being educated in mainstream schools. They have the opportunity to develop their own social skills whilst at the same time their peer group have the opportunity to become more accepting of children who are ‘different’ (Boutot & Bryant, 2005; Kasari & Rotherham-Fuller, 2007). However, children and young people with ASD experience considerable difficulty with social communication and forming and maintaining friendships and therefore in reality social inclusion does not
appear to be happening and pupils with ASD report concerns about peer relationships (Connor 2000). They have fewer friends, experience more rejection from peers and are more likely to spend time alone at break times (Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Evidence suggests that attempts to engage their peer groups can be successful in promoting peer inclusion (Gus, 2000; Nind & Wearmouth, 2006). Ochs et al. (2013) suggest that their levels of social inclusion depend primarily on the approaches of their schoolmates rather than their teacher. Bullying, widely defined as “the systematic abuse of power” (Smith, 2004, p.98), can be seen as a key indicator of social exclusion in school. Kloosterman et al (2013) found that the incidents of being bullied were higher for adolescents with ASD than among adolescents in three other disability categories. They also found that those students with ASD and without conversational ability may experience a degree of ‘institutional protection within the school setting’ and that those who received the majority of their lessons in mainstream classes were more likely to experience victimisation. Similarly, Rowley et al (2012) found that teachers report that children with an ASD who were less socially impaired in mainstream schools experienced higher levels of victimization than more socially impaired children. They suggested that strategies are required to support and improve the social interaction skills of children with ASD to enable them to develop and maintain meaningful peer friendships and avoid victimisation.

Pupils with ASD begin to stand out from the crowd a lot more during adolescents and begin to be perceived as ‘odd’ or ‘strange’, making them easy targets for bullies (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a). They may also be less likely to report incidents of bullying to school staff because their social cognition problems can lead them to believe that others are already aware of what has happened or because they simply may not understand that they are actually being bullied, particularly with the more subtle forms of bullying (Moore, 2007). Pupils with ASD may also lack the necessary resilience to help them overcome the problems associated with bullying and the thought of school itself can become distressing (Tantam, 2000).
Humphrey & Symes (2010) examined the reported frequency of bullying in school and the levels of social support for pupils with ASD, pupils with dyslexia and pupils without any special educational needs (SEN). As predicted, pupils with ASD reported higher frequencies of bullying than either pupils with dyslexia and pupils with no SEN. Secondly, the pupils with ASD reported lower levels of social support from parents, classmates and friends, but not teachers, than either of the two reference groups. They also found that receiving support from classmates was the most important way of reducing incidents of bullying.

The consequences of increased bullying among young people with ASD were examined by the NAS (2006) in their survey of 1400 families affected by ASD. They found that more than 80% of their respondents said that the bullying had damaged their child’s self-esteem, over 60% reported a negative impact on their mental health and over 70% stated that it had a negative impact upon social skills and relationships. This therefore suggests that bullying leads to damaged social relationships, making pupils more isolated, which in turn increases their risk of bullying even further because they then lack the protective social networks that can shield them from harm.

2.6 Use of Teaching Assistants (TAs)
Teaching Assistants are often the primary resource for supporting pupils with ASD and are considered vital to achieving successful inclusion for them (Rose 2001). TAs can provide support at transition times and moving around school as well as in-class support (Alston & Kilham, 2004). TAs may also have a more positive attitude towards their pupil than their teachers due to a greater understanding of their individual needs and difficulties (Emam & Farrell, 2009). However, research has found that TAs have little and inconsistent impact on overall attainment scores (Howes, 2003) and some studies report that the more support a pupil receives, the less academic progress they make (Blatchford et al, 2009). A high level of TA support may lead to reduced attention from the subject teachers (Blatchford et al, 2009) and may also reduce their independent learning skills (Howes, 2003) and can lead to social exclusion (Alston & Kilham, 2004; McVitie, 2009). Research suggests that the
relationships between teachers and TAs can determine the impact they have (Groom & Rose, 2005). Russel et al (2005) suggest a mismatch between the initial training TAs receive and the actual demands of their role. TAs themselves report concerns that generic ASD training is not helpful and that they need more joint planning with the teachers they support (Symes & Humphrey, 2011). It has also been found that the impact of TAs can vary depending upon how they are used within a school. Those TAs who are assigned to deliver specific interventions have a more negative impact on pupil performance than those who are not (Farrell et al, 2010). Similarly TAs who work within small groups may be more effective than those working with individual pupils (Howes, 2005).

2.7 Studies into the experiences of pupils with ASD in schools
Research does appear to suggest that the ability of schools to support pupils with ASD has arguably not kept pace with such rising numbers of this population in mainstream schools. Teachers and teaching assistants must have understanding and working knowledge of the school-related social, behavioural/emotional, cognitive, academic, sensory, and motor characteristics associated with ASD so that they can effectively meet these pupils’ complex needs. However, research has found that although many teachers say they are committed to the philosophy of inclusion, they do not feel they have the necessary training or support to provide effectively for pupils with ASD (Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari, 2003).

One possible reason why schools are failing to adequately support pupils with ASD is highlighted by Simpson and Myles (1998). They suggest that pupils with ASD may present as entirely ordinary to an external observer, despite the presence of marked social and communication difficulties. For example, aggressive behaviour is not a direct trait of ASD, but such behaviours may be a secondary issue arising from frustration, anxiety or sensory difficulties. As already mentioned, Frith (2003) suggests that not all teachers have the necessary level of understanding to recognise the ‘ASD-content’ of the behaviour and that autism can often be a ‘hidden condition’ (Frith, 2003). Since many of these children ‘look’ like others, it is easily assumed that they
think and process like others and have the same underlying difficulties. Thus school staff do not always recognise that the behaviours are from the autism within the behaviour.

Jordan (2001) proposes that staff need to have a good understanding of each individual pupil’s needs and endeavour to differentiate tasks to accommodate the pupils’ understanding and learning style:

*A child with a severe visual impairment would not be placed in a school without low vision aids and mobility training. Similarly, a child in a wheelchair would not be asked to walk, yet a pupil on the autism spectrum is often expected to manage in school without these equivalent supports and to be able to act and respond as other typical children.* (p.56).

Many quotes from parents from the Autism Education Trust (AET) study (2008) imply that those schools who support their children well are those whose staff listen to the parents (because they know their child best), but who also take the time to broaden their knowledge and understanding of ASD in general but also of individual children’s particular needs.

Cohen (1998) describes individuals with autism as a highly studied population yet knowledge of autism is still incomplete. Cohen refers to the attempts to tap into the individuals’ own experiences of being autistic, whilst acknowledging the difficulty of gaining meaningful responses from individuals whose difficulties include communication. Nevertheless, Cohen quotes from autobiographical accounts of high functioning adults who describe their anxieties about a highly unpredictable world and a desire for stability and anger towards those who may seek to interrupt their long established routines and rituals. The common factor about these self-report studies, is that they have been written by adults who look back at their experiences as children or young people. Historically there has been very little research into children and young people’s own views about their educational experiences, yet in recent times, this has slowly begun to emerge.
2.8 Pupils’ own accounts and views of school

Governmental guidance has started to promote pupil participation: ‘Children and young people with special educational needs have a unique knowledge of their own needs and circumstances and their own views about what sort of help they would like in order to make the most of their education.’ (DfES, 2001, p27). Thus it is becoming increasingly accepted that ‘insider’ accounts provide professionals with a valuable source of information when developing practices (Billington, 2006).

Studies have recently begun to emerge which have sought to gain some insight into the opinions and experiences of a sample of young people diagnosed with AS. Connor (2007) interviewed a sample of young people with a diagnosis of AS who were attending their local high schools, as well as interviewing the Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) from the schools.

Some of the main issues highlighted by the pupils themselves were:
- the lack of social confidence and anxiety about social interactions with peers
- the lack of structure during lunchtimes
- the dislike of subjects that require group discussions
- dislike of topics those whose relevance is not clear

The main issues described by the SENCOs were:
- their observably idiosyncratic style, leading to their limited social acceptance
- being isolated or unoccupied at break and lunch times
- being targets for bullying
- difficulty in ensuring all staff are aware of the varying aspects of ASD and willingness of staff to modify demands as appropriate
Some of the limitations of the study involve the very nature of the difficulties of individuals with ASD: i.e. social interaction and communication difficulties. To be specific, many may experience difficulties with the following:

- recognising and making sense of their emotions, as well as attempting to express them verbally.
- providing an accurate and well-balanced account of their experiences due to a tendency to focus upon small detail rather than to view the whole, bigger picture (Central Coherence difficulties).
- discerning relevant from irrelevant information. They may persistently go off on tangents and talk at length about, for instance, one particular recent incident that may be bothering him/her.
- Egocentricity – not listening to others or recognising their intentions – this may affect both the balance and breadth of the interview, but also their interpretation of events and the actions/words of others.

One-off interviews with only the young people themselves may therefore not produce a broad and balanced picture of his/her experiences in school.

Another limitation to consider is the nature of the questions posed to the individuals – the majority of which were factual and very closed in structure, thus preventing further discussion or the provoking of further insight into the nature and sources of the difficulties experienced.

A recent study by Tobias (2009) involved three focus groups with Year 9 and 11 students and their parents to explore current practice on supporting pupils with ASD in secondary schools. The study found that the most helpful support for these pupils was:

1) The provision of targeted support at key transition times – Effective transition planning reduced student anxiety and ensured that essential information about the student was passed on to key members of staff.
2) The provision of mentors for students – As social understanding is a key area of difficulty for students with ASD, having a consistent adult to help them unravel why something was said could prevent the escalation of disputes and help students to move forward.

3) The availability of quiet, calmer spaces to remove anxiety – This gave students a greater sense of security and reduced anxiety levels, enabling them to better manage the school day.

4) Good communication between staff and parents.

5) Staff knowledge of ASD and of individual students – A sound knowledge of ASD can impact upon a student’s education and a staff’s ability to problem-solve and plan well. A common problem that students with ASD face in schools is being labelled “naughty” or “disrespectful”.

6) Individual, tailor-made support – As every individual presents with a unique pattern of characteristics there are therefore educational implications for planning in accordance with an individual’s specific pattern of strengths and difficulties.

In my opinion, the use of focus groups with young people with ASD could potentially invalidate the data. This particular group of people, whose main difficulties tend to be in the area of social communication, may have difficulty taking turns in conversation, listening to the views of others and may actually feel more stressed and pressurised within a group situation.

Humphrey & Lewis (2008) interviewed pupils, parents and school staff and also undertook observations of the pupils within different contexts of the schools for the purpose of highlighting which school practices acted as facilitators or barriers to students’ learning and participation. They found that, consistent with literature in this area (e.g. Booth & Ainscow, 2002), the ethos of the school was crucial in determining the extent to which government policy and guidance was followed, as was the commitment from senior management.
staff. However, although they found substantial evidence of integration (physical placement in mainstream classes) they did not find proportionate evidence of inclusion in the sense of acceptance and participation of the pupils with ASD. They found that in some schools there was a significant gap between their ‘inclusion rhetoric’ and ‘classroom reality’.

As with both of these studies that have attempted to use ‘insider’ accounts i.e. from the pupils themselves to increase understanding of their experiences in school, it is important to remember, however, that whilst useful, the pupils’ views are only a part of a larger picture, and any full account of the inclusion process should also explore, for instance, the views of other stakeholders (e.g. teachers and parents) in addition to actual documentation of practice within classrooms.

The large-scale research study carried out by the AET (2008) aimed at identifying the challenges in ensuring good educational outcomes for children and young people on the autistic spectrum from the perspectives of parents/carers, providers and commissioners in local authorities and children and young people themselves. The study involved questionnaires and discussions with a sample of individuals in the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors, questionnaires and discussions with parents/carers and children/young people and analysis of relevant reports, documents and guidance. Data was collected from 10 geographical regions across the whole of England. The pupils’ own accounts of their high school experiences elicited valuable information. All of the pupils highlighted their social difficulties as the main problem. All said they have problems with at least some other pupils and also their teachers, and some suggested that autism awareness for both students and staff would help. One pupil said he would like “staff to fully understand me” (p.44) and about other pupils he said: “Teach them about autism from year 1 so they understand how I feel and cope so they can leave me alone.” (p.44).

One of the pupils from the AET study had written an account that was published in ‘Bright Futures’ in 2007. He was 14 years old and had Asperger’s
Syndrome. Typically he managed in primary school even though he was not diagnosed, but his problems became more apparent in secondary school where his behaviour was viewed as deliberately difficult and disruptive and he was regularly punished. This short account shows how important it is to obtain the views of children and young people and how able some children and young people are to give us their views:

*My Asperger’s Syndrome makes it hard for me to get into new routines and I have a very strong sense of smell that makes me get sick a lot. In primary school it was the same routine over and over again, but that was fine with me. However, when I got to secondary school it was the exact opposite. I didn’t know everyone there and they expected high standards from me. All the changes in routines and strong smells made it hard for me and I used to go under desks and disrupt lessons. The teachers just thought I was a troublemaker. They gave me detention and thought about putting me in a special school…………Then I met my new foster carer and we started to work on how to calm down and how not to disrupt a lesson……..I now get the right support and am improving all the time. I would hate to go to special school but for it to work properly each student must have the right type of support. (p134)*

The professionals’ views (including Educational Psychologists, Paediatricians, Specialist Teachers) on challenges and practice relating to the autism spectrum from this AET study provided a valuable perspective that has not been sought in any other published study in this particular area. It was found that the most commonly stated concern was the need to develop the knowledge and understanding of school staff and also the need to change staff attitudes towards such children. Several respondents were concerned about the intolerance of the behaviours exhibited by pupils with ASD and said they found it hard to explain to staff that: “many behaviours arise as a result of their ASD and not by choice.” (p.45). Several respondents referred to curriculum issues and inappropriate priorities and felt that schools were often too inflexible in their policy and ethos around curriculum issues, not being willing to make exceptions for children who had very different needs.
Respondents were asked to state what their wish list was for services for pupils on the autism spectrum. Not surprisingly, the most frequent wishes were to have more specialist autism-specific staff in all sectors, more funding and more specialist provision, particularly in mainstream schools.

2.9 Research evidence on different types of educational placement
There is little evidence as yet, to suggest what the relative benefits are of each type of placement. Many assumptions are made about the value of mainstream or specialist placements in the absence of such evidence. Only one or two studies have compared the progress of similar pupils across different types of setting as such research is widely documented as problematic e.g. Jones & Jordan (2008) state that such data cannot reliably be comparable.

Parental satisfaction with mainstream school provision for children with ASD is consistently found to be higher when children are placed in autism-specific resource bases than when they are placed in a mainstream school without a resource base or in a generic SEN resource base (Barnard, Prior and Potter, 2000; Batten, Corbett and Rosenblatt et al, 2006). Whereas 72% of parents whose children were in mainstream schools considered this provision the ideal option for their child, 43% of parents whose children were in mainstream schools without a resource base would prefer a resource base placement for their child (AET 2008).

However, it is not clear whether schools with ASD resource bases offer provision that is qualitatively different from that available in other mainstream placements. Parental satisfaction has been found to be associated with perceptions of the knowledge of teaching staff, the level and flexibility of support available and the quality of home-school communication across these two types of mainstream provision for ASD (Barnard et al, 2000). However, these same factors are also found to differentiate between satisfied and dissatisfied parents of pupils with ASD attending mainstream schools without specialist resource bases (Whitaker, 2007).
Little research has been carried out into the effect of setting in ASD provision, yet this would appear important in building an evidence base that can inform intervention and provision decisions for children with ASD. A recent small-scale study by Charters (2009) aimed to provide an insight into the experiences of pupils with AS within a) a mainstream high school and b) within a specialist resourced provision set within a mainstream high school. It was believed that eliciting the views of students, their parents and teaching staff from two different settings would give a richer picture in terms of what is and is not effective in terms of supporting these students. Semi-structured interviews were used as a tool for gathering data to gain an insight into their own personal experiences and to establish a greater understanding of what school life is like for these pupils in the two different educational settings: a mainstream school with additional support and a resourced provision: a specialist ‘unit’ for pupils with a diagnosis of AS who are believed to be academically able to access the mainstream curriculum but who require additional support for their emotional and social needs. The ‘unit’ was situated within a mainstream high school and the pupils accessed varying degrees of mainstream lessons (ranging from approximately 30% to approximately 60%). In the ‘unit’ they received teaching of those curriculum subjects they currently felt unable to access with a whole class and they also accessed individualised programmes to develop such skills as social interaction, social awareness, emotional literacy and life skills. Firstly, the study confirmed the fact that school life can be extremely difficult for this particular group of individuals, and that they are faced with a wide range of challenges and barriers to success on a regular basis. Secondly, secondary education can be successful for this group of students, but the degree of success appears to depend upon a number of factors, such as: knowledge and understanding of school staff, the ability to alleviate stress and anxiety for individuals, teaching coping strategies and the ability of staff to attempt to learn about the individual pupils’ needs and provide tailor-made support. All of these effective support strategies are examples of inclusive practice, where the emphasis is on flexible planning rather than “cure”. Parents and staff in the study talked extensively about the need to meet the needs of each individual child rather than to apply blanket strategies. This is consistent with the findings of Ainscow and Lindsay (1997):
Teaching pupils with autism is not about helping a child to “catch up” or to become normal”. An important shift in SEN generally has been the move from attempting to change the child to fit or to conform to the school system (often referred to as integration) to one where the staff change the school environment to accommodate the child (referred to as inclusion). (p56)

However, some parents and members of staff also suggested that there was a need to provide a balance between providing support structures for the young person and also teaching coping strategies so that the pupil can learn to overcome some of his/her difficulties him/herself. Furthermore, the majority of perceptions, particularly those of parents, were that school staff were more able to implement these strategies within a specialist setting like the resourced provision in the study (a specialist unit situated within a mainstream school) than within a mainstream school that does not have this additional supporting unit.

A recent study by Frederickson, Jones & Lang (2010) investigated characteristics of the provision available to pupils with ASD in mainstream schools with and without a specialist ASD resource base. The aim was to establish whether the characteristics of the provision received by pupils with ASD attending mainstream school differ according to whether they attend a school with or without a specialist ASD resource base. Because access to resource base provision requires an SEN statement, this research focused on pupils who had both an ASD diagnosis and a statement, and sought to answer the following questions:

1. Do the characteristics of the provision received by pupils with ASD attending a mainstream school differ according to whether they attend a school with or without a specialist ASD resource base?
2. What strategies are used by educational professionals working with pupils with ASD, and do these differ across mainstream and resource base settings?
3. To what extent do differences between placement types reflect the factors associated with parental satisfaction?

Information was gathered from semi-structured interviews with staff in 26 schools: 7 in schools with an ASD resource base and 19 in schools without an ASD resource base. Staff were asked about levels of inclusion and support, about the strategies used to support pupils with ASD, both at individual and whole school level, and about changes considered desirable. Interviewees were also asked to describe how they would respond to scenarios depicting situations that are commonly experienced in working with pupils who have ASD.

Findings identified two main differences in the characteristics of the provision received in the two types of setting. The first was the proportion of time spent in mainstream lessons, which was considerably greater in schools without an ASD resource base (between 75% and 100%, compared to 0 to 100% in schools with a resource base). This may well be related to the higher mean academic performance levels of the pupils in schools without an ASD resource base. However, it may also be related to the higher availability of support staff as necessary to support all participation in mainstream schools. Full-time (25 hours per week) TA support was available for half of the pupils in schools without a resource base and for a third of those in schools with a resource base. Findings also highlighted a marked difference between levels of staff training and expertise in the area of ASD. In the schools with a resourced base, almost all staff had received some ASD training in comparison to fewer than half of the teachers and half of the SENCOs in schools without a resource base. Schools with resource bases also presented as more ASD-friendly environments with clear signs, symbols and photos in communal areas as well as in areas where the pupils are taught. Although there was a high level of home-school collaboration in promoting skill generalisation across both types of placement, collaboration on behaviour management was much more common in schools with resource bases. Schools with resource bases also reported a higher percentage of supplemental communication strategies (e.g. PECS) used in school.
Findings confirmed that the features of mainstream placements identified as important by parents of pupils with ASD were more likely to be found in schools with ASD resource bases. However, there were several limitations of this study. Information was collected from 26 different schools, yet only one source from each school was interviewed, and in each case this source was the member of staff responsible for making the provision. The results may therefore be subject to bias due to acquiring only one individual’s perspective and the possibility of that person having an agenda of promoting his/her own work. The results would have been more objective and a different picture may have been obtained had a wider range of sources been used and had the views of parents and pupils themselves been included. Also the study purely focuses on inputs, the provision the pupils receive, and if conclusions are to be drawn about the effectiveness of these inputs and therefore the success of these resource bases, evidence should include pupil progress in terms of academic, emotional, social and behavioural progress, and/or the views of the pupils themselves as to how appropriate and effective the inputs are.

However, despite these limitations, the results are consistent with other studies including those that rely upon parents as informants (Barnard et al., 2000) and with those using multi-method approaches (DES, 2006; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). Emerging literature therefore does appear to be suggesting that the needs of many pupils’ with ASD are more likely to be met in schools with a specialist resourced provision, yet such pupils are unlikely to have their needs met simply by being placed in a setting deemed to provide specialist support.

2.10 Summary
Clear patterns have emerged across the research discussed in this chapter, in relation to the vast range of difficulties experienced by pupils with ASD in schools, the dissatisfaction felt by parents and the lack of staff expertise and understanding of ASD. Research has very much focused upon the limitations of educational provision for these pupils and highlights the difficulties and
‘gaps’ in provision yet there is very little evidence to highlight what good practice actually looks like. I was also unclear about what ‘success’ actually means. How would we know if provision was a ‘success’, and how could we measure this? The methodology outlined in the following chapter highlights the aims and purposes of this study, the methods of data collection and data analysis, as well as the rationale behind choosing these methods. The chapter also explains how the research seeks to ‘re-frame’ problems and seek out examples of good practice in order to construct an evidence-based model of successful provision for pupils with ASD.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I begin this chapter by discussing the main aims of the study and rationale for the chosen methodology as well as my role as researcher. I go on to describe the data gathering techniques implemented including questionnaires, case-study design, semi-structured interviews and observations. I also provide details of the participants and clear steps of each procedure and I conclude with ethical considerations and the methods chosen for the analysis of the data.

3.1 General Considerations
The research study seeks to develop an evidence-based model of successful provision for pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This is necessary not least in view of the need for accountability to the external body funding the doctoral programme and the anticipated provision, but also because it is important as Educational Psychologists to demonstrate the effectiveness of work we undertake.

Research in the field of education is beset with methodological difficulties. Establishing the reliability and validity of data, respecting ethical considerations and agreeing on terminology are but some of the obstacles to be faced. As Lindsay (2007) points out, Educational Psychologists work in complex situations where variables are notoriously difficult to control. On the one hand, as researchers, they are expected to be rigorous in their efforts to undertake controlled studies, essential to the establishment of an interventions efficacy (Frederickson, 2002), but on the other hand they are reminded that the positivist tradition of research does not sit with the context in which they work. (Lindsay, 2007). Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon (1998) suggest that the processes of change in educational contexts are subtle and more likely to be revealed by interpretive/constructivist methods. They recommend the use of mixed methodologies when trying to analyse complex phenomena such as classrooms.
3.2 Aims and Objectives

In the local authority where I am employed as an Educational Psychologist, there is currently no specialist provision for pupils with ASD and further information was requested as to how pupils with ASD can best be supported. The Local Authority particularly wanted to consider the provision for high school pupils as within this particular population there have been an increasing number of reported incidents of permanent exclusions, severe bullying, school refusals, depression and other mental health problems. In order to increase the likelihood of the success of ASD provision the authority has requested further research be undertaken to elicit a clear picture of ‘what good looks like’ i.e. which factors constitute a model of successful provision.

Therefore the main aim of the research study was to develop an evidence-based model of successful educational provision for pupils with ASD, specifically high school pupils, although it was anticipated that the model could be applied to primary settings. In order to initiate the development of this model, the views and perceptions of ‘what successful provision looks like’ were sought from high school pupils with ASD and their parents via questionnaires. This purpose of this initial step of the study was to elicit factors which the respondents feel constitute to successful provision. These factors were then used to develop the components of the model of good practice. This model could then be ‘tested’ for robustness by carrying out a case study of an educational setting judged by parents and pupils to be successful.

I felt that the views of the young people and their parents were crucial. They are the ones who know what it is truly like to have ASD and what everyday challenges they have to face in an educational setting but also what supports them in this context. What do they view as a successful provision? How do they interpret what has happened to them and how could it have been different? How can they communicate their views to myself as researcher? What do they see as important factors in contributing to a model of good practice?
3.3 My motivation for this particular work

The motivation for carrying out this piece of work comes from several sources. Firstly, as a practising Educational Psychologist with several years of experience, I have a longstanding interest in evidence informed research, in developing a positive ethos and culture in schools, in supporting inclusive practices and also in consulting with and empowering children, young people and their families.

For the last six years I have held the position of Senior Specialist Practitioner with a specialism in the area of ASD. This role involves working closely with children and young people with ASD, their parents/carers and other agencies. Through this role I feel I am able to learn a considerable amount simply by listening to the accounts of the young people as they talk about their educational experiences. Although many young people with ASD find it difficult to communicate with others, I have learned that they value having their thoughts and views listened to and many young people with ASD describe their frustrations at not being understood by others. I have learned that with the necessary scaffolding many are equally as able to provide valuable insights into their educational experiences. I am very interested to learn through this study, how we as professionals are able to further empower this group of young people to enable them to maximise their opportunities at being given a voice. This will enable us to be able to offer them more effective and successful support and provision.

This study therefore meets several purposes, including meeting the requirements of the LA in terms of informing their planning for future provision, developing the quality of my day to day work as an Educational Psychologist as well as supporting pupils with ASD and their families.

3.4 The role of the researcher

Research begins with the researcher’s motivations and goals and it is they who construct the research questions, decide upon the research methods, collect the data, analyse the data, present the results and draw conclusions. The researcher in this study is present throughout the entire research and is
an integral part of it. Having a central role in this study, I have endeavoured to continually remind myself how my role may be influencing the research in a number of ways, in particular, the choice of research methods and also the interpretation of the results. I have had to continually consider how my status as an Educational Psychologist may influence respondents’ comments and how my role as a Local Authority officer may have triggered my agendas and my reactions. I am therefore mindful that I carry several labels (additional to researcher) which people may construe in different ways and influence what they choose to tell me or not tell me.

I have made choices about what to investigate and how to investigate it and I have also analysed the data and discussed it and I am mindful that my background, experiences and values will have undoubtedly shaped aspects of every section of the research. My experience as an Educational Psychologist, teacher and also as a parent, has led me to believe that a respectful, empowering approach is important when working with young people and families who are likely to have experienced a significant amount of stress, and this prior understanding has shaped my approach to this study. I made a conscious effort to communicate openness, acceptance and genuine interest in the families involved in the study. Likewise, my experience as a teacher enables me to have empathy and understanding for some of the challenges faced by the members of staff involved in educating and supporting children and young people with ASD. Therefore, in this way, I believe that my experience will have brought out my strengths as researcher, particularly with regards to my style of communicating with the participants.

Inevitably, concerns regarding researcher bias could be raised regarding what I bring to the research. This could be in terms of assumptions, values and preconceptions, which may in some way affect the way participants behave in the research setting, in the kinds of questions asked, and/or in the selection of data for reporting. Ahern (1999) has produced a useful set of suggestions to help achieve what she sees as ‘reflexive bracketing’, which involves reflexivity to identify areas of potential bias. I used the suggestions in order to address
possible bias, although there is no certain way of ensuring the bias does not exist.

In 2007 I carried out a small scale study (Charters 2009) which aimed to develop an insight into the experiences of young people with Asperger Syndrome (AS) in two different educational settings: a mainstream high school and a resourced provision (a specialist ASD unit set within a mainstream high school) for pupils with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from seven young people aged between 13 and 18, their parents and also a member of staff who supports each of them. This, and previously published research helped me to shape up my interview design and to consider some important components to include.

Establishing rapport was very important in this study and this was a task I set out to do from the beginning of the second stage: the interview stage. I talked to all participants about the purpose and nature of my work, my motivations behind it, the confidentiality of it and about how I hoped to use the data. I stressed my role as ‘non expert’ and as genuinely interested in using their views to help improve the education of young people with ASD.

3.5 Research Questions
As already stated, the main research question is as follows:

1) Which factors are believed to contribute to a model of successful high-school provision for pupils with ASD?

And further sub-questions are:

2) How do we define ‘success’ when we are seeking to create a ‘successful’ educational provision for pupils with ASD?
3) How do the practices of specialist settings facilitate or constrain social inclusion of pupils with high functioning autism?
4) Could the model be applied to all educational settings?
These research questions aim to seek unique contributions to knowledge through providing a model of good practice that outlines the significance of its key components and also the relationships between each component/factor. It is my intention that it will be possible to apply the model to all educational settings and also that the research will identify a definition of ‘success’ and in so doing develop a criteria to measure the degree of success.

3.6 Methodological Rationale
There is a wealth of literature available relating to methodological design (Robson, 2002; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Silverman, 2000) and I considered some of this literature prior to determining the approach I used. Inevitably any conclusions from my research will be a product of the methodology adopted and the methods employed. My rationale for the methodology was based mainly upon practical considerations and past experience as well as personal preference and the nature of the subject matter. Since the research focuses on the personal views and perceptions of young people, a qualitative methodology seemed to be the most appropriate model. I was of the opinion that a quantitative approach would fail to reveal the richness of the information available regarding the personal experiences of young people, their families and the staff in their educational setting.

The literature draws upon the differences between a positivist approach to research and an interpretive, phenomenological approach. Silverman (2000) states that,

\[
\text{If you are concerned with exploring people’s life histories or everyday behaviour then qualitative methods may be favoured} \ldots. \\
\]

and that,

\[
\ldots \text{detail is found in the precise particulars of such matters as people’s understandings and interactions. (p.6)} \]

With a similar view Robson (2002) states that,
“People...are conscious, purposive actors who have ideas about their world and attach meaning to what is going on around them. In particular, their behaviour depends crucially on these ideas and meanings.” (p24)

He goes on to give an overview of phenomenological research that ‘focuses on the subjective experience of the individuals studied,’ i.e. what is their experience like? How can one understand and describe what happens to them from their own point of view?

I made the decision to use a non-positivist approach because I had no causal relationships or correlations to consider. An interpretative approach, using data gathered from a number of sources, was deemed to be more appropriate as I was intent on gathering the views, feelings and perceptions of a small group of young people within an educational setting, their parents and also school staff, and in so doing I would be able to generate hypotheses and a model of good practice which would prove useful for future planning.

As Mayket & Morehouse (1994) point out, qualitative research focuses on what people say and do: in other words the product of how they interpret the world and in their own words how they come to understand their situations. Therefore qualitative approaches are constructionist, they understand reality as being socially constructed by social interaction between individuals (Robson, 2002). In focusing on the words of the young people, their parents and educators, I attempted to access their world and their interpretation of their world at that time. Not all of what I found would be generalisable to other young people with similar difficulties, but I believe that it would produce a valuable insight into what young people with ASD might be experiencing in our schools and how some progress could be made to improve their educational experiences.

As recommended by Robson (2002) I triangulated my data collection during the case study by using more than one method of data collection: interviewing
three different groups of stakeholders, observations and studying relevant documentation about the setting. Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody (2002) suggest that triangulation reduces the problems of validity within qualitative research and requires the researcher to check pieces of information against at least one other independent source in order to help ascertain their credibility. Robson argues that this approach can increase the rigour of the research, as data collected about participants using one method can be compared and moderated against data collected using another. In addition, Whitmore & McKee (2006) point out that triangulation can ‘check and balance’ for bias in interpretation of the data.

3.7 Use of Questionnaires
The first step of the data gathering process was to generate specific questions for a questionnaire for pupils on the spectrum and also for their parents. In order to do this I considered the purpose of the questionnaire very carefully to ensure that the questions were trying to elicit the data that I required. I also had to ensure that they were not too leading in order to ensure that the responses were genuine. The purpose of the questionnaires was to elicit the views of parents and young people’s views and perceptions about how pupils with ASD need to be supported in schools in terms of their emotional wellbeing, social inclusion and learning needs/academic progress and general factors which they believe constitute good practice. I therefore wanted to elicit statements from the questionnaires about what these key factors were in supporting pupils with ASD in schools. These statements would then be used to formulate a model of good practice. My decision to use questionnaires was based on the need to elicit this information from as many respondents as possible about the diversity and range of specialist educational support for pupils with ASD. It was felt that this was the most cost and time-effective method of eliciting the views of up to 100 participants. Since I was hoping to elicit clear, heartfelt and honest views, many of the questions were open ended, with closed ones used where open ones considered unnecessary (see Appendices 2/3).
Gillham (2000) highlights some of the main advantages of using questionnaires, the main ones being that they are cost effective when compared to face-to-face interviews and they are time-effective: it is easy to receive information from a lot of people very quickly. This was one of the main factors in the decision to use questionnaires as opposed to interviews. Since the Local Authority who have requested the research have specifically requested that the study gains an insight into how pupils with ASD are successfully supported in other LAs, it was decided that questionnaires would be the best method to receive a high response rate. Gillham also argues that questionnaires are easier for respondents to complete: they can complete them when it suits them and they can take as much time as they like to complete each question and there is less pressure for an immediate response. Some respondents may respond positively to the anonymity of them; they may feel freer to disclose information. There is also an absence of interviewer bias and there is a standardisation of questions; if everyone gets the same questions then it can be claimed that another source of bias is eliminated. However, whether these questions can be always be interpreted in the same way is a different matter.

However, Gillham (2000) also highlights some of the main disadvantages of using questionnaires. A fundamental problem is the quality and accuracy of some of the responses, as questionnaires tend to be completed hastily. However, since it appears to be an extremely emotive topic for many parents and pupils it was anticipated that the majority would be motivated to complete it carefully. My intention was to make the questionnaires as simple and as succinct as possible to minimise the need for participants to rush the process. I also attempted to ensure that there were no ambiguous or misleading questions. Questionnaires are renowned for having a typically low response rate unless the respondents are particularly motivated to complete them i.e. if the respondents know you personally or whether they view it as interesting and valuable. From my experience from the 2007 study which conducted, parents appeared extremely willing to participate due to the emotive nature of the topic (many had recently gone through very difficult and frustrating experiences with their children’s schooling). Also, the fact that the
respondents accessed a parent support group suggested that they may be more likely to want to communicate and express their views.

Another limitation of questionnaires highlighted by Gillham is that questionnaires seek information just by asking questions and questions presume that people always have the answers. Simply by their nature, they do not encourage people to correct, to reflect, to expand and to steer topics in a particular direction, and therefore they do not seek to increase the validity of what they are saying. With this in mind I chose to ‘test’ the hypotheses formed from the questionnaire responses through interviews and observations in the follow-up case study.

3.7.1 Identifying participants and distributing the questionnaires

The first decision involved identifying potential respondents in the most fair and appropriate way. Sampling is linked with external validity, or generalisability of research findings, and probability samples tend to enable results to be generalised from the sample to the population (Robson, 2002). However, qualitative researchers are more likely to choose non-probabilistic sampling methods as their interests lie in understanding social processes, not in achieving representativeness (Robson, 2002). For example, purposive sampling, or theoretical sampling, are often used in order to allow the researcher to focus on the particular area of study. Therefore, while they are not representative statistically, they are relevant to the research question and theoretically informed. It could be argued that qualitative research methods can actually provide more valid data than quantitative research methods due to them investigating such things as the meanings people attach to their experiences.

A purposive sampling method was used for the study. This is a deliberately non-random method of selecting participants for research, which allows individuals to be selected because of the knowledge they possess that is relevant to the research. Respondents were selected via parent support groups
for parents with children with ASD. This ensured that the participants had the relevant direct experiences, knowledge and understanding.

Such support groups were identified through contacting various sources such as Educational Psychology Services (EPS), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Parent Partnerships across various local authorities in the north west. The coordinators of eight support groups were contacted and permission sought to distribute the questionnaires to the appropriate families at the relevant meetings, i.e. those for parents who had a son/daughter between the ages of 11 and 18 with a diagnosis of ASD. Covering letters were attached to the questionnaires outlining the purpose of the study, the intended use of the data collected and the issue of confidentiality (Appendix 1). The letter requested that the Parental Questionnaire (Appendix 2) be completed by one parent and the Pupil Questionnaire (Appendix 3) by their son/daughter. The letters also requested that the completed questionnaires be sent directly to the researcher using the stamped addressed envelopes provided. It is estimated that through the support groups approximately 70 to 80 questionnaires were distributed. Precise numbers are not known because they were distributed by the support group co-ordinators. The estimated totals of 70 to 80 are based on the information I received from each group co-ordinator of the average number of parents who attended each group. The precise details of how many were actually distributed were not sought. Twenty seven completed questionnaires were returned within the timescales I had available to complete this particular stage of the study and the findings were then collated and the main themes extracted to construct a model of good practice.

3.8 Case Study Methodology
A case study was used in the third section of my thesis for the purpose of generating knowledge about an educational setting and using this knowledge to compare and contrast with the hypothetical model of good practice generated earlier in the thesis; i.e the purpose was to test the robustness of my model.
A case study is defined by Yin (2008) as:

“.... an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” (p.13)

A case study can therefore be seen as a story about something unique, special or interesting about individuals, organisations, processes, programs, institutions etc. The case study gives the story behind the result by capturing what happened to bring it about and can be used to highlight a project’s success or to bring attention to a problem or difficulty. In other words, you would use a case study method if you deliberately wanted to explore contextual conditions, believing that they may play a fundamental part in the phenomenon being studied. In contrast, an experiment deliberately separates a phenomenon from its context so that attention can be focused on only a few variables.

Yin (2008) continues to expand on his definition of a case study by adding:

“The case study enquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.” (p.14)

In other words, the case study as a research strategy comprises an eclectic method of design, data collection and data analysis. They can be based on any mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence and need not always include direct, detailed observations as a source of evidence.

As a research strategy, the case study is used in many situations to contribute to our understanding of individual, group, organisational, social, political and related phenomena. Since my research questions are asking, “what”, “how” and “why” questions which are exploratory and explanatory in nature (as
opposed to frequencies or incidence rates etc) I needed to use an approach which would allow me to delve more deeply into the complex system of an educational setting. The main advantage of using case studies is that it provides much more detailed information than what is available through other methods, such as surveys. Case studies also allow one to present data collected from multiple methods (i.e. surveys, interviews, document review, and observation) to provide the complete story.

As Yin (2008) states:

“A case study’s unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews and observations – beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study.” (p.8)

He goes on to say that:

A case study has a distinct advantage when a “how” or “why” question is being asked about a set of contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control. (p.9)

However, historically, case studies have been considered a less desirable form of enquiry. The greatest criticism has been the lack of systematic procedures and the existence of biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions. Such lack of rigor is less likely to be present when using other strategies. A second common criticism about case studies is that they provide little basis for scientific generalisation. “How can you generalise from a single case?” is a frequently asked question. Yin’s short answer to that is:

Case studies, like experiments, are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a “sample”, and in doing a case study, your goal will be to expand and generalise theories (analytic generalisation) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalisation). (p.10)
Yin (2008) describes the 5 different applications of case study research:

1) to *explain* the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies,
2) to *describe* an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurred
3) to *illustrate* certain topics within an evaluation, in a descriptive mode
4) to *explore* those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes
5) a *meta-evaluation* - a study of an evaluation study.

However, Yin does state that case studies can be conducted and written for several different purposes, including the simple presentation of an individual phenomena or to generate broad generalisations based on case study evidence. For any of these purposes there are two distinct case study designs: single-case study design and multiple-case study design.

### 3.8.1 Identifying a School to Use for The Case Study

When a desired number of completed questionnaires had been received (27), the data was used for two purposes: 1) to use the core statements about what participants perceived to lead to a school successfully meeting the needs of pupils with ASD to generate a model of good practice and 2) to identify a specific school for the case study that was deemed to be ‘successful’ in meeting the needs of pupils with ASD. Three schools were named more than once and one school was approached first. The decision to use this particular school was partly based on its geographical location: being more accessible would enable the work undertaken as part of the case study manageable for myself as researcher. Another reason for choosing this particular school was a collection of information that suggested it was committed to inclusion, making it likely to meet the criteria for a school that was successful in meeting the needs of pupils with ASD. A postive 2008 Ofsted report deemed it a "good school" where:

*Achievement is good and standards are above average……… Personal development and wellbeing are outstanding. This is a school that is*
characterised by a high degree of mutual respect and a strong commitment to inclusion…….The school has an exceptionally positive ethos which contributes greatly to pupils’ all round development….. (2008)

This particular school had a ‘resourced provision’ for pupils with ASD within the mainstream school and this feature, along with the Ofsted report and recommendations from 3 questionnaire respondents, suggested that this was a school that could successfully meet the needs of pupils with ASD.

The headteacher and the head of the resourced provision were approached to discuss the aims and purposes of the research and the practicalities of what the study would involve. In my experience of a researcher, it can often be difficult to negotiate this work with a school and I therefore considered how I could encourage them to engage with me. It is my view that several factors led to them agreeing to the case study taking place in their school. Firstly, the fact that they had already been identified by several sources to be a school that is successful at meeting the needs of pupils with ASD. This enabled the proposal to sound appealing from the outset. Also, the fact that I reassured the staff that it would cause minimal disruption to their timetable and also that the school were going to receive feedback about my findings that they may find useful for the development of their school.

3.8.2 Designing the Case Study

A primary distinction in designing case studies is between single- and multiple-case designs. This means a decision needs to be made, prior to any data collection, on whether a single case study or multiple cases are going to be used to address the research question. Yin (2008, p40-42) discusses the rationale for using a single case design:

1) One rationale is when it represents the critical case in testing a well-formulated theory. The single case can then be used to determine whether a theory’s propositions are correct or whether some alternative set of explanations might be more relevant.
2) A second rationale for a single case is when the case represents an extreme case or a unique case i.e the case is so rare that any single case is worth documenting and analysing.

3) A third rationale is the representative or typical case whereby the objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation.

4) A fourth rationale is the revelatory case – when an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation.

5) A fifth rationale is the longitudinal case: studying the same single case at two or more different points in time.

Since my study meets the first of Yin’s rationale components, (that the single case will be used to test a theory), it was confirmed that a single case design would be the most appropriate and efficient method. The next decision to be made was whether it would be a holistic or an embedded single-case design. In an embedded case design the same case study may involve more than one unit of analysis whereas in an embedded case study design it studies only the global nature of an organisation or programme. The holistic design is advantageous when no logical subunits can be identified or when the relevant theory underlying the case study is itself of a holistic nature. Yin warns, however, that potential problems may arise with holistic designs:

*When a global approach leads to an investigator avoiding examining any specific phenomenon in operational detail and the case study is conducted at a very abstract level, lacking any clear measures or data.*

(p45)

Within an embedded design the subunits can often add significant opportunities for extensive analysis, enhancing the insights. A major pitfall of the embedded design, however, is that the study may focus only on the subunit level and fail to return to the larger unit of analysis and then the original phenomenon of interest has become the context and not the target of study.
In order to make a decision about which type of single case design I was going to use, I therefore needed to define the unit(s) of analysis. In order to do this it was necessary to elicit the main outcomes from the questionnaire to produce a model of 'a successful resourced provision for ASD'. In doing so this identified a main unit (the ethos of the school) and the smaller units:

- organisation of staff
- skills and knowledge of staff
- curriculum and levels of whole school inclusion
- physical environment
- social climate i.e. relationships between staff and pupils and between staff and parents
- links with the whole school

After defining the potential units of analysis and using these to produce a model, it seemed somewhat obvious that there were clear subunits and therefore the resulting design would be an embedded case study design. The alternative option could have been to examine only the global nature of the school and to use a holistic design, but I felt that there were too many implicit factors that needed to be examined closely in order to create a clear picture of the school and what makes it work and at the same time what the limitations are. However, as can be seen by the model, using an embedded case design, means being careful not to focus too much upon the subunits but to continually consider how the subunits impact upon the main unit.

3.8.3 Sources of data collection
The main data collection sources were intended to be the individual stakeholders— through semi-structured interviews with the pupils and staff supporting/teaching them and also the parents of the pupils. The main unit of analysis in the case study was organisational – the whole school - although upon embarking upon the case study it became apparent that the resourced provision was actually very separate from the rest of the school, with its own
systems, culture and ethos. At times, it therefore felt as though the study was focusing only on the enhanced provision. The purpose of the case study, however, was to study the whole school and how the resourced provision fitted into the whole system and therefore despite being very separate I continually had to be mindful that the main unit was actually the whole school. The aim of the case study was to compare the whole system with the model of good practice. Therefore, although the interview data was deemed to be extremely valuable and pertinent, the conclusions would not be entirely based upon the interview data as this would merely be a recollection of other people’s thoughts and ideas. The aim and purpose of the case study was to make sense of the processes and the impact of certain factors on these processes. How do the main components of the school impact on one another to enable it to support pupils with ASD successfully? The information obtained from the interviews must therefore be continually interpreted and systematised, discrepancies must be evaluated and new possibilities considered.

As Yin stated:

Case study collection does follow a formal plan, but the specific information that may become relevant to a case study is not readily predictable. As you collect case study evidence, you must quickly review the evidence and continually ask yourself why events or facts appear as they do. Your judgements may lead to the immediate need to search for additional evidence. (p59)

My intention was to collect information from other sources including:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources from Individuals</th>
<th>Sources from the Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupil Interviews</td>
<td>School Prospectus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Interviews</td>
<td>School policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Interviews</td>
<td>Written reports e.g. Ofsted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Media articles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.8.4 Documentation
The purpose of using documentation as a source of data was to a) elicit/confirm valuable information regarding the practical arrangements of the school and also to use any data collected to triangulate with other sources of evidence. A significant proportion of time was set aside to read through various sources of documentation including: ofsted reports, the school prospectus and policies available from the school. In considering this data, I considered it necessary to be mindful that the documents may not always be accurate and that they may contain bias because the purpose and specific audience will have been different to those of the case study. It was therefore vital to keep a critical eye when considering this documentation.

3.8.5 Interviews
I considered interviews to be the most important source of information as this method enables a case study researcher to pursue a considered line of enquiry as well as obtaining individual opinions, perceptions and personal experiences. The decision to use semi-structured interviews during the case study was based upon the need to obtain richer and more in-depth information that was based on experiences, emotions and feelings, and which may be considered rather personal or sensitive. The aim was not to uncover truths or facts that could be generalized throughout the whole population of pupils with ASD, but to gain an insight into their own personal experiences and to establish a greater understanding of what school life is like in this particular school and which factors enable these pupils’ needs to be met in such a setting. The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for flexibility and to allow the interviewees to develop ideas and elaborate on certain issues. Robson (2002) describes a semi-structured interview as having some pre-determined questions but in which the order can be modified based on the interviewer’s perception of what is most appropriate. In addition, question wording can be changed and explanations given, some questions can be omitted and additional ones can be included. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research, particularly where the views and perceptions of individuals are being sought.
Case study interviews tend to be more open-ended and this allowed me to follow my own line of enquiry and also ask questions in a conversational/unbiased manner that also serves the needs of the line of enquiry. In some situations it also enabled me to ask respondents to clarify and extend their responses and to further explore insights into a particular matter. Having some closed questions embedded into the interviews enabled me to corroborate certain facts that had already been established but needed verifying. In such a situation the specific questions were carefully worded so as to appear genuinely naïve about a topic in order to encourage the respondents to provide an independent commentary about it. The richness and depth of such data could not be obtained from quantitative methods of data collection or structured interviews.

However, with the use of qualitative methods of data collection, comes the issues of validity, reliability and representativeness. The extent to which these three are confronted will be addressed throughout this section.

Like any self-report method, the interview approach relies upon those interviewed being able and willing to give accurate and complete answers to questions posed but there are problems associated with interviewing in that interviewees may mistrust the interviewer, they may fail to tell the truth, they may not remember details or they may not understand the questions.

The style of the interviews was an ‘informant’ type of interviewing as referred to by Powney and Watts (1987). This style of interviewing allows interviewees freedom to respond and give information as they see appropriate, rather than being expected to respond less freely to a series of rigid, preset questions by an interviewer. In this sense the interview is what Kvale (1996) refers to as ‘an inter view’, an interchange of views between two people about a theme of mutual interest. I aimed to adhere to this advice of enabling a respondent to feel more like an “informant” in order for them to feel more in control and less threatened by closed questions.
Wengraf (2001) states that semi-structured interviews are more difficult to conduct than fully structured interviews as the interviewees’ responses cannot be predicted and therefore the interviewer’s responses have to be improvised which requires mental preparation. Consequently, semi-structured interviews necessitate careful preparation beforehand and time to be allowed for analysis and interpretation following the interviews (Wengraf, 2001). This was all considered during the planning stage and various skills were employed to conduct the interviews. For example, time was taken at the beginning to establish rapport. During the interviews, techniques such as probing for further information, requesting clarification, asking for examples, and reflecting on the responses, each of which is considered a core skill of interviewing (Gillham, 2005).

There is a risk during interviews that some questions may make an interviewee feel awkward or defensive and in this situation they may respond with an answer they feel is expected of them, or an answer which reflects what they consider to be the interviewer’s own viewpoint (Denscombe, 2003). This is one of the possible threats to the validity of qualitative research, summarised by Robson (2002) as reactivity (influence of the researcher’s presence on the people involved) and respondent biases (influence of the researcher’s assumptions and pre-conceptions). These issues can be addressed in part by the use of reflexivity by the researcher. Reflexivity refers to the researcher being aware of their methods, values, biases and mere presence in the very contexts they investigate (Seidman, 2013). A reflexive approach was used throughout this study.

3.8.6 Interview Participants
The interview schedules were administered with three pupils (aged between 11 and 16), three parents and three members of staff, one being the headteacher, one a teacher who was also head of the enhanced provision and one a teaching assistant from within the enhanced provision. The pupils accessed varying degrees of mainstream lessons (ranging from approximately 0 to 100%) with the aim of increasing the percentage of mainstream access over time. All of the pupils interviewed were boys, the two
girls were invited to participate but they declined. All pupils had a statement of SEN and a diagnosis of ASD. In the ‘enhanced provision’ they received teaching of those curriculum subjects they currently felt unable to access within a whole class and they also accessed some individualised programmes linked to their difficulties with social interaction. The ‘enhanced provision’ was spread across two classrooms which contained individual work stations and a time-out area (with the aim of creating visual barriers and reducing over-stimulation). There are seven pupils between the ages of 11 and 16, two of whom are girls. Two teachers and five teaching assistants are based in the enhanced provision and all play a part in planning and delivering the education and social and emotional support for all pupils.

It is acknowledged that this was not a representative sample for two reasons: the small number of participants and also the deliberately specific selection criteria. There was only a small sample size due to several factors: the labour-intensive and time-consuming nature of interviewing and the small population size within the resource base.

The decision to triangulate the data through interviewing parents and members of staff was taken in order to increase the validity of the data (that it was exploring/researching what it intended to). Several small steps were taken in order to increase the reliability of the data extracted from the interviews with the pupils. A decision was also made to interview the headteacher from the school in order to elicit more detailed information about the background context of the school, what the future plans might be and also to receive an insight into the how the enhanced provision fits into the rest of the school and how successful the school is at including and integrating these pupils into the school as a whole.

3.8.7 Interview procedures
A small number of specific questions were pre-written (see Appendix 4) yet I relied upon topic headings for much of the interviews rather than specific questions in order to enable me to have the flexibility to incorporate the interviewees’ own thoughts and constructs into the questions and to make it
more appropriate or relevant to each individual depending on their role, age and language and communication skills. This method also allowed the interviewees’ comments to be incorporated into further questions throughout the interview, enabling me to check that the responses had been interpreted correctly as well as maintaining coherence and continuity throughout.

The main questions for the pupils and parents were as follows: (see Appendices)

- Tell me some ways in which you (your son/daughter) have been supported in this school?
- Would you consider your (your son/daugher’s) time here to have been successful? Why(not)?
- Is there anything that hasn’t been as positive or that you think could be changed?
- How would you define a successful educational experience for pupils with ASD?
- How socially included do you (does your son/daughter) feel in this school? Why? Why not?
- If I was to ask for advice about how to plan the provision for high school pupils with ASD what advice would you give me?

The following questions were asked during the staff interviews:

- Tell me some ways in which you support the pupils with ASD in this school?
- Do you feel that the pupils generally have successful experiences here? Why/Why not?
- What is it about the school that enables the pupils to have successful experiences?
- Which pupils would this placement be most appropriate for?
- Is there a selection criteria?
- Are there some pupils for whom it would not be appropriate?
- What kinds of difficulties have the pupils experienced?
• What advice would you give if we were going to set up a similar provision in our authority?

A careful explanation of the purpose of the interviews and a brief outline of the purpose of the questions to be asked were provided to the interviewees beforehand, to ensure they had a good understanding of the meaning of the questions/discussions and also to allow them to make considered decisions as to whether they wished to participate. At the start of each interview a discussion also took place to ensure they understood that their responses would be confidential and that they could choose not to respond to particular questions if they so wished.

I have already mentioned how research demonstrates that people respond differently depending on how they perceive the person asking the questions. In particular, the age, sex and ethnic origins of the interviewer have a bearing on the amount of information people would be willing to divulge. In other words, the reliability of the data can be affected by the personal identity of the researcher. Therefore, caution was taken to minimise these effects, such as remaining neutral and non-committal on all the statements made during the interviews and trying to make the interviewee feel ‘safe’ and comfortable to provide honest answers through building up a rapport.

Interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the interviewee and later transcribed verbatim (An example of a transcription can be seen in Appendix 7). This is considered to increase the validity of qualitative research findings as it provides the researcher with a valid and accurate version of what they heard during the interview (Robson, 2002). The interview transcripts were then analysed thematically as soon as possible after completion of each interview to enable the data to be more accurately interpreted.
3.8.8 Unstructured observations

The purpose of the observations was to capture any relevant behaviours or environmental conditions which would potentially serve as another source of evidence to the case study. The choice of using either a structured observation schedule or a qualitative, unstructured observation was considered. A structured observation requires the researcher to plan ahead of time what s/he is going to focus upon and also what kind of event, or response, is going to be counted as relevant for the purpose of the research. This could potentially restrict what the researcher ‘catches’ during the observation by restricting him/her to a narrowed search. In contrast, an unstructured observation involves the researcher encountering the people and events studied with a relatively open mind as to what might become relevant to the research questions being addressed. They can be valuable in discovering new things that may not have been anticipated at the start of the study. However, a significant benefit to structured observation schedules is that they can generate data that is reliable, generalisable and is often comparable with other studies if the same measurement instruments are used. With less structured methods there are often problems in knowing whether they have been reliably described (would another researcher have seen it this way?) What one observer means when they describe a situation may be different from what another observer means, even if they use the same words to label it with. Structured observations, like structured interviewing, are more suitable for projects where the researcher has quite specific questions or hypotheses to investigate. I therefore had to consider how specific the information was that I was seeking and whether I was seeking to compare my findings with the findings of other researchers who have used structured observation schedules. Upon reflection, I surmised that the purpose of my observations was to seek out levels of inclusion in terms of the quality and nature of interactions with peers, the quality and nature of instances of participation and the levels of independence within the lessons. I also wanted to observe body language and facial expressions and dependence upon adult support to consider how the pupils were coping emotionally with the mainstream lessons. Another focus of my observations was observing the role of the subject teacher in supporting the pupils from the
enhanced provision, i.e. were they considering the needs of the pupils to differentiate their work, match them with appropriate peers and were they actively attempting to include them within the lesson. I also wanted to look at how the TAs were supporting the pupils and how much they were attempting to promote independence and inclusion. As an Educational Psychologist, who works within a social constructionist paradigm, I considered it more appropriate to consider the observations of the pupils in relation to how his/her environment were supporting or creating barriers to his/her inclusion. When considering different observation schedules there weren’t any that measured exactly what I was looking for and they only focused on the individual pupils, not the wider context of the whole classroom environment. Therefore an unstructured observation was deemed more appropriate as it allows for the examination of behaviour within an interactive natural setting.

In order to help focus my observations I considered incorporating aspects of a structured observation schedule. The ‘Observer Classroom Environment Measure’ (OCEM: Feldlaufer, Midgley & Eccles, 1998) requires an observer to record opportunities for student input, task organisation, competition, teacher control and student interaction as well as teacher-student relations. It is generally used to measure how inclusive a lesson is for a pupil by marking 29 items by the frequency they were observed. A higher score suggests a higher level of inclusion. I chose to use the specific items as prompts to look out for during the observations rather than for measuring the frequency of them. By incorporating these prompts, the observations actually became somewhat semi-structured in nature as they did involve an element of planning ahead of what I was going to focus upon and also what kind of response or behaviour was going to be recorded as relevant for the purpose of the research. The observations cannot be described as structured, however, as they did not involve measuring any behaviours for the purpose of generating data that could be generalisable. These are the following prompts from the OCEM that I used to provide evidence of inclusion and also findings about the general behaviours of the pupils in their mainstream classes:

- Independent working
The observations involved:

1) informal observations of the pupils within the enhanced provision during lessons and breaktimes
2) pre-planned observations of the pupils in mainstream lessons.

The pupils were included in at least one observation within the classroom environment and one within the enhanced provision. I considered the observations to be valuable in providing evidence to any claims by pupils and teachers about processes, systems, difficulties and needs of specific pupils and also behaviours and attitudes of mainstream school staff towards these pupils. Observing the same pupils in the enhanced provision as well as observing them in mainstream classes was judged to be a potentially valuable source of information. It is appreciated that multiple observers across several instances would have been preferrable as it would have increased the reliability of data collected and also the interpretations of the data yet due to restraints with time and available resources this was not possible.

3.8.9 Archival Records

Several sources of archival records were used to collect information about the school but also to provide evidence in conjunction with other sources of information about what is considered ‘successful’ for the school and also which factors contribute to the school being successful. The following records were obtained and considered as part of the data gathering process:

- lists of names of pupils and dates of birth
- individual records such as IEPs (individual education plans)
• individual plans/timetables for pupils, which highlighted ratios of time in the ‘unit’ and time in mainstream classes
• school prospectus and mission statement
• ofsted report

3.9 Ethical Considerations

I presented my thesis proposal to the ethics panel at the University of Manchester on 12.11.09 and received a letter on 18.11.09 to recommend that I proceed with the thesis and that no ethical concerns had been raised.

3.9.1 Informed Consent

Ethical issues are of paramount importance during the research process and from the outset I endeavoured to ensure that all participants, in particular the young people involved, had adequate information about the project and were fully aware of their rights within the research process. The study has also consistently followed the guidance of the British Psychological Society’s (BPS) ‘Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants’.

When the questionnaires were distributed there was a covering letter included (see appendix 1) which explained the nature of the study and the role they would play in it. It also highlighted issues such as confidentiality, the handling of questionnaire and interview data and their right to contribute and withdraw at any time.

During the interview stage of the case study, all pupil participants were given the choice to be interviewed or not and whether they wanted to do it on their own or with a parent/teacher. They were also given the choice of deciding where they felt most comfortable being interviewed. At the start of the interview the participants were also informed that transcripts of the interview data would be made but that they would be discarded once the data had been used. At the start of each interview a discussion also took place to ensure they understood that their responses would be confidential and that they could choose not to respond to particular questions if they so wished.
Written parental permission was obtained before any interviews with the young people took place.

3.9.2 Sensitivity

It is not an easy task to investigate the views of young people with ASD, when the main difficulties associated with ASD are communication and social interaction skills. These young people can present as shy, anxious, stressed and lacking in reciprocal conversation skills. Such difficulties often excludes them from participation and so the researcher always kept in mind that it was extremely important to treat people’s accounts of their experiences with extreme sensitivity.

3.9.3 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participants were assured that all names including the name of the school would not be disclosed. They were advised that although every effort would be made to preserve anonymity, the research findings would not be kept fully confidential. It would be submitted, including some direct quotes, to the University of Manchester as part of a Doctoral Qualification and also to the Local Authority who had requested the research in order to advise on future practice. ‘Representation’ (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) was offered to participants, which was explained to mean that their thoughts, feelings and experiences shared, within professional and academic forums, whilst striving to maintain anonymity. However, they were assured that each participant would not be identified at any point. Interview transcripts were assigned a code which was then used when presenting transcript quotations. Special care was taken to avoid including any personal information about participants which may have made them identifiable in some way.

Data collected was treated in the strictest of confidence. The computer on which data was stored was password protected and paper records were kept in a locked filing cabinet. Respondents were assured that on completion of the study the audiotapes would be erased.
3.9.4 Dissemination of Research Findings to Participants

Research participants were informed of the timescale of the research project and informed of their right to receive written feedback in the form of a research summary. All pupils and parents were able to request by email a copy of the summary of findings as presented to the Local Authority. The school which was chosen for the case study also received a copy of this summary.

3.10 Validity

Yardley (2000) lists four principles for assessing validity of qualitative research. The first two principles; sensitivity to context and commitment and rigour, cannot be considered as mutually exclusive (Smith et al, 2009). Often the researcher’s rationale for choosing to use a case study approach in itself can be considered to demonstrate considerable sensitivity to context. Smith et al (2009) state that sensitivity to context is also evidenced in the interpersonal interactions between the interviewer and the interviewees, through being able to put participants at ease, showing empathy and acknowledging the experiential expertise of the participants. Use of direct quotes from the transcripts also demonstrates sensitivity to the context in that it enables the participants’ voices to be heard and provides evidence for the reader to understand and validate or challenge the interpretations being made in the various stages of analysis.

Commitment and rigour is evidenced in this study through the attempts to collect data from various stakeholders: parents, young people and school staff and also through different methods: questionnaires, interviews and observations. I purposefully sought the views of young people from a variety of settings (through the questionnaires) and from different local authorities in order to elicit a broader picture of young people’s experiences.

The third principle, transparency and coherence, is evidenced in the high level of detail in the Methodology and Appendices sections which enable the study to be repeated step by step by a different researcher. Also, at the analysis level, the re-reading of the transcripts by myself but also by a ‘critical friend’
enables the extraction of themes and conclusions to be drawn confidently. The researcher is also highly explicit about her own contribution and role in the interpretation of the data.

The fourth principle is that of *impact and importance*. This research explores the experiences of groups of participants whose opinions had not previously been sought in order to plan for future changes to educational provision for pupils with ASD. The Local Authority who have requested the research are committed to person centred planning (PCP) and believe in eliciting pupil voice. In response to the dissatisfaction of many parents within the borough about their children with ASD not receiving the necessary support they are keen to ‘get it right’ and this therefore stresses the importance of the findings from this study in order for the Local Authority to make the right changes.

3.11 Data Analysis
The style of the questionnaires and the nature of the semi-structured interviews influenced greatly the type of data I collected and in turn influenced the data analysis techniques employed.

3.11.1 Questionnaire Data
The different questions within the questionnaire were all aimed at eliciting specific statements about the participants’ perceptions of how schools support pupils’ social inclusion, emotional wellbeing and learning needs and also general thoughts about what constitutes a successful school in terms of its ability to meet the needs of pupils with ASD. The questions were worded in order to elicit key themes. (See Appendices 2 and 3). Each response was read and re-read before the researcher identified and labelled themes that characterised each response. These themes were recorded in the right hand margin, organised into clusters and then given labels. The themes’ relation to other themes were examined and inter-relationships between them established. Separate tables were then generated for each master theme with its subordinate themes.
The questionnaires also served the purpose of identifying a potential school for the case study specifically by asking the questionnaire participants if they were able to name a school they deemed to be successful in meeting the needs of high school pupils with ASD. It was anticipated that since the participants were all based in the north-west, there was a high chance that the same school(s) would be named by several different participants. This would therefore suggest that several pupils had had positive experiences at that same school and thereby increasing the likelihood that it was a indeed a ‘successful’ school. However, this information was triangulated with background searches by the researcher into the school, i.e. ofsted reports, and other media reports to increase the reliability of the participants’ perceptions about the school(s).

### 3.11.2 Interview Data

The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis. The steps below outline the main process of the analysis:

Each taped interview was transcribed and each transcript was analysed one by one. I read and re-read each transcript in turn, initially producing unfocused notes in the left-hand margin that reflected the initial thoughts and observations regarding the text. These included questions, summary statements, difficulties experienced by the interviewee to engage in certain sections of the interview, any evidence of the changing emotional state of the interviewee and so on. This stage was a more general and initial interpretation, not line for line or focusing on particular pieces of discourse, more ‘getting a feel’ for the interview.

Each transcript was then re-read for the purpose of identifying and labelling themes that characterised each section of the text. The focus of this stage was predominantly exploratory, identifying the factors within the participants’ experiences that they prioritised to talk about and how they felt about these things (descriptive comments). This enabled me to begin to start to interpret and elicit clear thoughts and feelings about why these factors were important to the participant (conceptual comments).
The next stage involved creating an interaction between the participants’ sense making and my own sense making to establish underlying themes. An important consideration here was to try to reduce the amount of data without losing the complexity and meaning of the participants’ words. These themes were recorded in the right hand margin.

The next stage involved searching for connections across themes. Initially I wrote all of the themes down and then formed super-ordinate themes by clustering themes by identifying:

- those with similar or shared meaning
- those that are seemingly opposite or contradictory
- those that relate to a specific time or event
- those that are more frequently occurring

These steps were repeated for each individual interview transcript, ensuring to keep the focus on the individual accounts. Once this was completed, a comparison was made between super-ordinate themes for each case. This was for the purpose of highlighting the differences in experiences as well as any commonalities. The themes’ relation to other themes were examined and inter-relationships between them established. To increase the reliability of the analysis a colleague was asked to play the role of ‘critical friend’ and read through a sample of the transcripts and repeat the same process in order to compare the similarity of the themes generated. The colleague read a sample of the transcripts and repeated the process of recording themes, organising them into clusters and naming them. Any anomalies and discrepancies were highlighted and discussed and agreements were made as to the most appropriate theme. Finally, themes were integrated across transcripts to obtain a more generalised understanding of these individuals’ shared experiences of school. Tables were then generated for each master theme.
3.12 Summary
This chapter has detailed the rationale for the chosen methodology and the steps taken towards gathering data and also analysing the data, including a consideration of my role as researcher. In seeking and interpreting pupils’, parents’ and school staff’s perceptions of ‘what good should look like’ through questionnaires and a follow-up case study I hoped to gain both a greater understanding of their personal experiences as well as producing the model of good practice. The ‘Results’ chapter that follows highlights the findings from the questionnaire data and details the steps taken towards producing a model of good practice. The chapter then focuses upon the more detailed data elicited from the case study and will describe the changes that took place to produce the revised model of good practice.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Out of approximately 80 questionnaires disseminated, 27 were completed and returned. 16 of these were completed by parents/carers and 11 by young people. The tables below present the main themes extracted from the questionnaires in terms of the perceptions of both parents and pupils of what factors constitute successful provision. They are presented in two separate tables as the themes from the two sets of respondents i.e. parents and pupils, were mostly very different.

4.1 Parent/Carers Questionnaire Results

This table shows the spread and distribution of themes across all of the parent/carer questionnaires, highlighting commonalities and nuances. Each individual parent respondent was coded QP (and a number) to distinguish between each one. The respondents highlighted in red on the table represent all the parents who said their children were educated in a specialist ASD setting: either a special school or a specialist unit. This was specifically asked as it was thought that it would be useful and interesting to compare the perceptions of the different subgroups, which would undoubtedly reflect their different experiences. All 8 super-ordinate themes have been included, even if they were only relevant for a couple of participants.

The themes are presented in the table in order of frequency from the highest to the lowest frequency. It is not a personal assumption of mine that those themes with the highest frequency are more important than those with a lowest frequency but is merely a decision to present the findings of the respondents in this order to show which themes were cited most/least by the respondents.
Table 1

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<th></th>
<th>Staff Knowledge</th>
<th>Knowing the children</th>
<th>Good Communication with parents</th>
<th>Flexibility of staff</th>
<th>High staff ratios</th>
<th>School Ethos</th>
<th>Access to quiet areas</th>
<th>Curriculum Support</th>
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 Totals | 15 | 14 | 11 | 9  | 9  | 8  | 6  | 3  |

4.1.1 Staff Knowledge

The theme ‘Staff Knowledge’ relates to the parents’ perceptions that staff were well trained in the specific area of ASD and had a good understanding of the needs of children with ASD. This was the most commonly occurring theme from the parents’ responses. All 16 respondents suggested that this was one factor that enabled the school to successfully support their child. The following are examples of respondents’ comments about school staff:
The staff are supportive and understood what x needs. (QP1)

Teachers understand my son’s autism and know what triggers his outbursts. (QP3)

They know all about autism and what autistic children need. (QP11)

They have been trained to support children with autism. (QP13)

The teachers know what autistic children have problems with and how to help them. (QP15)

4.1.2 Knowing the Children

This was the second most commonly occurring theme (cited by 14 parents) and refers to parental perceptions that the school staff know the individual pupils well and have a good understanding of their individual needs. Four of these parents (all who had children in a specialist setting) made reference to the fact that this was due to high staffing ratios:

They only have a small number of children in the unit so are able to get to know the children well and understand what they need. (QP3)

Being in a small unit means that the staff know x well and know what stresses him out. (QP12)

Because the teachers know x they manage situations so that he doesn’t blow. (QP8).

Unsurprisingly, 11 of these 14 of these parents stated that their children had either been educated within a specialist ASD school or within a resourced
provision, thus suggesting that the smaller class sizes and higher staff to pupil ratios enabled staff to get to know the children better and therefore support them better. Of course, this is merely an observation and the questionnaires did not specifically ask parents to expand on their responses as to why they felt the staff were able to know their children well.

4.1.3 Good communication with parents
11 out of the 16 respondents cited good communication with parents to be a factor linked to success. This theme refers to the perceptions of parents that they were listened to and consulted with regarding decision-making and planning. Some referred to the fact that their advice was sought about how to manage any difficulties:

*The school asks us what we do at home so they can work out the best ways to tackle any problems.* (QP5)

*School diaries to share information about how he’s been in school and also for us to comment on what’s happening at home.* (QP10)

*We are asked to contribute to meetings and plans about what we think he needs.* (QP9)

4.1.4 Flexibility
Nine respondents cited this as a factor linked to success. ‘Flexibility’ refers to parents’ perceptions that the staff were willing to be flexible and make necessary changes, seemingly for the purpose of minimising pupils’ stress and anxiety levels and thereby potentially reducing challenging behaviours. Parents made reference to the fact that their children weren’t made to do things that would be stressful for them and that they were sometimes allowed to have some control over what happened to them. Examples were given whereby the pupils were allowed to make their own choices, for example, to opt out of things or to choose which mainstream lessons they went into. There
was a general feeling that the pupils were given opportunities to make choices:

\[ X \text{ can choose which mainstream classes he goes into. (QP11).} \]

They let him be on his own when he says he needs to. (QP7).

The teachers will make adjustments if he’s not happy about something. (QP5)

### 4.1.5 High Staffing Ratios

This theme of ‘higher staff ratios’ was cited by 9 respondents (all of whom had children who attended a specialist setting) to be a contributing factor of successful provision. Parents reported that with higher staff to pupil ratios schools have the time and resources to sufficiently meet the children’s needs. Some parents specified that this enabled staff to have the time to get to know the children better and also enabled them to be more flexible and provide support where it was required. For example:

Higher staffing levels means that they get more support and they feel happier. (QP2)

More staff so that they can spend more time with the kids and help them more. (QP3)

Small class sizes so that they are less stressed. (QP14)

Having more teaching assistants means that they can support them better.

### 4.1.6 School Ethos

This theme was cited by 8 parents and refers to the perceptions that the school as a whole was genuinely committed to supporting children with SEN, or specifically ASD. Parents reported a feeling of trust towards the school that
they were looking after their children. Again, all respondents who cited this as a contributing factor to success had children who attend a specialist setting. However,

*He feels safe there.* (QP1)

*Staff who care.* (QP10)

*It seems like the staff actually care and want to do their best for him.* (QP15)

### 4.1.7 Access to Quiet Areas

This theme refers to the parents’ views that pupils with ASD need access to a quiet area or low stimulation area at times when they feel they need it. This was cited by 6 of the parents as being a factor which leads to success, and interestingly, all 6 participants had children in mainstream schools as opposed to specialist settings. It was hypothesized that this may be due to their children experiencing difficulties with the noise and busy environments of mainstream high schools. Some parents refer to the importance of the availability of a quiet at lunchtime area at breaks and lunchtimes but some suggested that it should be available for whenever they need it:

*S somewhere quiet to go at lunchtime to get away from the crowds.* (QP1)

*They need a place to go to at break so they can stay calm.* (QP4)

*Need to know there’s somewhere quiet they can go to to unwind if they’re stressed.* (QP10)
4.1.8 Curriculum Support
This theme was cited by 3 parents as an indicator of success and refers to the pupils receiving in-class support with reading and recording, understanding what was being discussed in class and homework being set at appropriate levels. Two of the three parents commented on the stress created by receiving challenging homework:

*Having support in class to keep up and also to help with writing.* (QP4)

*Help with reading and writing and also going through the homework.* (QP5)

*Support to follow what the teachers are saying in class.* (QP10).

4.2 Pupils' questionnaire results

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Understanding of staff</th>
<th>School Ethos</th>
<th>Understanding of peers</th>
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<th>Emotional regulation</th>
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</table>
Table 2 shows the spread and distribution of the master themes generated across all of the pupil questionnaires, highlighting commonalities and nuances. Each individual pupil respondent was coded QYP and a number (where YP represents Young Person)) to distinguish between each one. The respondents highlighted in red on the table represent all the pupils who stated that they attend a specialist ASD setting. Only 2 of the 11 respondents reported that they attend a specialist ASD setting. Some participants cited several different but similar factors that all fit into the same category. This was more apparent for the pupils than for the parents, and is likely to reflect a particular difficulty associated with individuals with ASD: the tendency to attend to single elements of a stimulus or to fail to see the whole from the sum of the parts (Central Coherence Theory). Many of the pupils’ responses to the questionnaires tended to focus upon one or two main themes. Two key themes emerged that matched the parents’ responses: ‘Understanding of school staff’ and ‘school ethos’. However, the other themes are quite obviously related to the pupils’ own experiences of being a young person with autism that parents may not necessarily recognise in their role as a parent.

Five master themes emerged from the analysis:

- understanding of staff
- school ethos
- understanding of peers
- environmental adaptations
- emotional regulation

### 4.2.1 Understanding of Staff

This was the most commonly occurring factor and relates to the young people’s perceptions that in order for their needs to be met the staff have to have a good understanding of their individual needs. All 11 of the respondents reported that the knowledge and understanding of staff in relation to supporting pupils with ASD was crucial:
There should be a law to understanding autism. (YP1)

That teachers understand, sometimes they don’t. (YP4)

For teachers to know that if you don’t like something they shouldn’t make you do it. (YP8)

They shouldn't talk to us like we’re stupid. (YP9)

The teachers should know how to help you when things go wrong. (YP11)

4.2.2 School Ethos
This was the second most commonly occurring theme and was cited by 8 pupils as being an important factor in making a school successful. It relates to the need for the pupils to feel a sense of belonging and feeling welcome in their school and also that they are accepted by the other pupils. Although none of the respondents used the term ‘inclusive’, several suggested that a successful school is one that treats all pupils fairly and doesn’t discriminate:

When the teachers don't make you feel bad for being different. (YP3)

Being treated like you’re not weird. (YP6)

Where it’s OK to be different. (YP8)

Where you feel like you belong somewhere. (YP11)
4.2.3 Understanding of Peers

This theme was the third most commonly occurring theme and was cited by 7 pupils as being an important factor. It refers to the pupils’ perceptions that if the other students in the school had a good understanding of ASD they would be more likely to be accepted by their peers. Both pupils who were from a specialist setting cited this as a key factor and one (YP3) implied that he considered himself as being separate from the rest of the school and needed the ‘others’ to understand them.

*The school needs to make the other kids more aware.* (YP3)

*Understanding each other.* (YP5)

*Having friends who understand the way I am.* (YP6)

Three respondents specifically referred to bullying and there were implications that bullying incidents may be reduced if school staff responded to it and put a stop to it:

*Sometimes I get bullied and I need to know that the teachers are going to do something about it.* (YP3)

*Where they know you’re different but you don’t get bullied for it.* (YP11)

A school needs to put a stop from all kinds of bullying. (YP5)

4.2.4 Environmental Adaptations

This theme refers to how the school is physically adapted to help meet the needs of the pupils with ASD and was cited by 4 out of the 11 pupils as being a key factor. One of the pupils from a specialist setting referred to the fact that their school enabled them to be physically separate from their non-ASD peers. It is not clear from the questionnaires the extent to which they were separated and how the physical environment was set up to enable this but the
message was clear: that he valued the choice of being able to be in a ‘safe’ place away from the rest of the school:

*Having a place we can go that’s just for us.* (YP3)

Other respondents made reference to having special arrangements to avoid the busy corridors and lunch hall:

*We can have lunch in a separate place.* (YP1)

*Where you don’t have to do PE if you don’t want to.* (YP11)

*I need to be able to get to lessons early so I don’t have the stress of the corridors after lessons.* (YP6)

*Being taught in your own room so you don’t get bothered by anyone else.* (YP3)

### 4.2.5 Emotional Regulation

This theme refers to the pupils’ perceptions that they required emotional support from staff to cope better in situations they found challenging. Their responses appeared to imply that they required support to manage their feelings of stress and anxiety and reduce the incidents of emotional outbursts;

*Having help to keep calm and stop me doing things that are going to get me excluded from school.* (YP1)

*I’d be in a special school if I didn’t get help for my stress levels.* (YP5)

*Having help with bravery.* (YP9)
4.3 Constructing a model of good practice

The themes from both the parent and pupil questionnaires were collated and their commonalities were used to construct a model of good practice for supporting pupils with ASD (see figure 1). From the detail extracted from the completed questionnaires it was relatively simple to derive the main components of the model (from the factors simply listed by the participants) but somewhat more difficult to establish relationships and connections, and indeed to gauge the significance of these relationships between the different components of the model. This was due to the limited information provided by the completed questionnaires. However, what was apparent was that there was one factor/component that was prominent throughout the questionnaire data, and that was the importance of the ethos of the school. It was therefore decided to place ‘school ethos’ in the centre of the model with other components coming to/ from it as deemed appropriate from the responses. It was placed centrally within the model because there were implicit links between ethos and other positive qualities identified by certain respondents:

“If the teachers are kind and want to help you they will listen to you about what you need” (YP2)

“Where you feel safe and happy……. and that you’re not being pushed to do things you don’t want to do “ (YP10)

There was a clear message that a positive inclusive ethos meant that staff are more likely to listen to pupils and parents and more likely to be flexible to meet individual needs. As already stated, the limitations of questionnaire data became apparent here as the complexity of the relationships between these different components was only implicit within the data and was not really made explicit from many of the respondents. However, it was possible to use the information provided to construct the following model of good practice:

The text within the the model (figure 1) represents the sub themes within each super-ordinate theme.
FIGURE 1: A Model of Good Practice

- **SCHOOL ETHOS**
  - Promoting a sense of belonging
  - Welcoming Ethos
  - Promoting Respect for individual differences
  - Acceptance of children with SEN

- **ENVIRONMENT**
  - Adaptations
  - Alternative arrangements for PE break times, lunchtimes etc.
  - Access to low stimulation areas

- **SCHOOL STAFF**
  - Knowledge and understanding of ASD
  - Flexibility
  - Staffing levels
  - Opportunities for training

- **COMMUNICATION**
  - Between staff and pupils about their needs
  - Between staff and parents
  - Between pupils and peers

- **PUPILS**
  - Relationships with peers
  - School responsiveness to Bullying
  - Understanding of ASD of peers

- **EMOTIONAL SUPPORT**
  - Anger management
  - Emotional regulation
  - Access to low stimulation environments
  - Access to mentors

- **CURRICULUM SUPPORT**
  - Support with reading and recording
  - Support with recording
4.4 The Case Study

The next step of the research project was to analyse the case study data. The purpose of the case study was to compare and contrast the results with the model and if necessary, and to modify the model accordingly. As already discussed, the school was chosen for the case study as it was named by three questionnaire respondents as being one they perceived to be ‘successful’ in terms of its ability to meet the needs of pupils with ASD.

4.4.1 Background Information

The following information about the school was elicited from the following sources:

- the school prospectus
- a recent media article
- job advertisements
- 2008 Ofsted report
- discussions with the headteacher and head of the resource

Pertinent sections of the sourced articles can be found in the appendices.

The school is a maintained secondary school of average size within a small market town in the north west of England. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is very low. The proportion of students with special educational needs is below average, as is the percentage eligible for free school meals. The school opened an Enhanced Provision for children with social communication difficulties in 2008 which currently has seven pupils on role (full capacity is ten). There are two teachers within the provision (one of whom is head of the provision) and five support assistants. All staff have an undergraduate qualification in ASD. Because some pupils access a high proportion of their lessons within the unit, (and each one accesses different lessons of their own choice) the staff are in the position of having to teach aspects of the whole national curriculum, with some support from mainstream subject teachers. The purpose of the provision is to enable all of the pupils to access some degree of mainstream lessons whilst having a base within the nurturing environment of the enhanced provision. The level of inclusion into
the attached mainstream school varies for each pupil and at the time of the case study taking place it ranged from one pupil accessing no mainstream lessons to one pupil accessing 100% mainstream lessons. The aim is to increase the percentage of mainstream lessons attended for each pupil over their time there. The selection criteria states that: 1) all pupils have an SEN that is consistent with a diagnosis of ASD, 2) they must have a statement of special educational needs and 3) they must be able to access some mainstream lessons. At the time of the case study taking place, two of the pupils were in Year 7, four were in Year 10 and one was in Year 11. All pupils joined the provision in Year 7 and six of the seven pupils transferred from the primary enhanced provision within the same borough. The other pupils transferred from a mainstream primary school at the end of Year 6. Two out of the seven pupils were girls.

The school does not have a separate prospectus for the Enhanced Provision but the school prospectus states that:

*The Enhanced Provision for children with communication difficulties is an integral part of the Curriculum Support Department. We aim to promote the development of our pupils in an understanding and supportive environment. Given the right encouragement and inspiration, our students are able to develop their own personalities, build on their strengths and fulfil their potential.*

Extracts from the latest Ofsted report highlighted one of the strengths of the school as being its inclusive and caring ethos:

*This is a good school. Achievement is good and standards are above average……... Personal development and wellbeing are outstanding. This is a school that is characterised by a high degree of mutual respect and a strong commitment to inclusion……...The school has an exceptionally positive ethos which contributes greatly to pupils’ all round development….. (2008)*
4.5 Findings from Interview Data

The table below shows the spread and distribution of themes across the interviews with the three parents, three members of staff and three pupils, highlighting commonalities and nuances. Due to the significant number of overlaps between the themes for each of the three stakeholder groups the results were analysed and themed as one group, not as three separate groups. In the table below, each individual parent respondent was coded P (and a number), each staff respondent was coded S (and a number) and each pupil, young person was coded YP (and a number) to distinguish between each one. All 9 super-ordinate themes have been included, even if they were only relevant for a small number of participants.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
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<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Emotional Support</th>
<th>Staff Knowledge</th>
<th>Ethos</th>
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Each of the superordinate themes will be discussed in more detail and in order from the most commonly occurring to the least commonly occurring.
4.5.1 Control
This was the most commonly occurring theme and refers to perceptions of all the interview participants that a significant factor in determining a successful educational experience for the young people is in enabling them to feel they have some control about what happens to them. There was an overall positive perception that they had a voice and they were listened to and that they were part of decision-making processes, rather than being passive recipients that things simply happened to. As a result there were no feelings from any of the pupils or their parents that they were having to fight against the system.

There appeared to be a shared understanding that many children and young people with ASD need to feel that they have some level of control and that trying to enforce the same rules upon all of the pupils would not work.

*He’s had a choice about which classes he goes into……he can ask if he can come out of a class when he feels uncomfortable………He will only ever do what he wants to do, so he needs to feel he has some control.* (P2)

*There’s no point in trying to push children with ASD to do something they don’t want to do, it will just cause stress.* (S1)

*“If you don’t want to go into lessons they bring you out……If I get a headache I can say I don’t want to go into them [mainstream lessons]… cos it would be too much”* (YP2)

This feeling of control appeared to make the pupils feel safe, less anxious and more positive about being able to cope with difficult situations in the future:

*Teachers who listen to you when you say something is vital. That makes all the difference because it just totally affects how you feel. It just makes you feel that it will be OK.* (YP2)

*“He’s happier and more relaxed with staff that listen to him.”* (P1)
They make decisions about when to increase or decrease mainstream and by how much by asking him. It prevents problems by being like that. They don’t force him to do anything. (P2)

YP2 described in his interview how staff from his previous school (a mainstream school) didn’t listen to him or ask him what he needed:

The teachers were stubborn, they didn’t listen to pupils, they never listened to you, they just wanted you to fit into their system, regardless of what you found hard…….. It’s different here, they listen and all the pressure has been taken away. (YP2)

It is apparent, however, that this level of flexibility and responsiveness to pupil voice is possibly made more achievable because of the higher staffing levels within the enhanced provision. If strategies fail, the problems are discussed with the pupils and new strategies are drawn up and tested. This inevitably increases the confidence of the pupils that they will be listened to but also increases the confidence of the staff that they will be able to support these pupils and tackle any future difficulties:

It works because we have the time and the capacity to find out what’s effective and what isn’t for each individual. We are constantly learning from them. The problems change over time so we have to change our strategies. We have to deal with individual problems for individual kids. We try different things and if they don’t work we talk to them and try something else. (S1)

“We have to take his lead about what we learn about. If he’s not interested he refuses to do it.” (S2)

4.5.2 Happiness
This is the second most commonly occurring theme and was cited by eight of the nine interview participants. It was strikingly evident from the interviews with the parents that this was their primary concern: that their children
generally felt happy in school. It was apparent from two of the families that they had been on a long and difficult emotional journey with their children in relation to their difficulties associated with ASD. The levels of harmony within the family homes appeared to be largely dependent upon the emotional wellbeing of the pupils in school:

The main thing for me is that he’s happy. One little thing can stress him out and before coming here I’d had 10 years of hell. Everyday there was a major incident of some kind and it was just so stressful….. If I win the lottery they’ll [staff] be the first to get some, they’ve just changed our lives because he’s finally happy. (P1)

We have our fair share of problems and lots of squabbles, of course, but generally they seem to be happy here and that’s what matters, I think. (S3)

4.5.3 Inclusion
This theme refers to the amount and also the quality of social inclusion the pupils experience. Although it was cited by all but one of the participants, it did not appear to be perceived by any of the stakeholders as a priority of concern, particularly for the parents and the pupils themselves. Parents 1 and 2 both talked about inclusion; to Parent 1 it was not at all seen as a priority because he was happy just being in the resourced provision and the mainstream lessons would stress him out:

He’s still getting one–to-one in the unit, which I know isn’t what it’s supposed to be about, but he’s so rigid that at the moment he refuses to go anywhere else. (P1)

I’m not exactly sure how many lessons he’s going into now, but to be honest, I’m just pleased that he wants to go. (P3)

Parent 2 was extremely pleased that his son was accessing 100% of his mainstream lessons and that he achieved this easily:
X is accessing all of his mainstream classes now which is brilliant. He sometimes eats with the children from the mainstream school too. I don’t think it could be any better for X, it’s perfect. He achieved his goal of mainstream very quickly, I think because he felt so safe in school that he just went with it. (P2)

The staff appeared to be more concerned about the fact that the inclusion of these pupils into the mainstream school was a priority and a goal for them to work towards, and, when questioned about success criteria, the enhanced provision manager (S1) identified inclusion as the criteria for success:

Success is being able to access the majority of mainstream lessons, or even if it’s not the majority it should be continually increasing to the maximum that each individual feels they can achieve. (S1)

When questioned further about one of the pupils who has been at the school for a whole school year and is still not accessing any mainstream lessons or social activities with the rest of the school, S1 explained:

X came from a mainstream primary and he was so stressed when he came to us. It has taken a while for us to understand what was stressing him out. A psychologist suggested just teaching him in the enhanced provision for a while but it’s proving to be very difficult to get him into mainstream at all. Mum would like him to just be in here for the rest of his time here but that’s just not possible…… I’d hate to get him to the end of his education and him not be able to speak to anyone. (S1)

Inclusion was also highlighted as an important target for each pupil by the headteacher (S3):

The reason it works is because we’re committed to inclusion and that is one of our main aims, to get them into as many mainstream classes as
possible…….We would be doing them a disservice if they were just stuck in the resource all the time, that’s not what it’s about here. (S3)

However, although several participants referred to the target of increasing the amount of inclusion each pupil accessed within the mainstream school, there was no mention of a target of improving the quality of these inclusive experiences, despite talking about concerns that the experiences weren’t particularly inclusive. S1 talked about the amount of support some of the pupils needed in order to be able to cope with the mainstream lessons and their accounts suggested that for most of the pupils, their mainstream experiences may not be particularly inclusive experiences for them:

TAs tend to go into mainstream lessons with them. Quite often a TA is sitting with them in class which isn’t ideal but then sometimes they’re just floating around supporting the whole class……. Some ask for someone to be sitting with them all the time, like X, she will always need one-to-one support. And X is too scared to go into a class without someone sitting next to her….. She likes the other kids to talk to her but she never talks back to them. (S1)

Another illuminating finding was the fact that the mainstream staff appeared to take a back seat in terms of responsibility for the support and behaviour management of the pupils from the enhanced provision and that ultimately the responsibility lay with the enhanced provision staff:

They (mainstream staff) all know that I am there to help them with any problems that happen in class. Often I’m called in to try and negotiate with one of our kids when it’s going wrong. I think that’s one of the reasons it’s working, they trust that I will sort out any problems; I’m there to support the staff as well as the kids. (S1)

We (enhanced provision staff), have to be there in the lessons for them coz we’re the ones who can judge when things are going to happen and we can judge what the right thing to do is. (S2)
YP3 also described the security and confidence he feels that the enhanced provision staff are there for him, and he appeared to refer to a divide in terms of who he perceived were his advocates and who weren’t:

*X used to fight for me. She’s always there for me, trying to get the others to understand me. Maybe over time they (mainstream staff) will understand me better and be able to help me in the same way.* (YP3)

Another clear indication that the enhanced provision pupils may not be having truly inclusive experiences was the fact that S1 explained that the existence of the enhanced provision was not actually realised by the mainstream pupils, and interestingly, this was a purposeful move to conceal it in order to prevent them from being seen as different and standing out from the rest of the school:

*The vast majority will be unaware of the unit existing. We’ve purposefully kept it separate and behind these screens so that it’s not seen as a separate unit.* (S2)

There was an overall sense (from the enhanced provision staff) of wanting to protect their pupils from enhanced provision and by keeping the unit hidden somehow protected the pupils from being seen as different. By doing this they believed were keeping them safe and preventing them from being bullied:

*In this way, the pupils know they have somewhere safe to come to that the rest of the school doesn’t, and that makes it seem like a safe place for them.* (S1)

This feeling of wanting to protect the pupils from the unit and keeping them safe and happy was definitely appreciated by the pupils and the parents but will be considered further in the ‘Discussion’ section as to how this may impact on the inclusion of these pupils in their mainstream classes.
4.5.4 Relationships
This is another commonly occurring theme and encompasses the importance of several different types of relationships within the school which contribute to its success:

1) the relationships between staff and parents
2) the relationships between the staff and the young people
3) the relationships between the young people and their peers
4) the relationships between the unit staff and the mainstream staff

4.5.4.1 Relationships between staff and parents
A perceived significant factor contributing to the apparent success of the enhanced provision appears to be the regular and consistent two-way communication between staff and parents. Regular text messages are sent by staff to parents to feedback about daily successes and difficulties and informal meetings are called by either parents or school staff whenever issues arise. There was a general feeling that the staff were willing and helpful and this served to develop a feeling of trust from the families. It was apparent that parents felt comfortable talking to staff about a range of issues and that they felt confident that problems would be dealt with sensitively. All parents of pupils from the enhanced provision commented upon the usefulness of both the high level of feedback and the willingness of school staff to listen to parents and pupils themselves:

When there is a problem it is discussed with X (pupil), us and his teachers. It is nipped in the bud straight away. (P2)

When things happen you can always trust that things will get sorted out. (P3)

There was a general feeling that decisions are made with the family and that there wasn’t a feeling of things being done to them, they are done with them.
Teachers and parents learn from each other and we’re always asked what we think about things instead of being told what they’re going to do. In that way everyone gets better at dealing with things. (S3)

4.5.4.2 Relationships between staff and pupils
There was a definite feeling that the pupils trusted the staff (in the enhanced provision) and that they would support them and help them through any difficult situation and this appeared to make the pupils feel safe and secure. It was felt that the staff in the enhanced provision were true advocates for the pupils:

They (teachers) are nice here. They listen to you and that makes all the difference to how I feel. At my last school they never listened to you and they just wanted you to go along with whatever they wanted you to do. (YP1)

Staff broke their own regulations to make sure I was alright. It was horrifying seeing some of the things I was doing because of the other kids. Other schools would have put me in a mental institute. (YP3)

These close relationships between the pupils and the staff are also recognised and valued by the parents as a contributing factor to success:

The staff are the key to making it work. They all know X and that helps. He can be a bit in your face and annoying to others but they understand him and like him for who he is. (P2)

4.5.4.3 Relationships between the pupils and their peers
This appeared to be of less concern to the parents and the staff, possibly because there may be a pre-conception that people with ASD do not particularly want friends, or at least that they find this difficult so it is not expected. However, the ability to get along with their peers was recognised by the young people themselves as being very important to them and for one
pupil in particular his difficulties in this area are a significant concern to him and are something that need to be addressed:

I’ve always wanted to fit in but I’ve always found it hard to.... It’s down to the understanding of the other kids but you can’t force them to understand.... The hardest thing for me is dealing with the other kids in mainstream. This started to cause lots of problems for me, especially when I started to become attracted to a girl and that took over a lot of my thoughts. I started to hide up here in the unit more and not go into my lessons. (YP3)

Sometimes we get bullied, it’s a form of bigotry..... I think they’re immature philistines if they don’t understand me and my autism. Other kids do understand me though so I can sometimes make friends. (YP2)

Parent 3 was the only parent who alluded to the importance of access to good social role models from the mainstream school and the need to be able to form friendships:

I think over time we need to, (and the school as well) work on helping him to make friends and I mean real friends with the other kids, because he needs that to be able to fit in. I mean when he finishes school, not just when he’s in school. He really does find that hard, he thinks he’s got friends now, but he hasn’t really. (P3)

Parent 2 also acknowledged that his son did not have real friends but seemed less concerned about this:

He makes acquaintances with children in mainstream, I wouldn’t say they were friends but he says they are, but I guess he’s happy with that. (P2)

The enhanced provision staff appeared to spend a lot of time attempting to address the social needs of each pupil. They develop individual programmes
to meet each pupil’s needs, involving modelling and rehearsing appropriate social interaction skills, teaching about friendship skills, inviting certain mainstream pupils into the unit etc. The input certainly seems to be paying off for one of the pupils, (YP1), who said:

I like making friends here, I think if I’d have gone to a special school, I wouldn’t have made half as many friends. It just wouldn’t have been right for me, I’m a friendly person who needs lots of friends. (YP2)

However, both staff and YP2’s father, commented on the fact that YP2 had little awareness of how he was perceived by others and that many of his peers in mainstream did accept him and like him, but that he was also seen as different and was sometimes teased:

He still has a long way to go to make friends on an equal basis. He seems immature and quite funny to others but he doesn’t realise this, he thinks they’re his friends. (P2)

In contrast, YP3, who has greater self awareness, appeared to be extremely aware of his social limitations and was very self-conscious about standing out and being different. This therefore appeared to have made him more reluctant to try and make friends and participate in social situations for fear of being bullied and/or rejected:

I started withdrawing more because I started to get persecuted for being different. I know I’m different but until people accept difference I’m not going to fit in. (YP3)

It therefore appears to be the case that the more self-awareness a pupil has, the less confident s/he may feel in terms of being able to fit in and form friendships and the less socially included s/he may then become. However, for pupils like YP2, who have poor self-awareness, they may have more confidence to seek out friendships and to be included, but if there isn’t a strong school ethos about inclusion, acceptance and celebrating diversity
such pupils will struggle to be included despite having a strong desire to be. This again highlights the importance of a school striving to achieve an inclusive ethos.

Three of the respondents reported positive reasons for having pupils with ASD together within the unit:

They (other pupils with ASD), understand me and my autism. (YP2)

We’re all like a bunch of colours, we’re all a colour, but we’re all individual shades and I like that. (YP3)

They all understand each other and know that they all have similar needs. (P3)

They feel safe being in the unit together. (P2)

However, there were also several reports of on-going and very difficult disputes between the pupils within the Enhanced Provision. YP1 talked about his frustrations with particular pupils and he appeared to have very low tolerance levels for some of the other students’ idiosyncracies:

I have a few friends in here [the unit] but they’re not really my friends, coz they just wind me up and I like to wind them up. Now X REALLY annoys me, she’s the most annoying person ever, it’s her voice, it’s everything….. [X approaches]. Don’t ask her anything she won’t shut up, she just goes on and on and on. I can’t bear to be in the same room as her…… And Y also annoys me, he just walks around all the time, he won’t sit still for one minute. (YP1)

YP2 also commented on a difficult relationship within the unit:

I get on with everyone except for X. He annoys me. He points guns at me a lot. (YP2)
The staff agreed that there were tensions between some pupils and that they had to ensure particular students weren’t in the same room together for too long. They reported that they were trying to tackle this using the support from outside agencies (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, CAMHS) and through teaching conflict resolution skills in the social skills groups.

All three of the pupil participants displayed a range of socially inappropriate behaviours that became apparent throughout the interviews, such as controlling conversations and making them very one-sided, constantly interrupting, not listening and actually asking me when it was going to finish (YP2). Interestingly, two of the pupils made comments that they recognised their difficulties/limitations with social interactions and Pupil 3 made explicit reference to the fact that the staff were helping him to address these issues and supporting him to be a more effective communicator:

> When I came here I couldn’t talk to anyone and they’ve helped me to come out of my shell and to try to talk to people more. It’s not that I didn’t want to, I just didn’t know how to. (YP3)

### 4.5.4.4 Relationships between unit and mainstream staff

All three members of staff talked about the importance of the trusting relationships between unit staff and mainstream staff. S1 specified the importance of having the trust between the staff and the feeling that they support each other:

> The one thing that has made this job possible is knowing that the rest of the school are on board with it. I know that they will support me and at the same time they trust that I will sort out any problems for them too. (S1)

S2 talked about the importance of the status of the manager of the enhanced provision within the school and also the relationships between the staff and
the senior management team. He felt that this had enabled the staff from the provision to have a say about what they wanted and needed in order for it to be a success:

It's key who the link is in the senior management team. The SENCo is the link and because we work fairly closely with the SENCo we are able to get our views across. (S2)

4.5.5 Emotional Support
This theme was again cited by eight out of the nine participants as being a key factor in determining success. It refers specifically to the emotional support the pupils receive from the staff in the enhanced provision:

When I came here I couldn’t express my own feelings and they helped me to come out of my shell and talk about my feelings more……..I’ve always been dependent on other people to comfort me. I’ve had my comfort zone in other people because I couldn’t calm myself. They treat me like a security issue here coz of how I used to blow up at the beginning, and I’ve always known that my problems would always be solved, someone would always help me. (YP3)

I don’t need so much help with stuff anymore, I’ve got more confidence. Even if there’s a situation and there’s no teachers to help me I’ll just sort it out myself now. That’s my strength now - my bravery. I didn’t have that before I came here. (YP2)

The theme also refers to the recognition of staff that in order for the pupils to have successful placements they need to focus upon their emotional literacy skills in order to enable them to be more resilient and independent:

Ideally we want them to be more independent and be less dependent upon us to solve all their problems for them. We tend to be like their supporters at first, then over time we try to help them to think more about how they could deal with a situation….. yes, like develop their
problem-solving skills and ability to deal with conflict. There’s no point in them coming out of here completely dependent on us to fight all their battles for them, that wouldn’t be fair on them. Ultimately we want them to be independent. (S1)

4.5.6 Staff Knowledge

This theme was referred to by seven out of the nine respondents and refers to the perception that the staff have a good understanding of autism and understand the needs of the pupils. The pupils and their parents highlighted again and again that one of the most positive aspects of the school was the understanding of staff, or more precisely, the time taken by staff to attempt to learn about and understand the needs of the pupils. Having a good general knowledge about ASD appears to enable the staff to look at particular behaviours with more clarity and understanding and therefore enables them to address these more appropriately:

They understand what things we find difficult and understand that it’s not behaviour, it’s the autism and what we can’t handle because of the autism. (YP3)

We’ve made sure that all of the school have had some basic autism training but we’re constantly trying to generate a better awareness around the school. I think there’s been a change in attitude from a lot of the staff. I think they’re beginning to understand that there’s no point trying to push kids with ASD to do something they don’t want to do. (S1)

However, despite the general feeling that the staff within the whole school have a relatively good understanding of ASD, it was also recognised by staff in the enhanced provision that they need to continue to develop the skills and knowledge across the whole school. However, one member of staff thought that it was down to the interests and motivations of individual members of staff:
They [mainstream staff] don’t always get enough information about the children. However, they have to want to learn about the kids and be willing to take time out to do this. It depends on each teacher really. (S1)

4.5.7 School Ethos
Parents and staff from the enhanced provision all described the school as a welcoming place with an inclusive ethos. The staff emphasized the support from the rest of the school, saying that they felt they were working with, rather than alongside them.

It is such an inclusive school, people were just really supportive from the start. I asked the whole school if the unit was what they wanted. Only two had concerns, and that was about their own lack of knowledge. It wouldn’t have worked if they hadn’t been with us on it. The school as a whole have wanted to work with us from the start. (S3)

We wouldn’t have been able to do it if we hadn’t had the whole school’s support. They needed to be on our side for the inclusion to work. (S2)

I think they [the local authority] asked us because they know my background is SEN…… It has to be a school that’s very inclusive. (S3)

Although the enhanced provision staff talked about the inclusive ethos of the whole school, there was a general sense of ‘them’ and ‘us’ and that the resource base was very separate. There was a definite feeling that the mainstream staff had ‘agreed’ to the unit, but on the basis of the resourced provision staff maintaining overall responsibility for the young people with ASD. They seemed to look upon the resourced provision staff as ‘experts’ in supporting pupils with ASD and this almost disempowered them from dealing with some challenging situations themselves. S2 talked about mainstream staff calling for her assistance if they experienced difficulty with a pupil from the resource base:
They trust that I will sort out any problems for them……. There have been several incidents of me having to go down and kind of help resolve a problem or remove them from class……. this isn’t happening quite as frequently but they know I’m there to do that if they need me. (S2)

Within the smaller unit of the resourced provision there was definitely a strong sense of belonging, and one pupil described it as being “like a family” (YP2). From the staff interviews it was clear that the staff cared greatly about the pupils as individuals and pupils clearly felt that the enhanced provision staff were real advocates for them. One member of staff talked about how difficult it is to ‘let go’ of pupils when they leave and the unit feeling a sense of loss of the young person from the school community:

X, who was here from the start of setting up the unit, has found it really difficult at college…….. He comes back a lot, which is nice. I think he will for a while, because we were a big part of his life… kind of like his support structure really. (S1)

There was no mention of resourced provision staff seeing this ‘divide’ as a problem or having a vision to work on the cohesion with the whole school – to work towards whole school goals and a whole school shared ethos rather than focusing on the goals within the resourced provision. The resourced provision staff appeared to value having the status of ASD ‘experts’ and felt that these young people needed key people to be their advocates.

They know we’re there for them and that helps them get through…….. I think because we know them best we’re always trying to help teachers understand some of their behaviours. (S1)

There was extensive talk about the support and inclusive beliefs of the mainstream staff yet there was very little mention of the attitudes and values
of the pupils from the mainstream school. YP3 talked about the feeling of not being understood by the mainstream pupils and said:

You can’t force them to understand…..The hardest thing for me is dealing with the other kids in mainstream. (YP3)

For this pupil there was a definite sense of division between the resource base and the rest of the school and he felt that they were seen as ‘different’. YP3 recognised that there wasn’t a general sense of acceptance and tolerance for difference within the whole school and felt like there was an underlying problem of intolerance from the mainstream pupils.

I know I’m different but until people accept difference I’m not going to fit in. (YP3)

This statement suggests that YP3 appears to realise that he will never be fully included within the whole school unless the values and belief systems of the mainstream pupils are challenged and an inclusive ethos is truly in place. He alludes to the fact that it is not about educating them specifically about ASD but it is a wider issue of educating young people about valuing difference.

4.5.8 Learning Support

This theme was referred to by only three of the participants and refers to the differentiated/additional academic support the pupils from the enhanced provision receive as well as adaptations to the environment or to the different expectations from staff. For example, one of the pupils receives all of his lessons within a one-to-one or small group situation because of his specific learning styles and learning needs:

We have to take his lead about what he learns about. If he’s not interested he refuses to do it……. We have to deliver the learning in short bursts and at a very fast pace or he loses interest…….. I have him for three hours every morning and we have three lessons in that
time and if he works hard he gets to have a choice of what he does in the afternoon. (S2)

I have support in lessons because I’m no good at writing, it tires me…….. Sometimes I need some time out to walk around. I move around a lot just because I like it, it feels comfy. (YP2)

One member of staff talked about the specific needs of another pupil and how he has to change his teaching strategies to suit him:

Some days X needs to pace around so a lot of my lessons are done on the big screen. He doesn’t do much writing. He gets frustrated with writing so he’s much better at learning through discussion and reading the screen. (S2)

Academic targets or progress wasn’t mentioned by any of the participants; their main concern was being able to access learning and the need to adapt teaching strategies. One concern was raised by Parent 2 about the fact that the unit staff deliver most of the lessons even though they aren’t trained to deliver many of those subjects:

They teach some subjects from a book, particularly Spanish. He doesn’t like reading and writing, the best way for him to learn is speaking, but, you know, he wouldn’t learn at all if he wasn’t happy so I don’t see it as a massive problem. (P2)

It was mentioned by two of these respondents that in order to meet the learning needs of these pupils, there had to be a significant adult to pupil ratio:

You need a good amount of staff coz we can’t all be in mainstream all the time, we just can’t do it, and I can’t even be with other kids sometimes, they just annoy me so I need some lessons on my own. (YP1)
4.5.9 Environment

This theme was cited by three of the participants and it refers to the need for staff to consider adaptations to the environment in order to meet the needs of pupils with ASD. For example, YP1 and YP3 both mentioned the need to have these breaks which appear to serve the purpose of enabling sensory regulation because both referred to their sensitivities to noise and dislike of crowds:

*I need somewhere quiet to go to sometimes so I can get away from the irritating voices of X and Y..... I hate feeling like I’m being scrambled around the school from place to place, the busy corridors stress me out so I need to avoid those.... I have lunch in the unit coz I can’t stand the noise in the hall.* (YP1)

*Sometimes I just need space and quiet. I’m starting to not be too bothered by noise now, but it still gets to me sometimes.....PE is getting better too, it just depends what we’re doing, sometimes I need to do something else.* (YP2)

The enhanced provision manager talked about how the physical environment of the enhanced provision was not ideal and that in order to improve the provision they would need to make specific changes:

*If I was asked to set it up again, I would stress the need to have more than two separate rooms. We’ve got these partitioning walls but they need to be properly separated so that they can have the time out sessions in them without any noise or interuptions at all. Some of them really need to be separated from each other more too, to avoid all the spats and arguments, it’s tiring and very stressful trying to keep the peace. Also, I would want the unit more central within the SEN base, it feels like we’re totally separate and not really part of the SEN department.* (S1)
4.6 Connections between the themes

There were several commonalities across the themes yet key aspects of each theme enabled me to confidently conclude that they needed to be separate themes in their own right. For example, the themes ‘control’, ‘ethos’ and ‘relationships’ had very close links in that the reason many of the pupils experienced this sense of control was because of them feeling that staff had a good understanding of their needs and also their close relationships meant that they felt ‘safe’, protected and listened to. Close relationships would not be established if the school did not place such high value on respecting others’ views and listening to one another. It was felt that ‘control’ needed to be a separate theme because there were significant implications to the young people feeling in control, such as increasing their resilience and enabling them to take greater risks, for example, increasing their levels of inclusion into the mainstream school.

The theme ‘environment’ has links with ‘control’, ‘staff knowledge’ and also ‘relationships’ as many of the environmental adaptations were made after discussions with the pupils themselves but were also influenced by the staff’s understanding of ASD such as their knowledge of sensory difficulties and rigidity/inflexibility of thought. For example, YP1 wanted to be allowed to pace about in lessons and he wanted to have lunch in the unit rather than in the main hall due to his sensory difficulties. His requests were listened to and respected as staff knew they would get the best out of him if he was calm and sensed he had a degree of control.

The themes ‘Emotional Support’, ‘Ethos’ and ‘Relationships’ are also closely related as the pupils talked about the staff helping them to cope through difficult situations and the staff talked about trying to help them to develop coping strategies to enable them to be more resilient and independent. The staff were only able to do this through their strong desires to help these pupils and by getting to know them so well. It would appear that this strand of relationships i.e. between pupils and resourced provision staff was the strongest component of the ‘relationships’ theme. The understanding the mainstream staff had of these pupils seemed to be developing slightly over
time, but not to the extent of them feeling able to provide any emotional support for these pupils. It may therefore be the case that if the inclusive ‘ethos’ were a stronger, more school-wide goal, that these relationships would be stronger.

It is clear that the themes of ‘relationships’ and ‘ethos’ appear to have links with all of the other themes, and their influences were clear throughout the whole interview process. It was also evident that the school placed a high value upon listening to one another, valuing pupils’ contributions and working together.

4.7 Summary of the observation findings
Descriptive reports of the unstructured observations for all three pupils in the enhanced provision and in the mainstream lessons (except for one pupil who does not access any mainstream lessons) will now be documented under some of the headings that were considered to be most appropriate for this context, from ‘The Observer Classroom Environment Measure’ (OCEM, Feldlauser, Midgley & Eccles, 1998). In some lessons there were other pupils from the unit present and therefore observations were not just limited to the target pupils. I will therefore report more general findings of what was observed to be going on within the classrooms.

4.7.1 Independent working
All of the pupils engaged in some level of independent working in their observed lessons, however, the extent to which they did this varied considerably, and appeared to depend on their literacy skills, (in particular their recording skills) learning styles, motivation and interest in the task. YP1 engages very little in recording work but has very good reading skills and if he is interested in the task he will read and initiate discussions about what he is learning. In the lesson that I observed, he did not appear to be particularly motivated and was constantly going off task and trying to engage with his teacher in discussions about football. He therefore required a considerable amount of support to continually re-focus him and engage him in the task and there was very little evidence of independent reading/writing. YP2 presented
as fairly motivated to listen and engage in discussions but was less motivated
to engage in any reading and recording and he required a considerable
amount of support from his TA to help with this. He frequently initiated
discussions about unrelated topics and had difficulty keeping to the task set
by the class teacher. The responsibility of keeping the pupils from the
enhanced provision on task appeared to lie completely with the TA who was
supporting them and not the subject teacher. YP3 was the most independent
and this appeared to be due to his conscientious nature and motivation to
learn, but also due to his higher levels of literacy and recording skills.

4.7.2 Understanding of the lesson/instructions
YP1 and YP3 demonstrated good understanding of the lesson evidenced
through them being able to answer questions directed to them about the
topics. However, it was unclear about YP2’s understanding as he asked his
TA a lot of unrelated questions and did not put his hand up to offer a response
to questions directed to the whole class. When asked a question directly by
the TA he did not give a particularly appropriate response and again started to
talk about something similar but not directly related. The mainstream subject
teachers engaged very little with the Enhanced Provision pupils. They did
not take the time to check with them that they had understood the task or the
lesson and it was very clear that this was the responsibility of the TA. This
meant that there was very little interaction between the pupils with ASD and
the subject teachers.

In both of the mainstream lessons that I observed, there was no evidence of
planned differentiation of work for the pupils with ASD. YP3 did not require
this but YP2 may have benefitted from having certain adaptations such as
writing frames/a cloze procedure task etc to reduce the demands of the
recording aspect of the task. Any differentiation was implemented solely by
the TA and involved her reducing his demands, such as through scribing for
him, simplifying instructions and explanations and summarising main learning
points. This had the effect of physically separating him from the rest of the
class to a certain degree. However, because of the sociable nature of YP2, this marginalisation was minimised to some extent.

4.7.3 Listening to and interacting with classmates

At the time the case study took place, YP1 was refusing to go into any mainstream classes and he was also struggling to interact positively with some of his peers in the enhanced provision. This meant that not only were the frequency of interactions limited but also quite often when he did initiate communication with them, they were negative and sometimes somewhat aggressive. He tended to direct comments at them and did not attempt to engage in any two way conversation. He was not interested in listening to their accounts of things and struggled to tolerate listening to certain pupils’ voices for long. All of his lessons were currently being undertaken in a one to one situation and therefore there were no interactions taking place with his peers during lessons.

However, for YP2 his ability and willingness to interact and listen to their classmates was significantly more positive and therefore occurred more frequently. YP2 was extremely keen to interact with his peers and initiated this frequently. Although some of his classmates appeared to welcome his interactions, he was not particularly skilled at this and his ‘conversations’ tended to be rather one-sided and he did not always listen to or comment upon his classmates’ responses. YP3 was less socially confident and although he spoke to his peers from the unit he did not initiate any interactions with the rest of the class. This was also the case for the other pupils from the unit. They were very much seated together in a cluster with a TA from the unit. Although some presented as keen to listen to what as going on in the class and were happy for the other classmates to talk to them, some chose not to respond or they gave very little responses and did not initiate further questions to sustain the ‘conversation’. The mere physical placing of the pupils from the unit together (if there is more than one in a class) with a TA makes them feel and also present as being separate. As already mentioned in the interview results, when YP2 attends a lesson unsupported and without any of his peers from the unit he presents as much more part of the class and
does not stand out as much. He tends not to sit on the periphery and ‘blends in’ more. However, when other pupils or staff from the unit are present he tends to choose to sit with them. In hindsight, it would have been very useful to observe YP2 in a class where he was unsupported.

4.7.4 Engaging in problem-solving
YP1 and YP3 were very independent and motivated learners and tended to engage in independent problem solving, simply because they had the skills to do this. However, from the observations undertaken, there was very little or no evidence of any problem-solving taking place within the mainstream lessons for YP2 or any of the other pupils from the unit. Support from TAs tended to focus upon reading and recording and simplifying instructions and explanations and there was very little facilitation of discussion or scaffolding of learning to encourage the pupils to reflect and think more deeply about topics. These pupils presented much more as passive learners in comparison to their classmates. They tended to listen to the discussions of others within the classroom but engaged in very little discussion themselves. However, this is just as much likely to be due to their own limitations (linked to their diagnosis of ASD) as to the dynamics of the class. In the unit at breaktimes and lunchtimes, there was evidence of problem-solving being facilitated by staff, specifically regarding how to resolve conflicts or minor problems within the unit. For example, the pupils were asked to consider alternative strategies/solutions as well as to consider how their actions/behaviours might impact upon others in the unit. However, in general, there was a significantly greater degree of modelling techniques rather than facilitating independent problem-solving.

4.7.5 Expression of own views
All of the pupils from the unit were observed to express their own views about a range of subjects within the context of the unit. For example, they expressed their views about football teams, other pupils’ behaviours, what they liked or disliked about a lesson and what they did not want to do. Within the context of the unit all of the pupils appeared to be very comfortable to do this and in fact
there appeared to be a culture of encouraging the pupils to express their views freely. However, at times a small number of them appeared to do this in a manner and to such a frequency that upset and/or irritated others. Conversely, within the context of the mainstream lessons, there was very little evidence of the pupils expressing their views. YP2 responded verbally to concrete questions about the subject matter and did once offer his opinion about a matter that was not school related to one of his mainstream classmates, but he did not verbally offer his personal opinion about anything to do with the lesson. The subject teachers did, on a small number of occasions, ask the whole class for their opinions but the pupils from the enhanced provision did not offer a response. Although this contrast is not surprising as people with a diagnosis of ASD often feel more self-conscious about expressing their views in front of a larger audience, yet there was a definite feeling of the enhanced provision pupils being somewhat ‘protected’ by the TA in a small cluster.

4.7.6 Showing enjoyment in the lesson

There was evidence of all three of the target pupils showing enjoyment of the lessons they were observed in, but all for different reasons. YP1 genuinely appeared to have an interest and motivation to learn about the topic matter (which he chooses himself) and appeared to enjoy the ‘banter’ he has with his teacher when discussing certain topics in a one-to-one. YP2 definitely appears to enjoy being part of a mainstream lesson. He particularly enjoys the social element of being part of a wider group, and the fact that some of his classmates are friendly towards him and engage with him positively. YP3 appeared to enjoy elements of the lesson, evidenced by the fact that he was observed to listen intently and engage immediately in any independent work. It was not clear how much he enjoyed the social aspect of being part of a larger group, which included peers who could be loud and boisterous at times. He very much kept himself to himself and did not attempt to engage with them. Nor did he appear to be interested in them as he wasn’t observed listening in to their conversations or observing their behaviours.
4.7.7 Collaborative working

There was no evidence of any collaborative working between the pupils, other than occasional discussions about a topic within the enhanced provision. In the mainstream lessons I observed, one of the subject teachers instructed the pupils to discuss something in pairs for several minutes, but the target pupils tended just to ‘discuss’ the topic with the TA, not with their classmates. Neither the TA nor the subject teacher facilitated or encouraged the pupils from the enhanced provision to have a discussion with another classmate. It appeared that there was almost an unspoken rule that this would be too challenging for them.

4.8 Revisiting the Model of Good Practice

With all the analysis of the case study data completed, it is now time to examine the original model of good practice constructed and consider where any consistencies, anomalies and additional components may lie but also consider whether the evidence from the case study suggests that any changes to the relationships between the components need to be altered within the model. Upon first constructing the model after the questionnaire data was analysed, it was felt that this was precisely what was missing from the questionnaire data – the subtle links between the factors/components. The limited data about personal experiences, perceptions and beliefs derived from questionnaires cannot elicit such detailed information that such a potentially useful model would require. The interviews and observations enabled me to further explore what truly mattered for each of the stakeholders: what really makes a difference and makes the educational experiences successful for these pupils? In my opinion, gaining an insight into the experiences of these pupils can only be fully understood by talking to them directly and also by observing them within their school environment.

The findings from the case study suggest that the existence of the main components of the model do not need to be changed significantly, but that their position, relevance and relationships with other components have had to be re-considered to determine how this can be best represented by a model.
The model below is the final, adapted version of the model of good practice for supporting pupils with ASD. It demonstrates how, within a school, there are two main components that impact upon every other element of a school (as opposed to just one in the original model – school ethos.) From the case study, I found that the relationships between pupils and staff, between home and school, between staff members and also between the pupils and their peers is equally as pivotal to the success of a school as the ethos. These two main influential factors are represented by the two-way arrows coming to and from the central box. There is also a two-way arrow going to and from the two central components themselves (school ethos and relationships) which represents their reciprocal relationship: that both have an influence on each other as well as with the other components. The outcomes/criteria for success as cited by the respondents in the case study were ‘inclusion’ and ‘happiness’. ‘Happiness’ is represented in the model as ‘emotional wellbeing’. These are demonstrated in the model as ‘outcomes’ coming from the pupils’ box, suggesting that all of the other components impact upon the individual pupils’ levels of happiness and inclusion yet are dependent upon individual pupil factors. Again the arrows are two-way, indicating that there is a reciprocal relationship between them. The case study data also led to my decision to include an additional outcome (a long-term outcome) ‘Independence’. The reasons for this will be explained in more detail in the ‘Discussion’ chapter. The decision was not based on the perceptions of the case study respondents, but on my own interpretation of what I actually observed during the case study.
FIGURE 2: The Revised Model of Good Practice

- **ENVIRONMENT**
  - ASD friendly environment
  - Access to low stimulation areas
  - Alternative arrangements for PE etc.
  - Access to a ‘safe’ haven/unit

- **SCHOOL STAFF**
  - Knowledge of ASD
  - Flexibility
  - Staffing levels
  - Commitment to inclusion
  - Role of TAs

- **CURRICULUM SUPPORT**
  - Differentiation
  - Early Support
  - Role of TAs
  - Access to small group teaching
  - Life Skills/Independence

- **PARENTS**
  - Communication with school
  - Awareness of child’s needs
  - Relationships with school staff

- **PUPILS**
  - Emotional Intelligence
  - Academic progress
  - Social Skills-Self-awareness
  - Communication Skills
  - Independence

- **Emotional Wellbeing**
  - Independence
  - Friendships
  - Self esteem
  - Confidence
  - Self-regulation skills
  - Social Skills

- **Inclusion**
  - Participation in class
  - Responsibility of all staff
  - Role of TA
  - Peer Awareness
  - Social Skills
  - Independence

- **SCHOOL ETHOS**

- **RELATIONSHIPS**

- **INDEPENDENCE**
4.9 Summary

The themes from the questionnaire data reflect the perceptions of the young people and their parents of how young people with ASD need to be supported in schools. Their statements about what good practice should look like were used to form the basic components of the model of good practice yet gaps in the depth of the data led to gaps in my understanding of the links and connections between the themes and the main components of the model.

The case study led to a revision of the model and the indepth nature of this exploration into people’s lives – their experiences, thoughts and feelings - enabled me to recognise more clearly the commonalities between the themes and the implications of these links. One of the most salient findings was the critical components of ‘ethos’ and ‘relationships’ and hence their pivotal positions at the centre of the model. Another key feature of the revised model was the addition of the criteria for success which were identified by participants as ‘inclusion’ and ‘wellbeing’. These are demonstrated in the model as ‘outcomes’ coming from the pupils’ box in the model, suggesting that all of the other components impact upon the individual pupils’ levels of happiness and inclusion yet that the outcomes are also dependent upon individual pupil factors. The case study data also led to my decision to include an additional outcome (a long-term outcome) ‘Independence’.

The applications and limitations of the model and also its unique contributions to knowledge will be discussed in more detail in the following ‘Discussion’ chapter.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The objectives for the current study were:
1) to develop a model of good practice for educating pupils with ASD
2) to define ‘success’ for a pupil with ASD in an educational setting
3) to identify the characteristics and/or practices of educational settings which facilitate or constrain social inclusion of pupils with ASD.
4) to establish whether the model of good practice can be applied to other educational settings?

The response to the main research question (question 1) is found within the model as already discussed in the previous section. The model’s main components are made up of the main super-ordinate themes derived from the interviews and observations carried out as part of the case study. Within each stakeholder group (parents, pupils and school staff) there were similarities and differences in the experiences and perceptions reported but it was possible to extract two main underlying themes which seemed to link all of the super-ordinate themes together: ‘school ethos’ and relationships’. I believe that these two global super-ordinate themes are pivotal to the successful educational experiences of pupils with ASD:

- school ethos – the commitment of the school to inclusion of all pupils
- relationships – the quality of relationships between various stakeholders and the emotional impact experienced as a result of these relationships

These two global super-ordinate themes impact upon each other but also impact upon every other component within the model. Likewise, the other superordinate themes (components of the model) impact upon these global components.

The response to question 2 (defining the success criteria) was derived by directly asking all interview participants how they would know if a pupil was
experiencing success. All respondents replied with one of the following themes: they would feel happy (safe, secure and confident) and/or they would be successfully included into the whole school (at a level that was considered successful for each individual pupil). It was acknowledged that for some pupils, 100% inclusion was not realistic for various reasons, such as the need for regular time out breaks in a low stimulation area in order to be able to self-regulate, or a pupil being too anxious to cope with the social demands of mainstream for every lesson. However, the staff appeared to be striving to support each pupil to achieve their maximum levels of inclusion that was considered possible for them.

In order to be able to respond to question 3: to identify the characteristics and/or practices of educational settings which facilitate or constrain social inclusion of pupils with ASD, I will now highlight the main findings from the case study in relation to inclusion in more detail:

5.1 Inclusion
The school’s commitment to inclusion and to meeting the needs of all pupils with SEN within the school was striking upon first glances. The school as a whole were led by the strong inclusive values of the headteacher seemingly driven by his own background in SEN before becoming a headteacher. However, as is most probably the case in many schools, inclusive practices were not consistent throughout the school and it appeared that some staff have more skills, resources, experience and indeed confidence to steer their practice towards promoting inclusion than others. Also, some members of staff appeared to translate the term inclusion in different ways and apply their own versions through their different practices which are further influenced by to their own restraints and targets and agendas set for them. In some areas there were striking discrepancies between the school policy of inclusion and actual reality. There was repeated reporting by the staff of the overall belief in inclusion by the whole school which was clearly characterised by a top-down commitment from the headteacher:
“The reason it works is because we’re committed to inclusion and that is one of our main aims, to get them into as many mainstream classes as possible.” (S3)

However, as a researcher it was clear that this target of including the pupils in as many of the the mainstream classes as possible, was not always leading to real inclusive practices as was originally intended by political agendas such as the Salamanca Agreement which set out to promote:

“the approach of inclusive education, namely enabling all schools to serve all children, particularly those with SEN.” (UNESCO, 1994b, p.3)

Indeed the pupils themselves cited feeling a sense of belonging within the school, yet there was a considerable amount of evidence that these pupils were actually excluded from mainstream experiences. Real inclusion does not necessarily mean all pupils accessing all mainstream lessons and all breaks and lunchtimes with mainstream peers, however. For some pupils, they will need to access some level of ‘exclusion’ in order to experience inclusion as certain elements of the mainstream environment may be too stressful/difficult for them. However, several pupils from the case study were seated separately from their mainstream peers and were heavily supported by a TA in the mainstream lessons. It was also apparent from the observations that the mainstream staff took a back seat in terms of taking responsibility for the teaching and emotional support of the pupils with ASD whilst in the mainstream classes.

Recent evidence suggests that this is commonplace across all schools and for all types of SEND. Teachers are becoming de-skilled in meeting individual needs and it has increasingly become the role of Teaching Assistants (TAs) to support children with SEN in classes, particularly for those with a statement of SEN. A recent study also suggests that the more support children get the less academic support they make (Blatchford et al, 2009).
Another contradiction to the school’s policy on inclusion is the ‘hidden’ existence of the enhanced provision, seemingly for the purpose wanting to protect the pupils from the unit:

*The vast majority will be unaware of the unit existing. We’ve purposefully kept it separate and behind these screens so that it’s not seen as a separate unit.* (S2)

Despite understanding the reasons for this, advocates for inclusion would probably argue that in order for pure inclusion to occur, the staff would need to be open about the needs of these pupils and strive to develop the knowledge and understanding of the mainstream pupils in order to achieve acceptance and tolerance of all pupils. By keeping the unit ‘hidden’, it could be argued that these pupils will have difficulty trying to participate and be understood and accepted by the rest of the school. This feeling was felt in the discussion with one of the pupils about wanting to belong to a school where difference is accepted:

*We need to do more in schools about teaching people that it’s OK to be unique coz here I feel like I’m persecuted for being different……But in reality people want to fit in and be the same……Maybe over time having a unit will help others understand us better* (YP3).

The term ‘Inclusion Dissonance’ relates to the tensions that the staff experienced when they realised (through discussions about their inclusive practices), that their positive beliefs about inclusion were different to the actual experiences of some of these children in school. Each member of staff interviewed saw success as the maximum level of inclusion achieved for each individual pupil, yet some of their practices actually led to the pupils from the unit being socially excluded from the rest of the school, which was not their intentions. There were definite contradictions between wanting to increase their levels of inclusion but then keeping them separate at lunch and breaktimes and also in lessons. The belief that the unit should be kept inconspicuous and separate from the rest of the school is actually
contradictory to the inclusive agenda of the school. In keeping the unit separate and by not encouraging and enabling the pupils to participate more in the mainstream lessons, some members of staff are actually restricting the potential inclusive experiences and restricting their opportunities to form friendships with their mainstream peers.

However, through the conversations about inclusive experiences one member of staff (S1) seemed to recognise this dissonance but continued to justify their practices by saying they were in the best interests of the pupils even when the evidence showed up to contract the belief system of the school. S1 argued that by keeping this unit separate and exclusively for them this enabled the pupils to view it as a safe place for them to be. It is very probable that by having their own safe haven where they felt protected that this was the underlying reason why all of the pupils reported feeling ‘happy’ in school and as being happy was identified by several respondents as a criteria for success, this should not simply be overlooked and dismissed because it is not truly inclusive. As an Educational Psychologist, I am regularly advising schools that children cannot be receptive to learning experiences if they are stressed, anxious or upset i.e if they are not ‘emotionally ready’ to learn.

This is consistent with the message from the authors of the SCERTS model (Prizant, 2007) who maintain that the emotional needs of an individual must be met in order for them to be able to engage in any learning activities:

Appropriate support should be provided to maintain optimal arousal states. If emotional regulation is not achieved, an individual cannot be available for learning.(p29)

Therefore there is an argument for looking after children’s emotional wellbeing before addressing inclusion matters. However, by focusing too much on the pupils feeling ‘safe’ and ‘happy’ we may actually be over-protecting them and not preparing them sufficiently to function independently when they leave school. There was evidence from the interviews and also from the observations of the staff working on the pupils’ self-awareness, self-regulation
and social skills and one YP3 mentioned the staff supporting him to regulate his own emotions and “fighting all his battles”.

After carrying out the case study I made the decision to explicitly include a new component called ‘independence’. This has been incorporated on two levels: as a range of skills that need to be taught explicitly, such as self-regulation, self-awareness and independent learning, but I have also incorporated it as an additional outcome/criteria for success – alongside ‘emotional well-being’ and ‘inclusion’. I consider it to be more of a long-term goal and one which we should be striving for for all pupils with ASD in order for them to cope and be self-sufficient within the ‘real world’. The challenge for staff must be about ensuring an appropriate balance is met for each individual so that we are not just focusing upon protecting them but also focusing upon preparing them for adulthood.

One member of staff held exclusionary beliefs that some young people may not belong or fit into their enhanced provision or in mainstream schools:

“Some children aren’t right for this school – they should perhaps be in special.” (S1)

Such a statement highlights the ‘inclusion dissonance’ in place: the contradictory thoughts between staff saying they are committed to inclusion, yet in reality the practices do not always support these beliefs.

These findings of inclusion dissonance are consistent with findings by Humphrey & Symes (2008) who found substantial evidence of integration (physical placement in mainstream classes) yet did not find proportionate evidence of inclusion in the sense of acceptance and participation of the pupils with ASD. They found that in some schools there was a significant gap between their ‘inclusion rhetoric’ and ‘classroom reality’.

Morewood et al (2011) present a ‘saturation model’ to encapsulate the features of one mainstream secondary school that has been deemed to be
very effective in supporting pupils with ASD. The saturation model is based on the premise that in order to support pupils with ASD successfully:

…..inclusive principles and practice need to permeate every aspect of life in school; thus, in order to be ‘autism friendly’, the school needs to be saturated in autism understanding and awareness. (p.64)

The central component of the model, which is crucial to making it work, is the ‘agent of change’. At this school, the agent of change was the SENCo who had the responsibility of ensuring that understanding and provision was embedded into whole school policy, practice and thinking. Circling and feeding into the agent of change within the saturation model are 7 other components named as:

- Developing the school environment
- Flexible provision
- Direct support and intervention
- Policy development and embedding practice
- Thinking and development of staff
- Peer education and awareness
- Creating a postive ethos

Many of these components overlap with those within my own model of good practice, in particular, the importance of an inclusive ethos and understanding/development of staff, yet there are also several key differences. The saturation model has its pivotal feature as the agent of change, whereas the two pivotal features of this model are ‘school ethos’ and ‘relationships’ between all stakeholders. Relationships are not identified as an essential component within the saturation model, yet from the research undertaken in this study it was apparent throughout that relationships between all stakeholders are pivotal to successful provision. Having an agent of change clearly has a valuable role, and I would be interested in seeing the impact of including this within my own model when supporting staff to apply it in a school. The findings from this study suggest, however, that the agent of
change is only likely to have an impact upon whole school practice if relationships are strong between the agent of change and all other stakeholders. Another additional key feature of my model is the existence of short and long-term outcomes for the pupils, which are useful indicators of whether a school has actually been ‘successful’ at supporting pupils with ASD.

Both models imply that an inclusive ethos appears to be one of the main characteristics that may constrain or promote the inclusive experiences of the pupils. It would appear to be the role of the senior management, or even perhaps one key person, to ensure that inclusive practices are embedded within whole school practices and taking on this role would also involve uncovering not only where the gaps are in terms of practice across the school but also uncovering where the gaps are in the belief systems and values of its staff. Inclusion is only going to be an achieved goal if there is a strong shared vision.

5.2 Relationships
Another characteristic highlighted through the study to either constrain or promote inclusion was relationships. The strength of several different relationships (between staff and parents, staff and pupils, pupils and peers and between staff across the school) appears to serve two functions: 1) it serves to share information, for example, about what the child’s needs are and what s/he responds positively or negatively to and 2) it serves to build trust and confidence and empowers others to feel valued and listened to. This is consistent with earlier findings for example, from Barnard et al (2000) who found that parental satisfaction has been found to be associated with perceptions of the knowledge of teaching staff and the quality of home-school communication. The Autism Education Trust (AET) study (2008) also found that those schools who support their children well are those whose staff listen to the parents (because they know their child best), but who also take the time to get to know the children in order to have a better awareness of individual children’s particular needs. Good relationships enable pupils and parents to feel that their feelings and opinions matter and that any decisions will not be
made to them, but with them. It leads to shared understandings and in turn increases the likelihood that strategies and interventions are going to succeed. Schools who focus upon supporting pupils with ASD to build relationships with their peers who do not have ASD could potentially lead to a greater awareness of ASD and a stronger school ethos of tolerance and acceptance in the long-term. The case study highlighted the distinct separation between the pupils in the unit and the mainstream pupils both at a classroom level but also at a whole school level. Therefore, if the whole school focused upon celebrating diversity and explicitly educated all pupils about ASD, over time there would be a greater degree of acceptance and tolerance for difference and therefore greater levels of true inclusion. Therefore, although the school that was chosen for the case study was described by all participants as ‘successful’, as a researcher I would agree that it meets many of the needs of its pupils with ASD yet there are some factors that serve as barriers to true inclusion.

It was apparent from the case study that those with greater self-awareness and more advanced social skills were more susceptible to bullying. This is consistent with Rowley et al. (2012) who found that teachers report that children with an ASD who were less socially impaired in mainstream schools experienced higher levels of victimization than more socially impaired children. This suggests that some pupils who have a less obvious impairment may be targeted because the peers may not ‘recognise the autism’ within the pupils’ presentation and therefore may be less empathetic towards the individual. This stresses the need for schools to have a broader emphasis upon tolerance and acceptance for difference, and not simply to focus upon educating the school about ASD and other specific SEN.

5.3 Applications of the Model
Upon feeling confident that I have a robust model of good practice (based upon the findings from the case study in a resourced provision), the next step is to respond to the fourth research question: ‘Can the model be applied to all educational settings?’ My initial response to this question was, “Yes, but it may be more easily applied to a provision similar to the one in the case study
i.e. a resourced provision.” The findings from the case study would appear to suggest that school staff within a resourced provision are more able to implement this model of good practice for two main reasons. Firstly, the existence of the separate unit which serves as a ‘safe haven’ which many pupils with ASD both within this study and in the Charters 2009 study, cite as being a definite need for them. Some respondents say that they need somewhere to go to feel safe and where there there are low levels of stimulation to enable them to calm down and prevent them from becoming over-stimulated and stressed. However, there is no reason why mainstream schools (primary and secondary) and generic special schools cannot provide a low stimulation, ‘safe haven’ for their pupils with SEN. It would not necessarily have to be a separate ‘unit’ as such, it would simply need to serve the purposes it is highlighted by the pupils as its benefits: a low stimulation area and a perception of it being ‘safe’ and separate from the rest of the school. Of course, all schools are restrained by physical space and resources but with careful consideration, schools could make more appropriate choices in terms of allocation of resources. Secondly, the higher ratio of staff within the resourced provision and their specific skills and understanding of ASD enabled them to put in the required strategies to support these pupils. This is consistent with research evidence that suggests that a common complaint about schools is the lack of staff knowledge about ASD. The AET study found that the most commonly stated concern from both parents and professionals was the need to develop the knowledge and understanding of school staff and also the need to change staff attitudes towards children with ASD. Several respondents were concerned about the intolerance of the behaviours exhibited by pupils with ASD and said they found it hard to explain to staff that: “many behaviours arise as a result of their ASD and not by choice.” (p.45). This suggests a general lack of understanding on the part of the school staff and leads to the question of how can this be overcome. Although on-going training might be an obvious suggestion, research evidence suggests that training alone does not lead to long-term changes in practice. Increasing staffing ratios of specialist ASD-specific staff would enable them to have more time to get to know these children and understand their individual needs. Knowing the children and what works for them and having the flexibility to
meet their needs are the key elements of success. There is no apparent reason why mainstream schools could not provide this for many pupils with ASD. Schools now have greater autonomy over how they spend their SEN budgets and if they had access to such a model of good practice they may make more evidence-based decisions about how to deploy their staff and other resources.

If the physical space and access to a higher level of ASD-specific staff were available in mainstream schools, and the school had a strong inclusive ethos with good communication between its staff and with parents and pupils, and there was a safe haven available for them, wouldn’t more of these pupils have a better chance of success? It is my view that a resourced provision meets many of the specific needs of children with ASD to a large degree, yet I feel that their experiences are less likely to be fully inclusive and less likely to provide them with enough opportunities to apply the social skills they ‘learn’ within the resource base and therefore less likely to prepare them for adulthood and the social challenges that are required of them to experience ‘success’ in their personal lives and in their working lives. From the case study it was clear to me as an observer that YP3 was being held back socially by being part of the enhanced provision, and despite being given more mainstream opportunities than the other pupils in the provision, he still had a sense of belonging in the enhanced provision as opposed to a sense of belonging in the mainstream school, which I believe he was striving for. Perhaps we need to put more time and resources into considering how we adapt the model for mainstream schools and how we adapt the existing resources and environments within mainstream schools to meet the needs of these pupils on an individual basis rather than creating more resourced provisions which perhaps have more of a tendency to protect these pupils. We may need to consider how each aspect of the model relates to each pupil based on their own individual needs. In this way all of the pupils would have their form groups within the mainstream school as their base, but could access the ‘unit’ for different degrees of time and for different purposes. I feel that for many of these pupils we should give them the opportunity to belong
to a mainstream school but to have access to a ‘safe haven’ based upon their individual needs.

5.4 Unique Contributions to Knowledge

The purpose of the study was to construct a model of good practice for supporting pupils with ASD. There is no such model that already exists that would clearly outline the main interactive components of a model of good practice. The model seeks to clarify the significance of each individual component and also the relationships between each component/factor. The case study was carried out to test the robustness of the initial model of good practice and in doing such a thorough and in-depth case study of one school it enabled me to not only build on and adjust the model but also to gain a better understanding of the experiences and needs of pupils with ASD. As already discussed, unique aspects this model are that it can be applied to all educational settings and also that it includes the ability to measure the degree of success by the quality and quantity of inclusive experiences of these pupils and also by the emotional wellbeing of the pupils. Measurements of these criteria could be elicited from accounts of the pupils themselves and also their families, which is now widely recognised as good practice.

The model also highlights how the degree of success depends upon a number of factors, such as: knowledge and understanding of school staff, the teaching and learning environment, staffing levels etc., but the pivotal factors and the key to success must be a strong school ethos that values diversity and strives for inclusion and also good relationships between all stakeholders.

The overall findings from the current study do support findings from previous studies, (particularly that by Tobias, 2009) as many of the same factors which are most useful for supporting pupils with AS were identified: good communication, individual tailor-made support, staff knowledge and understanding of ASD and a welcoming ethos. However, the model does provide additional components such as the two central pivotal factors, and
also the provision of success criteria and it also highlights how these components impact on one another.

5.5 Limitations
Although the present study has produced clear insights into these individuals' own experiences and even offers encouraging implications for the potential effectiveness of the inclusion of individuals with ASD into mainstream settings, several limitations of the methodology warrant caution when interpreting the data. Firstly, as anticipated, the very nature of the difficulties associated with ASD posed some problems for the participants' abilities to fully and effectively participate in the interviews. The main difficulties were as follows:

1) Egocentricity – all three of the interview participants had significant difficulty answering questions about how things could have been done differently and what support would have benefitted them. They were only able to comment confidently about concrete examples of things that had actually happened to them. When asked questions that involved more higher order thinking, some asked for specific examples to help them to relate to their own experiences, but tended to conclude that things could not have gone any differently.

2) Central Coherence difficulties – the pupils had difficulty seeing the whole picture and providing general accounts, and had a tendency to focus upon specific topics, usually related to their obsessional thoughts and preoccupations. Some of the participants had difficulty talking about other things, and even though the researcher attempted to refocus them at regular intervals, they sometimes did not allow this to happen and refused to move on to another topic until they felt they had finished with their preferred line of discussion.

3) Difficulties engaging in reciprocal conversations. Four of the pupils tended to dominate the 'conversation', whilst the other two tended to provide limited
responses and required further prompting and questioning in order to gain fuller accounts.

These difficulties re-iterate the findings of Cohen (1998) who refers to the cautions required when attempting to tap into the individuals’ own experiences of being autistic. In his studies, Cohen acknowledged the difficulty of gaining meaningful responses from individuals whose difficulties were predominantly communication-based.

However, the pupils’ difficulties associated with their ASD can also be seen to be advantageous in some respects. For example, when carrying out interviews there is always a threat to reliability. For example, with semi-structured interviewing the research question tends to drive the interview. The interviewer will usually try to steer the interview to obtain the kind of data which will answer the research question. However, with these participants, who appeared to have little awareness of the potential power of the researcher, there was more of a balance obtained between the two since some of the interviewees continually attempted to control the direction and flow of the interviews. The needs of some of them to control the direction and speed of the interviews themselves were seemingly driven by dominating thoughts and feelings and also the need to seek control. This, however, was not necessarily a problem as it served to generate more novel insights for the researcher and resulted in seemingly more definite pictures emerging about their feelings and experiences. Also, the generation of the same or similar narrow themes accounted by each interviewee despite repeating the interviews indicates some level of reliability in the data produced, and diminishes some of the threat of misinterpretation.

A significant concern about the reliability of the data was the impact of the strong emotions of the parents. It was evident that this group of parents had experienced significant amounts of stress relating to their children’s educational placements and this was evident in their insistence that a criterion for success was ‘happiness’ experienced by their children. Their responses
did therefore seem to focus upon the importance of the emotional support available for their children and not so much on their academic progress or the levels and quality of inclusion they were experiencing. I cannot confidently conclude that these aspects were or would never be of particular concern to the parents, but would suggest that these were simply overlooked during the conversations about such a highly emotive topic. However, I questioned myself as to whether I should represent this concern about academic success in the model by using a narrow arrow to suggest that it should be seen as a relatively low priority, yet this simply reflects current perceptions and is not a suggestion that the academic progress of pupils with ASD should be seen as a low priority. However, it can also be explained by discussing the views of the case study participants: that the goal to meet the social and emotional needs of the pupils appeared to be a priority and far outweighed any goals for academic achievements. As already mentioned, if we focus on meeting their emotional needs these pupils are more likely to be emotionally ready to learn and to make progress. Therefore it may not be a problem for academic success to be initially considered less of a priority for these pupils.

Many quantitative researchers would argue that research is only valuable if the findings are generalisable to the whole population and it can be argued that case studies are unique and therefore not generalisable. However, I feel I can argue quite strongly that despite my case study setting being unique, the concepts, ideas and learning can be applied to other settings. Yin (1998) states:

*The investigator is striving to generalise a particular set of results to some broader theory.* (p44)

My broader theory is the model of good practice and I have already suggested that the model could be applied across all educational settings yet it would need to be adjusted appropriately to meet the needs of each individual pupil. Being able to generalise the model in a blanket fashion to all pupils with ASD was never an aim of the current study and the data derived further accentuated the researcher’s beliefs in the reasons against attempting
to generalise the findings. To do so would be to stereotype and simplify the nature of the difficulties experienced by pupils on the autistic spectrum - to put them all in ‘the same box’ so to speak. The very name of the diagnosis which includes the word *spectrum* implies that there is a vast range of individual differences amongst this population and therefore we have to listen to each individual’s story as their own in order to make decisions as to how the model can be applied for each individual.

As already mentioned in the methodology section, case study methodology can be criticised for not being analytically generalisable. From experiencing the process of undertaking a case study and drawing conclusions, I feel strongly that I can argue that although the case study itself was unique, the learning can be applied to other situations.

### 5.6 Future Research

The methodological limitations of the current study may require attention in order to increase the robustness of the research design. Future research methodology might include alternative methods for seeking pupils’ views. Two of the case study participants declined to be interviewed and one said he wanted to but when the time came he was too anxious. It may have been more useful to offer alternative methods of communication such as through diaries, through comic strip conversations (Gray, 1994) or by recording their voices on Dictaphones.

In order to be confident that the model could be applied across different educational settings, it would be useful to test the robustness of the model in a mainstream primary school, a mainstream secondary school and a special school for pupils with ASD.

Since one of the main findings was the discrepancy between values of inclusion and actual practices, it would be useful to undertake a study into how this gap can be closed; i.e. how we can provide support to enable a school to take on the challenge of moving from representation to true inclusion. Lovey & Cooper (2006) suggested that it is not the rigorousness of
the policy that determines the quality of the inclusive practice, but the shared understanding of the ethos and values that leads to greater inclusion of pupils. This would highlight the clear relationship between the belief systems in the agents of change and the change that is needed. In addressing the beliefs and values of the school staff prior to or as part of the policy development, there would be a greater reduction in dissonance, leading to reduced resistance and increased belief in and commitment to the processes. This would also allow staff to apply the process flexibly as they would have a clearer understanding of the ethos and ultimate goals. In the absence of this step in the introduction of a new policy or practice, it is human nature to strive to reduce dissonance.

Since I earlier hypothesised that a resourced provision might impact upon their future personal lives and working lives, it may be useful to undertake a study into the experiences of adults with ASD and to investigate whether their perceptions as to how the educational settings they attended as children prepared or inhibited their transition into adult lives.

5.7 Implications for Practice
Educational Psychologists (EPs) are in a pivotal position to function as consultants to schools and to facilitate problem-solving with school staff, parents and also with the pupils themselves. We have a responsibility to think systemically in order to improve the learning and emotional well-being for children and young people.

We have the potential to play a vital role in the inclusion process to try to maximise the experiences of this vulnerable population of pupils. Yet, as well as focusing all our efforts upon direct work through consultation, more widespread and longer term outcomes must also be considered: to work at the systems level to promote inclusion; to help schools to be more inclusive - in thinking and in practice. It is not realistic to expect that in the near future all schools will have a higher ratio of staff who all have a good understanding of autism and a good understanding of the individual children in school who have ASD. Therefore a more realistic aim is to support schools to apply the model of good practice by considering: how to deploy and adapt the
resources available to them, how to adapt the physical environment that is available to them and how to use the support staff to meet individual needs, but at the same time ensure that pupils are developing their independence and not becoming overly dependent upon them. It will be important to keep the success criteria in mind when all decisions are made to ensure that their emotional wellbeing and levels of inclusion are always considered to be the goal. If these goals are not achieved, it may be necessary to consider whether any realistic changes can be made to enable these goals to be achieved or even to consider whether these goals could only be achieved in a different setting. As already discussed, I believe that all aspects of the model can be applied to all educational settings if we help schools to consider where the ‘gaps’ are, for example, in staff training, in shared inclusive practices, in peer relationships in school etc.

In order to promote true inclusive practices we may need to help schools to learn to value the opinions of pupils and their parents and to focus upon developing trusting and two-way relationships with each other. We need to support the promotion of building trusting relationships in order for schools to understand each person’s experiences so that their needs and differences can be better understood. As practitioners of consultative practice, EPs are skilled at eliciting these stakeholders’ views and it is part of our role to share good practice in involving all stakeholders in decision –making processes.

EPs could also have a role in promoting independent learning for young people since ‘independence’ is the long-term goal highlighted in the model of good practice. The model could be used to encourage schools to help pupils to become independent learners and less dependent upon TA support. EPs are more commonly using dynamic assessment tools to assess the potential of learners through establishing minimum levels of mediation to enable the pupils to succeed at a learning task independently. EPs could be promoting such approaches alongside meta-cognitive and self-regulation strategies to help children and young people to think about their own learning more explicitly by setting goals and monitoring and evaluating their own learning.
There are numerous other ways that EPs could promote the application of the model through their work including:

- Extending the social communication skills of young people through evidence-based small group interventions with ‘good’ social role models
- Peer education and awareness raising of ASD and other forms of SEN. As discussed earlier in the thesis, bullying and social exclusion normally arise out of a lack of understanding and also due to intolerance for difference and therefore values and beliefs need to be challenged alongside educating young people about autism.
- Modelling and reinforcing the conceptual shift away from differences between learners to ‘learning for all’ and in so doing promoting the belief that if appropriate adaptations are made, all pupils with ASD (and other SEN) can be successfully educated and included within a mainstream class.
- Reducing existing beliefs about the need to have ASD ‘experts’ and specialists within a school. The current study demonstrates how this potentially blocks knowledge, expertise and confidence dispersing throughout schools. We should be focusing on whole school approaches to ASD and improving the skills and understanding of all staff members by promoting ‘knowing’, ‘believing’ and ‘doing’.
- Using the analogy of a parent from the AET study who suggested: “We need to view challenging behaviour as a panic attack.” (p40) Those who understand the autism spectrum are more likely to use terms such as frightened, highly anxious, stressed or sensorily challenged and are more likely to put appropriate and effective strategies in place to manage the behaviour. This also highlights the need to promote understanding of ASD throughout schools.

5.8 Summary

This chapter has focused upon the implications of the findings, applications of the model as well as its limitations. The model highlights how the degree of
success depends upon a combination of a number of factors, such as: knowledge and understanding of school staff, the teaching and learning environment, staffing levels etc., but the pivotal factors and the key to success must be a strong school ethos that values diversity and strives for inclusion and also good relationships between all stakeholders. By considering the significance of certain components of the model, the chapter highlights how the role of the EP can directly impact on how successfully the model can be applied to different settings by supporting schools to develop certain areas within their school, for example, independent learning, teaching social skills and developing peer awareness. The following chapter, the ‘Conclusion’, includes a closing summary of the main findings from the study and also reflections on more general issues such as the importance of listening to one another, valuing individual’s opinions and celebrating differences.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Providing successful experiences for pupils with ASD in educational settings presents a significant challenge to educators, families and the pupils themselves. Although the needs of children and young people with ASD can be extremely complex, the study suggests that many can be accommodated successfully if provided with the appropriate support structures. Like the autism spectrum, inclusion is a continuum and it has to be sufficiently planned, evaluated and modified in order to ensure it is appropriate for each individual. The current study highlights the fact that although it has elicited a model of good practice it is necessary to continue to remind ourselves that all young people with ASD are individuals and cope differently to the demands put on them in schools. Therefore, we cannot treat them as a homogenous group, we have to get to know the needs and challenges experienced by each individual person. As the prevalence of ASD increases, professionals must increasingly work to unpick how the demands of the environment create barriers to each pupil’s successful inclusion (socially, emotionally and educationally) and plan how we can reduce these barriers. In the absence of any current large-scale studies, we must so far rely upon a combination of careful evaluations of student progress, joint working with parents and school staff, and valuable insights from the pupils themselves regarding their own experiences.

Finally, it seems necessary to state that whilst inclusion still claims to be an important agenda for all or at least most schools, there appears to still be a long way to go before schools are embracing inclusion whole-heartedly and implementing it effectively. A general message from this study is that we need to make more of an effort to get to know each other better and to listen to others in order to understand, accept and even celebrate our similarities and differences.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Parent Questionnaire

I am interested in finding out how a school can be successful in meeting the needs of its pupils who have an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD).

1. What do you think schools can do to meet the emotional needs of its pupils with ASD in order to make them feel safe, happy, calm and confident in school?

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2. What do you think schools can do to develop their social skills and help them to make friends?

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3. What do you think schools can do to support pupils with ASD with their learning?

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4. If you were asked to give advice about setting up a new school for young people with ASD what things would you say that the school would need to have or do to make it a successful school?

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Appendix 3
Pupil Questionnaire

I am interested in finding out how a school can be successful at meeting the needs of children and young people with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD).

1. What do you think school staff can do to help you when you feel worried, upset, uncomfortable or angry?

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2. What do you think school staff can do to help you get along with others and make friends?

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3. What do you think school staff can do to help you with learning?

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4. If you were asked to help set up a new school for young people with ASD, what things would you say the school should have to make it a successful school?

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APPENDIX 4
Parent Interview Schedule

• Tell me some ways in which your son/daughter has been supported in this school?

• Would you consider your son/daughter’s time here to have been successful? Why(not)?

• Is there anything that hasn’t been as positive or that you think could be changed?

• How would you define a successful educational experience for pupils with ASD?

• How socially included does your son/daughter feel in this school? Why? Why not?

• If I was to ask for advice about how to plan the provision for high school pupils with ASD what advice would you give me?
APPENDIX 5
Pupil Interview Schedule

• Do you like coming to school? Why? Why not?

• Tell me some ways in which people help you in this school?

• Would you consider your time here to have been successful? Why(not)?

• Is there anything that hasn’t been as positive or that you think could be changed?

• How would you define a successful educational experience for pupils with ASD?

• Do you have friends in school? Who are they?

• Do you feel socially included in school? Why? Why not?

• If I was to ask for advice about how to plan the provision for high school pupils with ASD what advice would you give me?
APPENDIX 6
School Staff Interview Schedule

- Tell me some ways in which you support the pupils with ASD in this school?

- Do you feel that the pupils generally have successful experiences here? Why/Why not?

- What is it about the school that enables the pupils to have successful experiences?

- Which pupils would this placement be most appropriate for?

- Is there a selection criteria?

- Are there some pupils for whom it would not be appropriate?

- What kinds of difficulties have the pupils experienced?

- What advice would you give if we were going to set up a similar provision in our authority?
APPENDIX 7
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

L: Hi, I’m Lucy and I’m an Educational Psychologist. I’m interested in finding out how to support pupils with ASD in school so I’m here today to talk to you and other people about school and what things help you and what people could do differently to support you in school. I’m going to tape our conversation so that I can type it out but then I will destroy the tape and the typed notes when I have used them. Is that Ok?

YP1: Yes, how long will it take?

L: It should take about half an hour but it will depend on how much you want to tell me. You can ask me to stop at any time or you can choose not to answer certain questions if you don't want to. Is that OK?

YP1: Yes

L: We can talk here, or is there somewhere else you would prefer to go?

YP1: No it's fine. Can X stay?

L: Yes of course, that’s fine. Is there anything else you want to ask before we start?

YP1: No

L: Oh, and I need to mention as well that everything you tell me will be confidential. It won’t be shared with anyone else. I’m going to use what you say to write a report but your name won’t be in it. Is that alright?

YP1: yes

L: Ok. Do you like coming to school?

YP1: I like this school more now. I didn't like it at first.

L: Why was that?

YP1: I went into class all the time to start with but I got more and more stressed with the busy corridors and the classrooms, it was all too much so I stopped coming for a bit and I was taught at home.

L: So what’s different now?

YP1: Now I’m in 3 full days and 2 half days. A lot of the pressure has been taken away.

L: What else helps you?

YP1: I’m just in here now for all my lessons which I can cope with. I don't go into any mainstream lessons at all, it’s too much.
L: Would you like to go into some mainstream lessons in the future?
YP1: No.
L: What else do people do to support you in school?
YP1: They keep people like X away from me. He does my head in. And X, she's the most annoying person ever. It's her voice, it's everything. If she comes in, don't speak to her. She'll just go on and on. She drives me mad, I can't stand to be in the same room as her.
L: Tell me some other ways in which people help you in this school?
YP1: They're nice here. They listen to you and that makes all the difference to how I feel. At my last school they never listened to you one bit and they just wanted you to go along with whatever they wanted you to do..... Here, I can say when I don't want to do something or when something's stressing me out. That's the big difference.
L: Is there anything else that they do to help you?
YP1: X let's me do lots of stuff on the computer coz that's how I learn things.
L: Is there anything that hasn't been as positive or that you think could be changed?
YP1: Like I said at the beginning, being in the mainstream classes stressed me out. And X does.
L: Ok, is there anything that could be different?
YP1: Yes, some of the people I guess.
L: Could the staff do anything differently?
YP1: It needs more teachers so that we don't all have to be together sometimes. And more space maybe. I need somewhere quiet to go to sometimes, not at lesson times, but at breaks. I like to be on my own. I hate feeling like I'm being scrambled around the school from place to place, the busy corridors stress me out so I need to avoid those.... I have lunch in the unit coz I can't stand the noise in the hall.
L: Is there anything else that could be different?
YP: Not sure.... No.
L: How would you define a successful educational experience for pupils with ASD?
YP1: When you're not stressed out and you're not made to do things that you don't want to do. They have to listen to you and not make you do things. Also when they don't try and make you fit in if you don't want to.

YP1: I have a few friends in here [the unit] but they're not really my friends, coz they just wind me up and I like to wind them up. I can't bear to be in the same room as X...... And Y also annoys me, he just walks around all the time, he won't sit still for one minute.

L: Would you like to have more friends?

YP1: No I'm OK. Well. Maybe... I'm not sure. It would have to be someone who doesn't annoy me and doesn't go on too much. I hate that.

L: Do you feel socially included in school?

YP1: What, do you mean with the rest of the school?

L: Yes

YP1: No not really but that's what stressed me out, I don't really want that. I'm OK in here, it's fine.

L: If I was to ask for advice about how to plan the provision for high school pupils with ASD what advice would you give me?

YP1: You need a good amount of teachers and you need teachers who are nice and who listen to you.

L: Right, ok.... Anything else?

YP1: Erm...... you need to do interesting things. Some lessons are boring and I hate being bored. I hate writing so you shouldn't have to write if you don't want to. That's it really.

L: Well thanks very much X. That was very helpful. Is there anything you want to ask me?

YP1: No.