Perspectives of students, parents and teachers on the secondary school experiences of children and young people with autism spectrum disorders

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Abstract

Secondary education is increasingly recognised to be a time of challenge for many children with special educational needs (SEN), and particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Individuals with ASD have a profile of needs, including social difficulties, sensory needs and anxiety, that make them particularly vulnerable within the secondary setting, and parents increasingly seek more specialist provision as their children reach secondary age. Building on these findings, this research study aimed to examine the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

This study adopted an ecosystemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and used a mixed-method multi-informant approach to examine both intrinsic child characteristics and wider systemic factors influencing the secondary school experiences of 16 children with ASD aged 11-15 years. Children attended a range of secondary provision including maintained and independent special, local mainstream and autism bases. This allowed for a thorough examination of children's secondary school experiences, including investigation of differences by type of provision. Furthermore, this multi-informant approach revealed the views of children with ASD and their parents and teachers are not always consistent.

Autistic behaviours were significantly associated with type of provision (mainstream versus special), yet cognitive ability, sensory symptoms and anxiety were not. The accounts of children, parents and teachers revealed the overall success of children's secondary placements did not vary according to type of provision (mainstream versus special), although where children attended out of county provision, these placements were noticeably less successful. Difficulties primarily centred around the challenges of meeting the needs of cognitively able children whose ASD impacts on their ability to cope in mainstream schools.

Children's secondary school experiences were particularly influenced by their social vulnerability and feelings of difference. A range of systemic mitigating factors were identified, including transition preparation, teaching strategies, professional involvement, home-school communication and availability of provision. The findings have important implications for EPs, particularly with regards to providing training, transition support, and psychosocial interventions in school. The findings also highlight a crucial role for the EP in accessing children's views, and mediating between parents and children where conflict exists.

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Introduction

1.1 Rationale

Secondary education is increasingly recognised to be a time of challenge for many children with special educational needs (SEN), both in the UK and internationally (Meijer, 2005), and particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; 2008b). Secondary schools are larger, more impersonal, evaluative, formal, competitive and comparative environments than primary schools (McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow, 2003; Lucey & Reay, 2000). Secondary provision is characterised by departmentalised teaching, including more subjects, rooms and teachers (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008) and a significantly larger, more diverse population of students, in which relationships with peers are more complex (Tobell, 2003). These factors create significant challenges to the successful inclusion of children with SEN in the secondary phase.

Individuals with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) have a profile of needs, including core difficulties in social communication and interaction and restricted repetitive patterns of behaviour including possible sensory sensitivities (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013), and an increased risk of co-occurring psychiatric conditions (Simonoff et al., 2008). These difficulties make children with ASD particularly vulnerable within the secondary setting (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; 2008b; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Connor, 2000). Yet research studies which have directly elicited the views and experiences of children with ASD in secondary education are severely lacking.

Nationwide, there is a shortfall in specialist provision that meets the distinct needs of children with ASD (Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers & Yuille, 2006). As a result of this lack of provision, and the drive towards inclusion that has until recently shaped government policy and legislation, the majority of children with ASD (70%) attend mainstream secondary schools (Batten, 2005; DfE, 2011a). Yet many parents believe that as their children reach secondary school age they necessitate more specialist educational support and provision (Barnard, Prior and Potter, 2000). Since this is not always a view shared by professionals, parents increasingly challenge LAs for special school placements in the secondary phase (SENDIST, 2010). As a result, identifying and accessing the most appropriate secondary provision can be a source of considerable stress and anxiety for

children with ASD and their parents (Tissot, 2011). Through the Children and Families Act (2014) and the new SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014), the current Government continues to work towards enhancing the confidence and involvement of parents in the SEN system. To best address these aims, further rigorous academic research examining the views of children with ASD, their parents and schools regarding secondary education is clearly needed, as was the focus of the present study.

1.2 The Research Context

This research was commissioned by one Local Authority (LA) in which ASD accounts for over one fifth of the total number of statements currently maintained. Children with ASD also constitute a large percentage (43%) of the total number of children attending out of county (OC) and non-maintained independent (NMI) provision. In recent years, parents have increasingly voiced concerns about the considerable challenges secondary school presents for their children with ASD. Often these children have managed mainstream primary school with appropriate support, yet parents feel a large mainstream secondary school is not adequately able to meet their child's needs. Therefore, many parents seek specialist placements in the secondary phase. SENDIST tribunals relating to children with ASD accounted for 35% of tribunals within the LA during 2012.

The LA was eager to gain insight into the experiences, concerns and wishes of families of children with ASD in the secondary phase to inform future policy, practice and provision. One of the current areas of focus for the LA is an agenda aimed at developing local special provision to strengthen the LA's capacity to support children with SEN through in county provision. Audits carried out by schools identified ASD as one of most prevalent needs of children in the LA. As such, this agenda has a strong focus on identifying how best to support children with ASD in school. It was anticipated the present research would inform this agenda and provide an evidence-base to support parents, schools and LA to meet the needs of students with ASD in secondary education.

1.3 Methodology

This study adopted an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this model, children's experiences are viewed as influenced by a wide range of overlapping systems, including individual child and broader systemic factors. Since the ASD population encompasses a diverse and heterogeneous spectrum

of need (Byrne, 2013), researchers in the field stress that for research findings to be most meaningful, it is essential to understand the profile of needs of ASD participants (Howlin, 1998; 2006). For these reasons, in this study, a mixed methods approach was used to examine both intrinsic child characteristics and wider systemic factors influencing the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. To investigate the influence of intrinsic characteristics and profile the needs of child participants, the broader ASD profile was examined. Data were collected regarding children's social difficulties, cognitive ability, sensory needs and anxiety. To gain an understanding of the wider systemic influences on children's secondary school experiences, the study included interviews with the children themselves, their parents and teachers.

By examining the secondary school experiences of children with ASD attending a range of provision through a mixed-method and multi-informant approach, it was anticipated that this study would make a unique contribution to the existing evidence base in this field. Furthermore, it was hoped this research would provide a channel through which the voices of children with ASD and their teachers and parents were heard and listened to, recognising them as LA's partners.

1.4 Research Aims

The overarching aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of students with ASD in a range of secondary provision through considering both intrinsic child characteristics and broader systemic factors. In so doing, the study aimed to examine those limiting and enabling factors that influence the secondary school experiences of students with ASD. Within this, the more specific aims of this study were fourfold:

First, this study sought to determine whether secondary school placements for students with ASD vary according to intrinsic child characteristics. Cognitive abilities, social difficulties, sensory preferences and anxiety have all been shown to influence children's experiences of secondary school through autobiographical accounts and research literature. Yet, the relationship between these characteristics and school placement decisions has rarely been examined.

Second, this study aimed to understand the experiences of students with ASD in a range of secondary provision and elucidate the broad range of systemic factors

which can either support or hinder their secondary school experiences through interviews with the children themselves, their parents and teachers.

Third, this study aimed to examine whether the experiences of students with ASD in secondary school vary according to the type of provision they attend. Research has consistently reported that parents of children with ASD increasingly favour specialist provision as children reach secondary age, yet little research has specifically examined the experiences of children with ASD in a range of secondary provision through a multi-informant approach.

Lastly, this study aimed to inform the commissioning LA's agenda to develop special provision locally and provide recommendations to inform future policy, practice and provision to support children with ASD in secondary education.

Literature Review

2.0 Overview

This chapter reviews the existing literature related to the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. A notable lack of research focusing specifically on understanding the secondary school experiences of children with ASD through the views of key stakeholders including parents, teachers and children was identified. This paucity of research highlights the need for further research in this area, and thus provided the impetus for the present study.

Due to the limited literature available in this specific area, a broader literature base is examined herein. First, the history of education for children with SEN is discussed, from segregation to inclusion, the implications of this for children with SEN and in particular ASD, as well as consideration of the current government agenda for children with SEN. Next, the literature examining different factors which can influence the secondary school experiences of all children, including those with SEN is reviewed. This is followed by an introduction to the difficulties associated with ASD, and a review of the existing research that has considered implications of these difficulties in secondary schools from the perspective of students themselves, parents and teachers. This is followed by discussion of existing literature on best practice in autism education in secondary school and review of available literature on the issue of secondary provision for children with ASD. Finally, an overview of the current study is given.

2.1 A History of Inclusion

In 1967 Stanley Segal proclaimed that 'no child is ineducable' (Segal, 1967). This presaged a change in attitude towards children with SEN, which led to the Education (Handicapped Children) Act of 1970. This Act, for the first time, gave all children a legal right to education (Wall, 2011). Gradually it became accepted all children can learn if teaching is appropriately adapted to children's individual needs (Baron-Cohen & Bolton, 1993, Jordan & Powell, 1995, Wall, 2011). These advances in the educational rights of children with SEN, alongside progress in the diagnosis and understanding of a range of SEN and disabilities including ASD, mean that today all children with SEN are legally entitled to an education (Baron-Cohen & Bolton, 1993, Jordan & Powell, 1995, Wall, 2011). However, the most appropriate ways to integrate these students within the secondary education system is an area that has yet to be fully addressed.

2.2 The Drive Towards Inclusion

As recognition of the right of all children to an education increased, the UK Government embarked on a drive towards inclusion (Brooks, 2010). The term 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN) was introduced in the Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978) to describe all students who need additional support to access the educational curriculum. This report, for the first time, suggested integrating children with SEN in mainstream schools, a view which has since been extremely influential in policy and practice (DfEE, 1997; DfES, 2004a). The Education Act (1981) legislated many of Warnock's recommendations, including the introduction of a statement of SEN (Wall, 2011). The Code of Practice (DfEE, 1994) introduced a five-staged approach to the identification and assessment of SEN. In a move towards greater integration many special schools were closed, and only students with the most complex SEN continued to be educated within specialist provision (Jordan & Powell, 1995; Brooks, 2010).

The UK Government's 1997 Green Paper (DfEE, 1997) further advocated inclusion, and the number of children with SEN attending mainstream schools increased by 16% between 1997 and 2001 (Keen and Ward, 2004). 'Every Child Matters' (DfES, 2003) proposed reforms to children's services with a continued underlying philosophy of inclusion. Following this, the UK Government's 2004 SEN Strategy (DfES, 2004b) outlined plans to improve educational provision for children with SEN, with a continued emphasis on inclusion. The steep rise in children with SEN attending mainstream schools has since plateaued (a less than 1 per cent rise between 2004-2010) (DfE, 2010), yet most (70%) students with ASD in England continue to attend mainstream rather than specialist schools (DfE, 2011a).

2.3 From Inclusion to Exclusion?

To support the inclusive education of children with SEN, the UK Government introduced a series of policy changes to foster improvements in mainstream education. The SEN and Disability Act (2001) and Disability Discrimination Act (2005) require schools by law to make 'reasonable adjustments' to enable children with SEN to learn and be successfully included. It is important to note that the focus of these policy changes is on inclusion rather than integration. A successfully inclusive school environment is one which emphasises that all children are different and all children can learn. Harman (2009, p. 1) highlights that an inclusive school environment is one in which "the school system, as a

whole, is enabled to change in order to meet the individual needs of ALL learners. Children are "participating" in school." Similarly, Snow (2008, p. 2) stresses that inclusive schools are ones in which "students with disabilities are fully participating members of their school communities in academic and extracurricular activities."

Alongside the increasing policy emphasis on inclusion, there has been a growing body of educational literature examining the two key theories behind the promotion of inclusive education: rights and efficacy (Lindsay, 2003; 2007). To date, debate persists as to whether inclusion promotes positive outcomes for children with a range of SEN including ASD (Brooks, 2010). Research suggests that children with ASD are particularly "likely to experience negative outcomes" in mainstream secondary education (Morewood et al., 2011, p. 64). One suggested reason for these poor outcomes is that inclusion often requires children with SEN to fit within a system not designed for them (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose & Jackson, 2002). Unsuccessful inclusion can have far-reaching consequences for students with SEN, resulting in disengagement and failure to learn (MacBeath, Galton, Steward, Macbeath, & Page, 2006).

Warnock (2005) delineated some of the difficulties of successful inclusion, claiming that it can be extremely difficult to meet the wide-ranging needs of some students with ASD in mainstream schools (Warnock, 2005; Wing, 2007). In addition, studies have found mainstream teachers often do not perceive themselves sufficiently competent to meet the multifaceted educational needs of students with ASD (Barnard et al., 2002). The National Autistic Society's (NAS) 2002 report 'Autism in Schools: Crisis or Challenge?,' related findings from a survey of 373 teachers across Britain, and revealed 32% of schools were negative about inclusion. Almost half (44%) of schools felt children with ASD were not getting necessary specialist support, and 72% reported teachers were not receiving adequate training in ASD (Barnard et al., 2002).

A study by Humphrey and Symes (2013) which explored through surveys the perceptions of 53 secondary school staff regarding inclusion for children with ASD revealed subject teachers were the least confident in their ability to meet the needs of this population of students. In a study of the perspectives of teachers on the inclusion of children with ASD in Scotland, McGregor and Campbell (2001) gathered questionnaire responses from 23 specialist and 49 mainstream

teachers. Only a minority of mainstream teachers perceived integration to be advantageous. Pearce, Gray & Campbell-Evans (2010), following interviews with 50 Australian leaders of inclusive education, revealed leaders expressed with conviction that they did not feel secondary school teachers held the necessary qualifications and expertise to successfully include students with SEN.

Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, exclusion from mainstream schools is a persistently worrying outcome for children with ASD, with one in four children (27%) with autism or Asperger syndrome being excluded from school (DCSF, 2009; DfE, 2010). This is significantly higher than the rate of exclusion for children with other SEN, and seven times higher than children without SEN (4%) (DCSF, 2009; DfE, 2010). An inquiry into special educational provision in England commented "Children with ASD…provide an excellent example of…where significant cracks exist in the system, to the detriment of those who fall between them" (House of Commons, Education and Skills Committee, 2006, p. 18). It is therefore clear that at present the unique and complex needs of students with ASD frequently make it difficult for them to succeed within mainstream secondary education (Morewood et al., 2011), highlighting the need for research which examines the experiences of children with ASD in secondary education, as was the focus of this research.

Perhaps as a result of these findings, recent Government policy has indicated a move away from the emphasis on inclusion. The Coalition Government program for schools (Cabinet Office, 2010) stressed "we believe the most vulnerable children deserve the very highest quality of care. We will...prevent the unnecessary closure of special schools and remove the bias towards inclusion." Furthermore, the Government's SEN Green Paper (DfE, 2011b) proposed a change to parents' rights to inclusive education. The paper outlined plans to reduce parents' existing entitlement to mainstream school except if it is "incompatible with the efficient education of other children" (DfES, 2001, p. 14). Additional criteria will be introduced, including if mainstream is considered not to meet the needs of the child, is incompatible with the efficient education of other children, or is an inefficient use of resources (DfE, 2011b).

In addition, the current government recently passed the Children and Families Act, which will become law in September 2014. This will extend the SEN system from birth to 25, giving children, young people and their parents greater control and choice around decisions which affect children's care and education, and

introducing the offer of personal budgets for families with the ultimate aim of ensuring children's needs are properly met. This Act will also replace the SEN Statement with a new birth to 25 Education, Health and Care Plan in order to improve co-operation between all services that support children and their families, and require education, health and care authorities to work together with families to meet children's needs. Together, this demonstrates a clear drive towards increasing parental choice and control over many aspects of children's care and education, with an emphasis on listening to children's views. This highlights the need for research that seeks to ascertain parents' and children's views on secondary provision for children with ASD, as was the focus of the present study.

2.4 Factors Influencing Secondary Education

In the UK education system, children transition from primary to secondary school at approximately 11 years of age. Research suggests that whilst inclusion of children with SEN is often successful in the primary phase of education, in the secondary phase a range of difficulties emerge (Meijer, 2005).

Secondary schools are larger, more impersonal, evaluative, formal, competitive and comparative environments than primary schools (McGee et al., 2003; Lucey & Reay, 2000). Unlike the integrative 'single class, single teacher' model of education in primary schools which creates a 'child-centred' and 'family' ethos, secondary schools are characterised by departmentalised teaching, incuding more subjects, rooms and teachers (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). Thus secondary schools have by nature a more impersonal, segregated, fragmented and 'subject-centred' regime (Shaw, 1995). These characteristics of secondary schools necessitate more independence and autonomy on the part of the student (McGee et al., 2003; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). They also create a "one size fits all approach," which research has suggested results in students with SEN being denied access to the curriculum (Pearce et al., 2010, p. 300). In addition, secondary schools are usually characterised by a 'streaming' model where students are grouped according to achievement level. These characteristics, combined with the fact that the gap between students with SEN and their peers, both academically and in terms of social-emotional abilities, tends to increase with age, can cause significant difficulties for student inclusion at the secondary level (Meijer, 2005).

Secondary schools are also characterised by a significantly larger, more diverse population of students, in which relationships with peers are more complex (Tobell, 2003). Students face the challenge of negotiating new friendship groups (Rudduck, 1996; Lucey & Reay, 2000). Ashton (2008) gathered the views of 1673 children facing transition during their final term of primary school using a multi-method approach including questionnaires, discussion, drawing and writing. The author found the children were significantly more concerned about the social differences associated with secondary school, such as friendships, bullying, and adapting to new teachers, than the curriculum changes. Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2002) conducted an in-depth case study of an inclusive secondary school, and found that whilst students with SEN were often successfully included academically, parents described their children to be socially isolated.

Evangelou et al. (2008), as part of the UK national study The Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) 3-14 project, a longitudinal examination of education through the views of key stakeholders including children, parents, school staff and LA professionals, conducted a sub-study focused on secondary transition. Questionnaire data were collected from 550 children and their parents during their first term in secondary school, of which 12 in-depth case studies were completed for children who had experienced a successful transition to secondary school. In addition, interviews were conducted with teachers and LA professionals. The findings revealed that for the majority of children, positive social experiences were central to enabling a successful start in secondary school, including building friendships, maintaining existing friendships and experiencing low levels of bullying.

Evangelou and colleagues' study included a substantial proportion (23%) of child participants identified as having SEN (n=110). Despite parental concerns and anxieties regarding secondary transition, no significant differences were found between the success of transition for children with and without SEN. However, children with SEN were identified to be more susceptible to bullying, and bullying was found to negatively impact on children's ability to settle in to their new school. The multi-informant mixed-method approach employed enabled the authors to undertake an in-depth examination of factors that impact on children's early experiences of secondary school. Furthermore, the inclusion of a large number of children with SEN enabled them to gain insight specifically into the experiences of children with SEN who were vulnerable in their ability to adjust to

secondary school. When the EPPSE project followed-up these children's experiences at Year 9 in secondary school, they found students with SEN consistently reported less favourable perceptions of school than peers, in a range of areas including behaviour, learning and the school environment (Sammons et al., 2011).

Other studies have also found that for all children, bullying, ranging from name-calling to physical violence, is one of the biggest problems highlighted by children, parents and professionals when eliciting views of secondary school experiences. Norwich and Kelly (2004) gathered the views of 101 children with MLD in both primary and secondary mainstream and special schools, and found that bullying was particularly dominant in their accounts of school. Jindal-Snape and Foggie (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of 9 children in years 6 - 8 of Scottish schools through interviews with children, parents and professionals. Child participants were purposively sampled to be 'vulnerable' to experiencing difficulties adjusting to secondary school. The authors identified that bullying was one of the biggest problems highlighted by participants, and there was often a feeling amongst parents that schools were not responding appropriately to resolve concerns (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008).

In addition to the social challenges arising from student-student interactions, Pearce et al. (2010) suggested that the size of the student population in secondary schools, alongside the transient nature of teacher-student interactions produced by departmentalised teaching make it difficult for teachers to get to know students, preventing the development of the teacher-student relationships which characterise primary education. Following 50 interviews with Australian leaders of inclusive education, the authors revealed that transfer of necessary information about students was considered to be "almost impossible" within the secondary school environment, with the result "the secondary school context is a barrier" (p. 294) to successful inclusion. In the study by Evangelou et al. (2008), the primary concern voiced by parents of children with SEN was their child's ability to adjust to the large number of teachers in secondary school. Additionally, Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) concluded that the development of secure attachments with both adults and peers in secondary school can play a crucial role in ensuring positive experiences of secondary school.

Other research has found that, in addition to these systemic school factors, individual characteristics can also significantly impact on a child's experience at

secondary school due to the psychosocial challenges inherent in secondary education. Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) identified individual characteristics such as resilience, self-esteem and anxiety levels influence children's ability to cope with the challenges of secondary schools. Others have emphasised the fact that secondary education runs parallel with the developmental changes associated with the onset of puberty (Longaretti, 2006) which can also play a role in impacting on children's secondary school experiences (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Nevertheless, research also highlights that systemic mitigating factors exist which can protect and enhance a child's secondary school experiences where these individual factors increase vulnerability. In particular, support from family, peers, the school system and professionals, can all have a significant effect on children's secondary school experiences (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Noyes, 2006; Evangelou et al., 2008).

2.5 Autism Spectrum Disorder

Individuals with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) have a profile of needs, including core difficulties in social communication and social interaction and restricted repetitive patterns of behaviour including possible sensory sensitivities (APA, 2013). It is important to be aware there is much variation in the way in which individuals with ASD experience these social and behavioural difficulties. In the recent DSM-5 released in May 2013, the four previously existing terms used within DSM-IV for a diagnosis of autism (autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder and PDD-NOS (pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified) were replaced with the single diagnostic category 'autism spectrum disorder' (APA, 1994; 2013).

2.5.1 Social difficulties

These social interaction and social communication difficulties affect how people with ASD understand and respond to the world around them (Wing & Gould, 1979). They experience difficulties in both receptive and expressive language skills, including speech, gesture, facial expression, reciprocity and other social nuances (Baron-Cohen et al., 2000). As a result, they can struggle to understand and interpret the behaviour of others and the world around them, and have difficulty communicating with others, leading to a preference for highly structured routines and environments (Baron-Cohen, 2008; Frith, 2008; Mesibov & Howley, 2003, Wing, 2007).

2.5.2 Restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests

Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests and activities are a less well-understood and researched area of ASD (Honey, McConachie, Randle, Shearer & Le Couteur, 2008). These manifest in a range of ways, including sensory preoccupations, motor mannerisms, compulsions, rituals, circumscribed interests, repetitive use of language and an insistence on sameness (Honey et al., 2008). These repetitive interests have been shown to reduce the engagement of individuals with ASD in both solitary activities and social interactions with family and peers, leading to poorer social and communicative outcomes (Honey et al., 2008).

2.5.3 Sensory needs

A large number of people with ASD also experience sensory difficulties (Baker, Lane, Angley & Young, 2008; Pellicano, 2013), characterised by hyper- and hyposensitivity (Baranek, 2002; Bogdashina, 2003). Hypersensitivity relates to sensation-avoiding, for example averting eyes away from lights, and covering ears in noisy situations. Hyposensitivity relates to sensation seeking, for example seeking deep pressure (Baranek, David, Poe, Stone & Watson, 2006; Dunn, Saiter & Rinner, 2002). The way in which these sensory sensitivities manifest varies for each individual (Kranowitz, 2005). In the recent DSM-5, sensory difficulties are for the first time included as criteria for diagnosis, within the area of restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour (APA, 2013). This revision reflects the increasing recognition that sensory issues are an important factor impacting on the daily lives of individuals with ASD.

2.5.4 Co-occurring psychiatric conditions

Alongside these diagnostic characteristics of ASD, there is also a growing recognition of the high prevalence of co-occurring psychiatric conditions in individuals with ASD (Leyfer et al., 2006; Simonoff et al., 2008). Many receive dual or multiple diagnoses including conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), mental health problems including major depressive disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, phobias and anxiety disorders (Leyfer et al., 2006; Simonoff et al., 2008). In a study of 112 children with ASD aged 10-14 years, Simonoff et al. (2008) found that 71% of children reached the diagnostic threshold for at least one co-occurring diagnosis as assessed through the parent-report Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment. The most common co-occurring diagnosis was social anxiety

disorder, found in 29.2% of participants, closely followed by ADHD (28.2%). Furthermore, 41% of those with a co-occurring disorder also reached the diagnostic threshold for a second co-occurring diagnosis, and one third of these reached the diagnostic threshold for three or more diagnoses. This range of co-occurring difficulties is likely to intensify the social, behavioural and sensory challenges experienced by individuals with ASD. Furthermore, these wide-ranging difficulties are likely to be exacerbated by the larger, more complex environment of secondary school, making them particularly vulnerable within this setting (Noyes, 2006).

2.5.5 Prevalence of ASD

There has been a major rise in the prevalence of ASD over the last twenty years. A 1967 study found ASD occurred in 1 in every 2500 children (Lotter, 1967). However, current research indicates 1 in every 100 children are diagnosed on the autistic spectrum (Baird et al., 2006), although Baron-Cohen et al. (2009) emphasise this is a minimum figure since many cases remain undetected. The cause of this dramatic rise remains unclear, although studies indicate it is likely to be linked to improvements in assessment and identification, and the broadening diagnostic criteria (Gernsbacher, Dawson & Goldsmith, 2005).

What is apparent is that it is crucial UK schools have the skills, knowledge base and resources to meet the complex educational needs of children with ASD. Research conducted by the NAS identified that over 10 years ago 1 in every 128 children in mainstream schools had a diagnosis of ASD, and the rate of ASD appeared to be three times higher in primary (1 in 80) than in secondary (1 in 268) (Barnard et al., 2002). Batten (2005), then Head of Public Affairs for the NAS, stressed that this report makes it “clear that secondary schools will shortly be faced with higher numbers of pupils with ASD than they have previously experienced” (p. 93) and continued to outline that whilst 90,000 children attending UK schools had an ASD at that time, only approximately 7500 specialist school places were available. As such, it would seem clear that research to identify effective educational practice to meet these children’s needs throughout secondary education is crucial and timely, highlighting the importance of this research.

2.6 Autism Spectrum Disorder and Secondary Education: Challenges

Research has consistently indicated that the presence of a SEN causes children to have particular difficulties coping with the challenges of secondary education (Meijer, 2005). When considering the specific difficulties experienced by individuals with ASD, together with the characteristics of secondary schools discussed earlier, it would seem clear that children with ASD are particularly vulnerable to experiencing difficulties adjusting to and coping throughout secondary education (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; 2008b; Hannah & Topping, 2013; Dillon & Underwood, 2012). However, unfortunately at present there exists very little rigorous academic literature specifically and directly examining the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

2.6.1 Social difficulties

Carrington and Graham (2001) used in-depth case study and semi-structured interviews to gather the views of two 13 year old boys with Asperger syndrome and their mothers regarding secondary school experiences in Australia. Whilst the education system experienced in other countries may differ, due to the limited literature available, such accounts nevertheless provide a helpful insight into the school experiences of these young boys with Asperger syndrome. The findings highlighted that both boys found negotiating social situations a major cause of stress, had difficulty understanding and relating to peers, and struggled to both form and maintain friendships. Mark, one of the boys participating in this study described how “last year wasn’t a good year. I didn’t have many friends, I used to go home in tears actually, because I saw all the other kids with friends” (p. 42). In addition, mothers of both boys stressed their belief that their sons endeavored to ‘mask’ their difficulties at school. Since this was a descriptive study using an extremely small sample base, caution must be taken in generalising the results to other children with ASD. It would also have been valuable to gather teachers’ perspectives to ascertain whether they reiterated parents’ and children’s views. Nevertheless, the views of these students and their parents provide useful insight into the challenges experienced by these children with ASD in secondary education. Furthermore, many of the issues raised are supported by other research in this area that shall be discussed herein.

Humphrey and Lewis (2008a) used semi-structured interviews and student diaries to examine the views of 20 students aged 11-17 years with Asperger’s syndrome about mainstream secondary school. The use of student diaries offers

a powerful and personal insight into the daily lives of these students. This study highlighted similar findings to Carrington and Graham (2001), describing that the social naivety, and difficulty developing relationships with peers experienced by students with ASD often proved to be a barrier to successful inclusion in school. This was exacerbated by students' repetitive interests, which impacted on development of reciprocal relationships with peers. In addition, this study also found that students with ASD in mainstream secondary schools often felt the need to 'mask' or 'hide' their autism and were 'forced to adapt' in order to 'fit in,' resulting in what they term 'masquerading,' a finding consistent with that of Carrington and Graham (2001). In addition, Humphrey and Lewis (2008a) noted students frequently used negative connotations such as 'freak', 'retard', having a 'bad brain' and being 'mentally disabled' to describe themselves.

The substantial diversity in the secondary school experiences of the 20 students in the study by Humphrey & Lewis (2008a) is particularly striking. Whilst some students demonstrated acceptance of their condition, and seemed able to 'fit in' and manage the organisational, environmental, and social challenges of secondary school, other students had greater difficulty accepting their differences and coping with the demands of the secondary school environment. This is not necessarily surprising if one recalls that, as highlighted earlier, autism lies on a broad spectrum, and there is great variability, diversity and heterogeneity in individual presentation and need (Byrne, 2013).

The author's conclusions were strengthened by the study's larger sample size. However, the presence of only qualitative data did not allow them to characterise the profile of child participants. Better understanding of these students' reported strengths and difficulties might have been achieved through measuring the key traits inherent to ASD described earlier such as social difficulties, sensory preferences and anxiety, enabling them to examine potential associations between these characteristics and students' experiences of secondary school (Howlin, 1998; 2006). In addition, the authors omitted both the parental and teacher views, which prevented additional potential insight offered by two key stakeholders in the educational experiences of children with ASD.

Connor (2000) gathered the views of 16 students with ASD in Years 7 to 11 of mainstream secondary school through semi-structured interviews. Comparative to the studies by Humphrey and Lewis (2008a) and Carrington and Graham

(2001), this study was strengthened by the author's inclusion of the teachers' perspectives. The study found students consistently described anxiety caused by social situations and interacting with peers, including not only unstructured times, but also group work and presentation of work. In addition, several of the issues raised by teachers were also related to the students' social difficulties. Teachers outlined that these significantly impacted on students' interactions with peers, and consequently negatively influenced social acceptance, often resulting in students with ASD being socially vulnerable and isolated in school.

Carrington, Papinczak and Templeton (2003) conducted a phenomenological study using semi-structured interviews with 5 young people with ASD in mainstream secondary schools in Australia. This study identified three key ways in which children with ASD struggled socially in secondary school: difficult social experiences, hostile encounters with peers, and students 'masquerading' to hide their difficulties from peers. Through the interview responses gathered, this study provided a detailed insight into the secondary school experiences of these five students, and these three key areas of difficulty identified reiterated those outlined in other studies previously discussed. Nevertheless, key limitations of this study were the small sample size and the absence of parent or teacher perspectives to elucidate further the views expressed by students themselves.

A major consequence of the social difficulties experienced by individuals with ASD and highlighted throughout these research studies is children with ASD's vulnerability to teasing and bullying. Humphrey and Lewis (2008a) identified that experiences of bullying were the most constant finding across all 20 students. The authors proposed that the social naivety typical of ASD made them susceptible to being manipulated and taken advantage of by peers. This finding has been reiterated by much other research examining the secondary school experiences of children with ASD (Gumaste, 2011; Carrington et al., 2003; Connor, 2000; Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

The NAS's 'Make School Make Sense' campaign involving consultation with 1400 family members of school-aged children with ASD, found 3 in 5 children with Asperger syndrome had experienced bullying (Reid & Batten, 2006). Bullying was more common in mainstream educational settings and amongst older students. Humphrey and Symes (2010) compared the school experiences of 40 children with ASD to those of 40 children with dyslexia and 40 without SEN

through self-report questionnaires. The large sample size and inclusion of comparison groups are clear strengths of this study. They found the highest levels of bullying amongst the ASD population, suggesting the profile of needs of children with ASD makes them particularly vulnerable to bullying.

Wainscot and colleagues (2008) conducted a case-control study involving interviews with 30 mainstream secondary school students with Asperger syndrome or 'high functioning' autism aged 11-18 years, and 27 matched peers without SEN. They found students with ASD had significantly fewer friends and were significantly more likely to be bullied than mainstream peers (Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, Tantam & Williams, 2008). The authors did not triangulate the data gathered through other perspectives, which would have enhanced the validity of the findings. A clear strength of this study is the inclusion of a control group to allow comparison to be carried out between the experiences of children both with and without ASD. However, the authors note that due to school staff's difficulties in applying the 'matching criteria,' only approximately half of the matched pairs could be included in some aspects of data analysis, thus reducing the reliability and validity of the study. In addition, the authors did not gather quantitative data to profile the characteristics of participants, thus preventing any exploration of associations between individual characteristics and school experiences.

These social difficulties are perhaps further exacerbated by the fact students with ASD have been found to experience difficulties related to their sense of identity at secondary school (Gumaste, 2011; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a). Gumaste (2011) elicited the views of 15 students with ASD, their parents and teachers through semi-structured interviews in their first year of secondary school. Of these, 8 attended mainstream and 7 attended specialist provision. The research found children's sense of identity was differently affected according to the type of provision they transferred to. Those in mainstream showed an increasing awareness of feeling different from their peers, negatively labeling themselves as 'weird' and a 'nerd' and trying hard to 'fit in' and 'appear normal', similar to the findings of Humphrey and Lewis (2008a) and Carrington and Graham (2001). Unlike their mainstream peers, students with ASD attending specialist provision attempted to distance themselves from peers as they experienced difficulties tolerating the 'unusual' behaviour of peers. They negatively labeled them and struggled to understand and accept their own 'special' identity (Gumaste, 2011).

The inclusion of perspectives from children, parents, and teachers is a key strength of this study, since it allowed examination of a wide range of factors that impact on children's transition to, and early experiences of secondary school. In addition, one distinctive quality of this study was that it directly elicited the views of children with ASD attending both mainstream and special secondary schools, and their parents and teachers. In so doing, this study explored an area in which research is to-date distinctly lacking. Furthermore, Gumaste also collected data to characterise the profile of children in the study, including social difficulties, cognitive abilities, sensory needs and anxiety. This mixed methodology ensured an in-depth understanding of the profile of participants in the sample, and enabled associations to be examined between intrinsic characteristics, choice of secondary provision and transition success. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecosystemic Model (1979), a child's secondary school experiences are influenced by both individual child factors and broad systemic factors. From this perspective, to ensure a thorough examination of children's secondary school experiences, both individual child characteristics and broader systemic factors should be examined, the approach undertaken in the present study.

2.6.2 Preference for routine

Other features of ASD are also likely to impact upon children's experiences of secondary school. Morewood et al. (2011) described key factors in the successful inclusion of children with ASD within secondary education, and highlighted that the preference for routines demonstrated by individuals with ASD cause students to experience difficulty coping with transitions, and unexpected changes in routines. Given the often chaotic, departmentalised environment of secondary schools, this preference for sameness and predictability is likely to be exacerbated by the context of mainstream secondary education. Carrington and Graham (2001) and Carrington et al. (2003) also highlighted the importance of rules and routines in supporting the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

2.6.3 Restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests

Research also suggests that the restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour interests and activities experienced by children with ASD also impact on their secondary school experiences. Klin, Danovitch, Merz and Volkmar (2007) conducted a survey of special interests in 96 children and adolescents with 'higher functioning' ASD and found children's engagement in restricted

interests reduced their engagement in both solitary activities and social interactions with family and peers, and led to poorer social and communicative outcomes. Furthermore, Humphrey and Lewis (2008a) documented that students often struggled to form reciprocal friendships with peers due to their 'special interests.' One boy interviewed as part of this research articulated how "I got in an argument about why I like certain stuff on sporting talents" (p. 33). In addition, Carrington and Graham (2001) highlighted that children's repetitive interests impacted on concentration in lessons.

2.6.4 Sensory needs

The sensory difficulties associated with ASD are also likely to make the process of coping within a larger and more complex educational environment particularly challenging. Wing (2007) describes mainstream schools as 'noisy', 'brightly lit', and 'ever-changing' environments, which can terrify children with ASD. Bogdashina (2003) emphasises "most educational environments are all about the very things that are the strongest sources of aversion [for students with ASDs]" (p.17). Moore (2007), a mother of two autistic sons, also supports this view, stressing "autists often have sensory hypersensitivities, and the designers of mainstream school buildings do not take these into account" (p. 36). Humphrey and Lewis (2008a) also found many students with ASD reported the noisy, busy and chaotic environment of secondary school to be a considerable source of anxiety and stress, further corroborating these views. Tsokova and Tarr (2012) report an account from a mother of a child with ASD, who described:

> *"For autism, I think the architecture of the school makes it also difficult. If you have got a school with lots of echoing places, lots of children bumping into each other in corridors…schools that don't have lots of little rooms where you can go away in groups are a problem…or if you have a school that is not prepared to set up desks separately in the classroom so that they can have independent work stations when the child needs it – that is a problem"* (p. 22).

These views are further supported by autobiographical reports by individuals with ASD. Clare Sainsbury (2009), a woman with Aspergers Syndrome, reveals the school environment, with its noisy busy corridors, frequent ringing bells and overwhelming smell of cleaning products constantly brought her to the brink of sensory overload. In addition, Donna Williams, an autistic self-advocate describes:

> *"My ideal educational environment would be one where the room had very little echo or reflective light, where the lighting was soft and glowing with upward projecting lighting. It would be one where the physical arrangement of things in the room was cognitively orderly and didn't alter and where everything in the room remained within routine-defined areas. It would be an environment where only what was necessary for learning was on display and there was no unnecessary decorations or potential distractions."* (Williams, 1996, p.284)

Dominique Dumortier (2004, p. 31), another autistic individual, describes how "the world often scares me ... one stimulus can be so overwhelming ... I begin to panic or my temper flares up ... my feelings at that point can best be described as a survival instinct." In addition, Ashburner, Ziviani and Rodger (2008) identified that children who experience sensory difficulties characterised by auditory processing difficulties, underresposiveness and sensation seeking are more likely to academically underachieve.

Luke Jackson, a teenage boy with Asperger Syndrome, also describes the sensory difficulties he encounters within the school environment:

> *"The only thing I cannot stand is the echoing in swimming baths or big empty halls. There is another thing that I find really annoying and that is the fact that exams are taken in big halls. I can hear everyone turning their pages on their exam sheets and this drives me crazy" (Jackson, 2002, p.74).*

Kenneth Hall, another young boy with Asperger's Syndrome similarly describes "I just hated the classroom. The noise annoyed me. At the time the sound of the children's chatter was like dynamite going off in my ears" (Hall, 2001, p.39). Additionally, Naoki Higashida, a young boy diagnosed with Autistic Tendencies, has written a fascinating account in which he invites the reader "to imagine a daily life in which your faculty of speech is taken away… [and] the editor-in-residence who orders your thoughts walks out without notice" (Higashida & Mitchell, 2013, p.1). Naoki describes how "it's not quite that the noises grate on our nerves… it feels as if the ground is shaking and the landscape around us starts coming to get us, and it's absolutely terrifying" (Higashida & Mitchell, 2013, p.81). These autobiographical accounts of young people with ASD regarding their experiences of school provide valuable insight into their lived experiences of education.

2.6.5 Anxiety

As discussed earlier, there is a well-documented high prevalence of co-occurring

psychiatric conditions such as phobias, mental heath disorders / depression and anxiety disorders in individuals with ASD. Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) emphasise the impact of anxiety levels on the successful transition of children with ASD to secondary school. Carrington and Graham (2001) highlight the stress and anxiety children with ASD experience both in social situations with peers, and when completing school work. Mark, a 13 year old boy with Aspergers Syndrome participating in this research, described how "I get really worried and then when I'm worried I can't concentrate." Humphrey and Lewis (2008a) reveal that the chaotic and busy environment of secondary school is a considerable source of stress and anxiety for children with ASD. Furthermore, Gumaste (2011) found a positive correlation between the degree of sensory sensitivities experienced by individuals with ASD and the severity of their anxiety. The potential consequences of this anxiety exacerbated by the social and sensory characteristics of secondary school environments are far-reaching, since they can lead to emotional outbursts which teachers find difficult to manage (Humphrey & Symes, 2013).

Collectively, these findings regarding the social difficulties, preference for routine, restricted behaviours, sensory challenges and anxiety experienced by children with ASD suggest the social and environmental context of secondary schools presents significant challenges for students with ASD, highlighting an important focus for research to inform evidence-based practice to support students with ASD to be successful within secondary education, as was the focus of this research.

2.7 Autism Spectrum Disorder and Secondary Education: What works?

As has been discussed, the process of effectively including children with ASD within mainstream secondary education is often difficult and complex, and these students are often at increased risk of negative outcomes (Morewood et al., 2011; Reid & Batten, 2006). Jones (2006, p. 545) highlights "there is growing recognition that children with ASDs have particular and distinct needs from others with SEN." Furthermore, Jones and colleagues argue that placing a child with ASD in a mainstream school is 'locational integration', not inclusion (Jones et al*.,* 2008). However, unfortunately at present little empirical research exists specifically examining what does work for children with ASD in secondary education.

The UK Government's Autism Spectrum Disorders Good Practice Guidance (DfES, 2002a; 2002b) outlines findings from a 2-year working group examining what constitutes good practice for this population of children. This guidance is now over 10 years old, and as outlined by one author, "most of the principles and content … are based on what appears to make good sense, by those with long experience in the field, rather than on empirical evidence" (Jones, 2006, p. 547). Nevertheless, researchers stress that, "given the lack of robust, empirical evidence in many areas of practice and provision, the views of experts (including parents) remain a vital source of information and guidance" (Parsons et al., 2009a, p.4). This guidance continues to be provided by the NAS, and offers a helpful list of pointers to good practice in supporting students with ASD. Key principles highlighted include the importance of practitioner knowledge and understanding of ASD, the value of clear short-term and long-term goals, in particular to develop the social skills of children with ASD, as well as the continuing need to monitor, evaluate and research the effectiveness of provision.

In reviewing the literature on what is currently known about good practice in the education of students with ASD, Jones (2006) recommended a dual focus – to help children with ASD to develop social skills to understand the world around them and communicate their needs, whilst at the same time making adaptations to the environment which support child with ASD to function and learn. In a report commissioned by the Autism Education Trust (AET), Jones and colleagues used a mixed methods approach, including a literature review, survey questionnaires and interviews with school staff, relevant professionals, parents/carers and children with ASD to describe the school experiences of children with ASD in England (Jones et al. 2008). They concluded that important factors are staff understanding of the particular needs and learning styles of students with ASD, effective relationships between staff and students, and a whole-school positive and optimistic ethos.

Parsons and colleagues (2009a) conducted an international review of the literature surrounding best practice in educational provision for students with ASD. The report noted that of the 100 studies included in the empirical review, only 10% focused on meeting the needs of post-primary aged children and young people. The review recommended that a range of educational provisions and interventions be available and chosen to meet children's individual needs. In a recent report commissioned by the AET, Charman and colleagues related the

outcomes of interviews with school staff, students and parents/carers at 16 schools known for good practice in educating students with ASD. This highlighted eight key factors in the effective education of children with ASD: “ambitions and aspirations, monitoring progress, adapting the curriculum, involvement of other professionals/services, staff knowledge and training, effective communication, broader participation and strong relationships with families” (Charman et al., 2011, p. 4).

Morewood et al. (2011) undertook an in-depth case study of a single successfully inclusive secondary school. This highlighted a range of key areas which schools should consider if they are to effectively include students with ASD. These include “developing the school environment” to take account of the sensory sensitivities experienced by many individuals with ASD, “creating a positive ethos” throughout the school, providing “training and development” to staff on ASD, “peer education and awareness” of ASD to facilitate social inclusion, “flexible provision” to accommodate the unique and individual needs of students with ASD and “direct support and intervention” to develop skills in specific areas of difficulty (Morewood, et al., 2011, p. 64-66). Tobias (2009) investigated supportive factors for the education of children with ASD in one secondary school through focus groups with children and parents. This identified key factors included transition support, mentors, provision of quiet calm spaces, good home school communication, staff knowledge of ASD and individual students, individualised support, and a consistent approach.

Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of key areas in supporting the effective education of children with ASD, including staff knowledge and training, peer awareness, flexibility to meet individual needs, home-school communication, a broad and adaptable curriculum, working with professionals, emphasis on teaching social skills, environmental accommodations, positive relationships between staff, students and parents and a positive and ambitious school ethos. Nevertheless, the lack of research examining what works in practice specifically for children with ASD in secondary schools highlights an important area for future research, and was a key focus of the current study.

2.8 Autism Spectrum Disorder and Choice of Secondary Provision

Perhaps the most challenging decision for parents of children with SEN approaching secondary age is identifying the most appropriate secondary

provision to meet their child's needs. Leyser and Kirk (2004) surveyed 437 parents of children with SEN in the US and found parents of secondary age children voiced significantly more negative views of mainstream education than parents of primary aged children. A survey by the NAS gathered the views of 818 parent members' experiences of inclusion in education. They found parental satisfaction towards inclusive provision reduced with the child's age, and many parents believed that as their child reached secondary school age they required more specialist educational support and provision with ASD trained teachers. Additionally, the study revealed parental satisfaction is greatest when children attend autism specific provision (Barnard et al., 2000).

Another report by the NAS entitled 'Make School Make Sense' (Batten et al., 2006) published findings from a survey of 1271 parent members of school-aged children with ASD. Of parents surveyed, 59% related not having had the opportunity to exercise any preference over the type of secondary provision their child attended. The study also revealed parents found identifying a suitable secondary school placement for their child a challenging process, and they felt there is a significant shortfall in suitable specialist placements for secondary age children with ASD, with 30% reporting their child attended 'out of county' secondary provision. A report by the Audit Commission (2007) identified that of the 6000 'out of county' school placements in England, 23% were allocated to those with ASD. This has clear financial implications for LAs due to the costs associated with out of county provision.

An online survey by Parsons, Lewis and Ellins (2009b) gathered the views of 66 parents of children with ASD and 59 parents of children with other SEN. The study found that parents of children with ASD were significantly more likely to voice that they had not received sufficient information to make an informed decision about their child's school placement, or been able to choose the provision of their preference. Byrne (2013) conducted a review of parents' placement decisions for children with SEN. Studies from the UK, Australia and USA were included due to the limited literature available within the UK. The review reiterated other findings, highlighting that parents of children with SEN consistently want more specialist placements for their children as they reach secondary age.

Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger and Alkin (1999) conducted a survey of 113 parents of children with ASD and 149 parents of children with Down Syndrome, aged 2-9 years in the US. They found that parents of children with ASD felt mainstream schools could not adequately meet their child's needs as they got older, due to inadequate teacher to student ratios, concerns about teasing from peers, and inadequate training and specialist knowledge about ASD amongst staff. Interestingly, these were not views shared by parents of children with Down Syndrome, suggesting it is not just a child having SEN which influences parents' preference towards more specialist provision as children get older, but rather the specific characteristics of ASD. Kasari et al. (1999) also highlighted that parents of children in specialist provision were most dissatisfied with their child's placement and most desired a change of provision. It was also notable that these parents considered teachers but not the curriculum to be benefits of their child's placement. This would suggest that parents of children with SEN can be faced with conflicting choices and difficult decisions when identifying the 'best fit' educational placement for their child.

Many of the pieces of research reviewed above used surveys to examine the views of parents of children with ASD regarding educational provision. A key strength of these studies is the large number of parent respondents. However, gathering parents' perspectives through surveys allows for far less in-depth responses than other approaches such as interview. In addition, in many cases the respondents to these surveys are members of establishments aimed at advocating for parents. As such, it is important to be circumspect when considering the findings of these surveys, since the views of these parent members may not be an accurate portrayal of the views of parents of children with ASD more generally.

Starr and Foy (2012) attempted to overcome these issues to some degree by reporting the findings of open-ended survey questions completed by parents of 144 children with ASD in Canada, 87% of whom attended mainstream schools either full or part-time (Starr, Foy, Cramer & Singh, 2006). The authors identified that parental satisfaction towards their child's education decreased with children's age, with parents of children in secondary being the least satisfied. Significant sources of dissatisfaction were schools not meeting children's needs, inadequate training and knowledge about ASD, and poor communication. Whitaker (2007) also sought to resolve to some degree the issues inherent in other survey studies

through sending questionnaires to all parents and carers of a child with ASD in the county of Northamptonshire. A mixture of closed and open questionnaire items was employed to attain both quantitative data and more in-depth open responses regarding parents' views of their child's secondary school experiences. Whitaker found that parents of children attending specialist settings were the most satisfied with their child's provision, with only 15% rating themselves as either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. In contrast, 40% of parents of children attending mainstream settings expressed dissatisfaction with the placement. In addition, responses revealed that where parents rated themselves as satisfied, up to 25% voiced serious issues or significant worries regarding their child's educational provision. This highlights the enduring and pervasive difficulties parents of children with ASD can encounter in attempting to ensure their child's educational needs are met. Of importance to parents was good home-school communication, expert knowledge of social skills teaching, and a readiness by teachers to listen and be flexible to meet children's individual needs.

A review of provision for children with SEN conducted by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006) revealed parents of children with ASD experience the greatest levels of frustration and upset when attempting to ensure provision meets their child's needs, a finding reiterated by Tissot and Evans (2006) following surveys with 738 parents of children with ASD. Since professionals do not always support parents' views, other research has shown parents are increasingly challenging LAs for access to specialist secondary provision (Tissot, 2011). Between 2009 and 2010, the proportion of appeals to the SEN and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST) in England regarding children with ASD totaled 31%, a figure greater than any other SEN category (SENDIST, 2010). This delays the identification and naming of a suitable school, causing considerable anxiety for both children with ASD and their families (Gumaste, 2011).

Furthermore, research suggests that where children transition from mainstream primary settings to specialist secondary provision, parents and children often express conflicting choices regarding secondary provision. Whilst parents strongly advocate a specialist place for their child with ASD, studies indicate that children themselves expressly voice a preference for mainstream secondary provision due to a desire to remain with their existing peer group (Gumaste,

2011; Maras & Aveling, 2006). Gumaste (2011) suggests this conflict may impact on children's acceptance of their secondary placement, and thus their success within this provision.

Cumulatively, the findings of these studies suggest that parents' preference for specialist provision in the secondary phase (Barnard et al., 2000; Whitaker, 2007) is juxtaposed with a lack of provision options (Batten et al., 2006), conflicting advantages to different types of provision (Kasari et al., 1999), and in some cases also with a conflict in opinion between children, parents and professionals (Gumaste, 2011; Maras & Aveling, 2006; Tissot, 2011). As a result, identifying and obtaining the most suitable secondary provision for a child with ASD can be stressful and anxiety provoking. This therefore highlights the need for further research in this area to more fully understand the experiences of children with ASD and their parents regarding secondary provision, as was the focus of this research.

2.9 Conclusion

It would therefore seem clear secondary education presents a range of potential challenges for students with ASD due to the unique and complex needs of this population. The decision as to whether a child with ASD should attend specialist or mainstream secondary provision is fraught with multiple concerns and considerations. Furthermore, the implications of school placement decisions and school failure for students, their families and LAs are wide-ranging. However, perhaps due to the strong focus on inclusion over the past 20 years, little research has examined the views of children with ASD, their parents and teachers with regards to their experiences of and satisfaction with a range of secondary school placements. As such, this represents an important area for further research and was the focus of the current study.

2.10 The Current Study

The overarching aim of this study was to examine the key factors impacting on the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

A mixed-method multi-informant approach was employed in an attempt to overcome some of the methodological limitations of prior research in this area described earlier. Data regarding the profile of needs of child participants were gathered to inform understanding of the individual needs of children in the

sample, as well as to determine whether intrinsic characteristics influence secondary school placement decisions. Since both social difficulties and sensory needs are included within the newly revised diagnostic criteria of ASD (DSM-5), both these characteristics were examined. In addition, cognitive ability was assessed since this is a key factor taken into consideration when the LA makes school placement decisions. Finally, anxiety was also examined, since as outlined in the literature discussed earlier, difficulties related to anxiety are the most common co-occurring condition for individuals with ASD. Furthermore, anxiety arising from the challenges of coping within the secondary school context has regularly been raised in the literature as a factor influencing the secondary school experiences of children with ASD, making this characteristic pertinent for the present study.

Broader systemic factors influencing children's experiences of secondary school were also examined through interview. Interviews were undertaken with children with ASD themselves to ensure student voice was elicited, as well as with parents and teachers, to enhance reliability and validity of the study, provide in-depth data, and enable triangulation through a multi-informant approach. Purposive sampling was utilised to ensure child participants attended a range of secondary provision, including local mainstream, maintained special, bases attached to mainstream and independent special. Since research examining the intrinsic characteristics of child with ASD, alongside eliciting the experiences of children attending a range of secondary provision through multiple perspectives has rarely been undertaken, it was hoped this would provide a much-needed addition to the existing literature base in this area.

Methodology

3.0 Overview

This chapter will provide an overview of the methodology used to undertake the present study. The research aims will be discussed, followed by an outline of the participants involved in the study, the research methods and tools employed, and the data analysis techniques utilised.

3.1 Research Questions

Based on the literature review discussed, the overarching aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of students with ASD in a range of secondary provision through considering both intrinsic child characteristics and broader systemic factors. In so doing, the study aimed to examine those limiting and enabling factors that influence the secondary school experiences of students with ASD. Within this, the more specific research questions examined by this study were fourfold:

Research Question 1: Do secondary school placements for students with ASD vary according to intrinsic child characteristics. Cognitive abilities, social difficulties, sensory preferences and anxiety have all been shown to influence children's experiences of secondary school through autobiographical accounts and research literature. Yet, the relationship between these characteristics and school placement decisions has rarely been directly examined, as was undertaken in this research study. On the basis of the literature available, it was anticipated that children with higher cognitive abilities, fewer social difficulties, fewer sensory needs and lower anxiety were more likely to attend mainstream settings.

Research Question 2: What are the experiences of students with ASD in a range of secondary provision and what are the broad range of systemic factors which can either support or hinder their secondary school experiences? To examine this question, interviews were conducted with children with ASD, their parents and teachers to triangulate this broad range of perspectives regarding children's secondary school experiences.

Research Question 3: Do the experiences of students with ASD in secondary school vary according to the type of provision they attend? Research has

consistently reported that parents of children with ASD increasingly favour specialist provision as children reach secondary age, yet little research has specifically examined the experiences of children with ASD in a range of secondary provision through a multi-informant approach, as was the approach undertaken in this research study. Based on the existing literature, it was anticipated that children attending specialist provision would have more positive experiences of secondary school, and that parents would be more satisfied with their child's provision.

Lastly, this study aimed to inform the commissioning LA's agenda to develop special provision locally and provide recommendations to inform future policy, practice and provision to support children with ASD in secondary education.

3.2 Theoretical Perspective

The range of individual and systemic factors influencing the experiences of children in secondary education discussed through the literature review is consistent with the Ecological Systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). This perspective suggests that children's experiences are influenced by a broad range of systems including individual child factors, home and school (microsystems), family, teachers, peers, curriculum and pedagogy (mesosystem) as well as other factors such as the wider community, attitudes and culture (exosystem and macrosystem). Children's experiences are therefore socially and culturally constructed through interactions and relationships with others in environments where meanings and languages are shared.

In this way, this ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) suggests that these wide ranging and overlapping systems all influence a child's secondary school experiences. Bronfenbrenner (2001, p.6965) states that "over the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving bio-psychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environments." Thus, children's secondary school experiences are influenced by a variety of personal, family, school and society factors. Considering this theoretical perspective alongside the literature discussed, it would seem important that any examination of children's secondary school experiences consider the influence of both individual child factors and broad systemic factors, as has been undertaken in the present study.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

The ontological and epistemological approach of this research is linked to the decision to utilise Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to shape the research. A social constructionist ontological and epistemological perspective was adopted, since this acknowledges that reality and knowledge is socially constructed and recognizes the complexity and role of social interaction in interpreting and understanding knowledge and meaning. In this way, social constructionism allows for a variety of interpretations of the ways in which reality is understood and constructed. As such, this position acknowledges the role of social interaction in enabling individuals to continuously co-construct and re-construct their perceptions of children's educational experiences. Additionally, social constructionism acknowledges the role of the researcher in the shared construction and interpretation of knowledge and meaning through the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

3.4 Research methods

To address the research questions, a mixed methods approach was employed. Many researchers now embrace mixed methods research designs and advocate that quantitative and qualitative methods can be successfully combined together (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2002). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) suggest that through the use of mixed methods approaches, it is possible to more fully answer research questions through acquiring a more complete and comprehensive data set. Denscome (2007) also supports this view, stressing that different methods can be employed to provide distinctive perspectives which can be combined and compared to most effectively address research aims.

As such, for the purposes of this study a mixed methods approach was employed. Quantitative data were gathered both to examine the characteristics of the children in this sample and to determine whether any relationship exists between intrinsic child characteristics and type of secondary provision. Broad systemic influences on children's secondary school experiences were also examined by directly eliciting the perspectives of students, parents and teachers through interview. It was anticipated this multi-method multi-informant approach would allow a full examination of the secondary school experiences of children with ASD, and the broad range of factors influencing these experiences.

3.5 Participants

3.5.1 Identification of potential participants

Participants invited for involvement in this study comprised children of Years 7 - 10 schooling age (chronological age 11-15 years) during academic years 2012-2013 and 2013-14, their parents and teachers. Child participants were sought through a database search, which identified all students with ASD known to the Special Educational Needs Team of the LA where the researcher worked as a Trainee Educational Psychologist.

Child participants identified through the database search were required to:

1. have an independent clinical diagnosis of an autistic spectrum condition (including Autistic Disorder and Asperger syndrome);
2. have a Statement of Special Educational Need (under section 324 of the Education Act 1996), with ASD specified as their primary need;
3. have been educationally placed in a mainstream primary school prior to transition to LA maintained schools.

Children were purposively sampled to attend one of four provisions:

1. local mainstream secondary school
2. LA maintained special school for children with moderate learning difficulties
3. unit/base for children with ASD attached to a mainstream secondary school
4. non-maintained independent special school for children with ASD

All children were living within the LA commissioning this research and identified through the database search described above. Children within the first two groups were educationally placed within the LA supporting this research. Children within groups three and four were educationally placed out of county. The commissioning LA did not at the time of this research have any bases for children with ASD or any special schools for children with ASD without additional learning difficulties.

3.5.2 Recruitment

Following ethical approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education, a sample of parents whose children met the research criteria were sent information letters (see Appendix 1) inviting children and parents to participate. In an attempt to reduce variation from extraneous factors,

and increase homogeneity between the secondary school experiences of participants, the decision was made to target groups of potential participants attending the same schools. Once parental and child consent for involvement was received, each child's secondary school were contacted via letter (see Appendix 2) to recruit secondary school teacher participants.

3.5.3 Final Sample

There were 16 triads of participants in the final sample of the study. This comprised 16 children who met the inclusion criteria for the study, their parents and secondary school teachers. Two maintained special schools, one independent special school, one autism base and three local mainstream schools were represented in the sample. Individual details for each child, parent and teacher participant is presented in Table 1.

3.5.3.1 Child participants

Child participants comprised 16 boys ranging from 11 to 15 years of age. All children were of White British ethnicity, with the exception of two children, one of White Asian descent, and the other of Mixed Unspecified descent. Two parents who chose to participate themselves in the study elected not to give consent for their child (children 3 and 7) to participate in either interview or assessment, due to the difficult time the child was currently having at secondary school, and the parents' desire to prevent any additional stress caused by reliving this experience. These children attended a LA maintained special school and an independent out of county special school. A further child (child 16) attending mainstream school chose not to give consent to take part in assessment or interviews. One child (child 6) attending LA maintained special school elected not to complete the cognitive assessment, although did agree to be interviewed. In total, 13 children were interviewed as part of this research, 14 completed a standard questionnaire, and 12 completed cognitive assessment.

3.5.3.2 Parent participants

Parent participants comprised either one biological or adoptive parent (mothers) of the children participating in the study. Two parents (of children 1 and 15) opted not to participate in either interview or completion of questionnaires themselves, although gave consent for their children to participate. This was due to the parents' limited time available for participation. In total, 14 parents were interviewed and completed standard questionnaires as part of this research.

3.5.3.3 Teacher participants

Teacher participants comprised members of staff who felt they knew the children participating in the study well, and agreed to take part in the study. The two parents who did not give consent for their child to participate, also chose not to give consent for the school to be approached, and thus teacher participants were not sought in these cases. One further parent requested that the school not be approached since they themselves worked there. Teacher participants comprised 7 SEN Co-ordinators (SENCos), 4 Form Tutors and 2 Teaching Assistants. In total, 13 secondary teaching staff participated in this research.

Table 1. *Participant Details*

Secondary Provision	Child	Age (Y:M)	Gender	Diagnosis (parent report)	Ethnicity	Child Participant	Parent participant	School participant
Special (MLD)	**1**	14:10	Male	ASD[a]/MLD[b]	White British	Y	-	SENCo[e]
Special (MLD)	**2**	12:10	Male	ASD/MLD/Dyspraxia	White British	Y	Mother	SENCo
Special (MLD)	**3**	12:05	Male	ASD/MLD	White British	-	Mother	-
Special (MLD)	**4**	12:04	Male	ASD/MLD	White British	Y	Mother	Form Tutor
Special (MLD)	**5**	14:02	Male	ASD/MLD	Mixed Unspecified	Y	Mother	Form Tutor
Special (MLD)	**6**	14:08	Male	ASD/ADHD[c]/MLD	White British	Y	Mother	Form Tutor
NMI[g] Special (ASD)	**7**	13:05	Male	HFA[d]	White British	-	Mother	-
NMI Special (ASD)	**8**	13:06	Male	HFA	White British	Y	Mother	Form Tutor
Base (ASD)	**9**	11:05	Male	ASD/MLD/Dyspraxia	White British	Y	Mother	TA[f]
Base (ASD)	**10**	11:07	Male	ASD/MLD/Dyspraxia	White British	Y	Mother	TA
Local Mainstream	**11**	15:10	Male	HFA/Dyspraxia	White British	Y	Mother	SENCo
Local Mainstream	**12**	13:03	Male	ASD	White Asian	Y	Mother	SENCo
Local Mainstream	**13**	13:01	Male	ASD	White British	Y	Mother	SENCo
Local Mainstream	**14**	12:00	Male	ASD	White British	Y	Mother	SENCo
Local Mainstream	**15**	14:02	Male	ASD	White British	Y	-	SENCo
Local Mainstream	**16**	14:03	Male	Aspergers/Dyspraxia	White British	-	Mother	-

Notes. [a]ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder; [b]MLD: Moderate Learning Difficulties; [c]ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; [d]HFA: High Functioning Autism; [e]SENCo: Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator; [f]TA: Teaching Assistant; [g]NMI: Non-maintained Independent

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study followed the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) and received ethical approval from the Institute of Education.

Parents and teachers were sent invitation and information letters (see Appendix 1 & 2) along with a consent form (see Appendix 3 & 4), providing them with detailed information about the study to ensure informed consent to participate. The opportunity to ask further questions about the study over telephone or email was offered to parents and teachers, and the study was outlined again ahead of their participation. It was explained to all participants that they had the right to withdraw consent at any time. Participants were given contact details for the researcher should they have any further questions after taking part. Participants were informed a written summary of the main findings would be provided at the conclusion of the study.

A 'child friendly' information letter (see Appendix 5) and assent form (see Appendix 6) was used to support children to give their informed consent. Child consent was considered a 'continuous process' (Lloyd, Gatherer & Kalsy, 2006). At the start of sessions children were asked again if they were happy to speak with the researcher and were reminded that they did not have to answer questions if they did not want to, and could stop at any time.

Confidentiality was explained to all participants. Anonymous identification numbers were assigned to all participants and used on all research materials. All participants were ensured that their views and opinions would remain anonymous within the final written report.

3.7 Examining individual characteristics

To characterise the population of children involved in the study, as well as to determine whether a relationship existed between individual child characteristics and type of secondary school provision, information was gathered regarding the cognitive, social, sensory and anxiety traits of the children involved in the study.

3.7.1 Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence – 2nd Edition (WASI-II)

Children's cognitive abilities were assessed using the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence 2nd Edition (WASI-II) (Wechsler, 2011) to provide verbal

comprehension and perceptual reasoning scores. The WASI-II is a concise and reliable measure of ability comprised of four subtests: Vocabulary, Block Design, Similarities and Matrix Reasoning. The WASI-II generates verbal, perceptual and full-scale IQ scores, and is strongly connected to the longer WISC-IV. Mean internal consistency reliability for the verbal and perceptual indexes of the WASI-II are 0.94 and 0.93 respectively (Kranzler & Floyd, 2013). The WASI-II was standardised on a sample of 2300 individuals, including children with SEN (McCrimmon & Smith, 2013). The Wechsler scales are reported to be the most widely used measure of cognitive ability in individuals with ASD (Bolte, Dziobek & Poustka, 2009) and have frequently been used in research involving children and young people with ASD (Mottron, 2004). Scoring of the WASI-II was carried out according to the instructions in the accompanying assessment manuals.

3.7.2 Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS)

The parent-report Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) was used to measure the autistic behaviours of each child (Constantino & Gruber, 2005). The SRS examines children's reciprocal social interactions within naturalistic settings through a 65-item questionnaire. The SRS generates a total score comprised of five subscale scores for social awareness, social cognition, social communication, social motivation and autistic mannerisms. Parents are asked to rate their child's behaviour over the last 6 months on a 4-point scale (1=not true to 4=almost always true). Higher scores indicate a greater degree of social difficulties. Studies including over 1,900 child participants aged 4-15 years have been used to examine the psychometric properties of the SRS (Constantino & Todd, 2003). These indicated strong reliability and validity (internal consistency reliability for total raw score 0.93), suggesting the SRS is a valid measure of autistic behaviours (Hilton, Graver & LaVesser, 2007; Wigham, McConachie, Tandos & Le Couteur, 2012). The SRS is considered suitable for use in research studies of ASD (Constantino et al., 2003). Following the authors' guidelines, the scores for the 68 items of the SRS were summed to form a total score for each child and then converted to T-scores. For the SRS, a total T-score of 60 or higher is indicative of social communication difficulties, and is associated with a clinical diagnosis for ASD (Constantino & Gruber, 2005). A total T-score of 76 or higher represents a result in the 'severe' range.

3.7.3 Adult / Adolescent Sensory Profile (AASP)

The self-report Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile (AASP) was used to measure the sensory needs of each child (Brown & Dunn, 2002). The AASP (appropriate for age 11+ years) is a 60-item questionnaire, which takes 10-15 minutes to complete. It includes responses to a range of sensory occurrences in daily life encompassing 7 sensory modalities: taste/smell, movement, visual, auditory, touch and activity level, and determines the extent to which adolescents exhibit differences in sensory responses relative to typically developing peers. Adolescents report on a 5-point scale (1=always to 5=never), how frequently they respond in a particular way to a range of sensory events. The AASP was standardised on a sample of 950 individuals without disabilities. It is one of the few instruments available for measuring the sensory needs of adolescents, and has been shown to have strong psychometric properties, including reliability and validity (internal consistency reliability 0.64 - 0.78) (Brown & Dunn, 2002). Other available sensory measurement tools such as the Sensory Questionnaire (Boyd & Baranek, 2005), the Sensory Profile (Dunn, 1999) and the Sensory Experiences Questionnaire (Baranek et al., 2006) were designed for younger age groups. The AASP has been successfully used in research involving individuals with ASD (Crane, Goddard & Pring, 2009). Following the author's guidelines, the scores for the 60 items of the AASP were summed to provide total scores in four quadrants: low registration, sensation seeking, sensory sensitivity and sensation avoiding (see Table 2 for more information). These total quadrant scores were then classified in comparison to normative scores representative of typically developing adolescents.

Table 2. D*efinitions of the four sensory quadrants measured in the AASP*

Low Registration
High sensory thresholds together with passive behavioural responses e.g. not noticing sensory stimuli
Sensation seeking
High sensory thresholds together with active behavioural responses to sensory stimuli e.g. actively perusing sensory stimulation
Sensory sensitivity
Low sensory thresholds together with passive behavioural responses e.g. finding sensory stimuli uncomfortable
Sensation avoiding
Low sensory thresholds together with active behavioural responses e.g. actively withdrawing from sensory stimuli

Notes. Adapted from Sensory processing in adults with autism spectrum disorders by L. Crane, L. Goddard and L. Pring, 2009, Autism, 13(3), p. 219.

3.7.4 Spence Child Anxiety Scale for Parents (SCAS-P)

The Spence Child Anxiety Scale for Parents (SCAS-P) (Spence, 1999) was used to measure the anxiety levels of each child through parental report. The SCAS-P is a direct adaptation of the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (SCAS) (Spence, 1998). It comprises 38 items that relate to the same six subscales as the SCAS: panic attack and agoraphobia, separation anxiety disorder, physical injury fears, social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder. Studies have demonstrated the SCAS-P has strong psychometric properties, including reliability and validity (internal consistency reliability 0.58 - 0.92) (Nauta et al., 2004). The SCAS has been successfully used in research with children with ASD (Russell & Sofronoff, 2005; Chalfant, Rappee & Carroll, 2007). Following the authors' guidelines, the scores for the 38 items of the SCAS-P were summed to form a total score for each child. These were compared to SCAS-P norms (separate for age and gender). Total scores of less than 16.0 (SD=11.6) or 11.8 (SD=8.3) for boys aged 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively are indicative of a child without anxiety difficulties. Scores suggestive of anxiety difficulties are 31.4 (SD=12.9) and 30.1 (SD=14.9) or higher for boys aged 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively.

3.7.5 Collecting Questionnaire Data

At the end of the parent interviews, parents were given further details regarding the three questionnaires relating to children's social responsiveness, sensory preferences and anxiety levels. Parents were asked to complete the two parent report questionnaires relating to social skills and anxiety levels, and to support their children to complete the child-report questionnaire relating to sensory preferences. The questionnaires were then given to parents together with pre-paid envelopes to return these questionnaires to the researcher at their earliest convenience.

3.7.6 Analysing Child Profile Data

This research aimed to profile the needs of child participants, as well as to determine whether secondary school placements for students with ASD vary according to intrinsic child characteristics. To achieve this, the data measuring the intrinsic characteristics of each child were inputted into SPSS 22. Descriptive statistics were generated for intrinsic characteristics of the child participants, Pearson's correlation analyses were run to identify any relationships between these characteristics, and ANOVAs were run to identify any group differences in

intrinsic child characteristics according to school placement.

3.8 Eliciting Views

In order to examine the secondary school experiences of students with ASD, and elucidate the broad range of systemic factors either supporting or hindering children's secondary school experiences, children, parents and teachers were invited to participate and share their stories, experiences and feelings regarding children's secondary school placements. It was anticipated that triangulating these multiple perspectives would facilitate a thorough examination of the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

When planning to elucidate the secondary school experiences of children with ASD, as was the purpose of the present study, there are many reasons why the views of these students should be sought directly. The importance of involving students in decision-making about issues which directly affect them such as their education, has increasingly been recognized in recent years (Woolner, Hall, Wall & Dennison, 2007). Student voice is a notion underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), which two decades ago highlighted the importance of listening to children's views. Article 12 of this Convention specifically states that children and young people should be involved in making decisions about initiatives that concern them. More recently, the revised SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001a) and associated SEN Toolkit (DfES, 2001b) stressed the importance of generating a 'listening culture' in schools in order to hear the views of children with SEN.

More recent policy changes have also served to encourage UK schools to prioritise student consultation. The revised Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) framework (2009) requires that they take account of students' views during self-evaluation. The Children Act (2004) includes the five outcomes of Every Child Matters, of which the outcome "make a positive contribution" in particular provides a strong platform for student consultation (DfES, 2004a). Furthermore, the Lamb Review (2009, p. 6) on SEN Disability Information also highlights the benefits which can be reaped when student voice is acknowledged in the provision of education, stating that:

"The Inquiry has seen the benefits where schools have involved disabled pupils in the development of the school's scheme: this provides insights into what makes school life difficult for disabled pupils, what frustrates their learning and participation; and disabled pupils come up with practical, often simple,

suggestions for how the school might make changes."

Additionally, the current Government continues to emphasise the importance of accessing the views of children through the Children and Families Act (2014) and the new SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014).

In addition to the increasing emphasis on listening to students' views in legislation and policy, the value of gaining learner voice by listening to children's perspectives has been emphasised in a range of recent educational research (Blackburn, 2010; Clark & Moss, 2001; Fielding, 2001; Rudduck & Flutter, 2003; Frost & Holden, 2008; Woolner, Hall, Wall & Dennison, 2007). Brewster (2004, p. 166) highlights that "ensuring the genuine participation of people with learning disabilities in research about them is imperative." Nevertheless, the difficulties associated with directly eliciting the views of children with ASD are emphasised by the fact that in 2002, Preece documented that there was no published research within the field of social care which involved the direct participation of children with ASD, whereas numerous published studies existed involving the direct participation of children with other disabilities. Consequently, many researchers now highlight that accessing the views of children with disabilities such as ASD has "significant challenges" (McKay, 2003, p. 208) and "allowing their voice to be heard is not without its challenges" (Germain, 2004, p. 170).

For students with ASD in particular, the difficulties they experience with social communication, flexibility of thought and social interaction presents specific challenges to researchers wishing to consult children and young people with this condition (McKay, 2003; Preece, 2002; Beresford et al., 2004). Nevertheless, Nind (2008, p. 4) stresses that "people with learning/communication difficulties have something to say that is worth hearing and experiences that are worth understanding, making it important to commit serious attention to the methodological challenges involved in researching them." For this reason, Germain (2004, p. 170) suggests that "innovative methods are required to facilitate access to the views of this population" of students. Nevertheless, Goodley (1998) highlights that researcher assumptions about participants with learning difficulties requiring a particular methodological approach may at times be a more significant constraint on the data collection process than anything the participant themselves brings to the situation.

Humphrey and Symes (2010, p. 83) advocate that “interviews, as a research method in studies involving individuals with AS [Asperger Syndrome], provide a voice for participants and a window into their thoughts, feelings and experiences in a field dominated by impersonal experimental studies.” With this in mind, to fulfill the aims of this research, interviews were selected as the most appropriate method by which to elicit the views of children, parents and teachers. Interviews provide the opportunity for guided conversation with the goal of eliciting rich, detailed information (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). As such, interviews enable issues to be examined in greater depth than other methods such as questionnaires, although they are open to researcher bias (Frechtling & Sharp, 1997). Interviews are most suitable when research requires “detailed information”, when it is “reasonable to rely on information gathered from a small number of informants”, and when the data are based on “emotions, experiences and feelings”, “sensitive issues” or “privileged information” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 164-165). Since this research aimed to examine the secondary school experiences of children with ASD through the views and experiences of a group of students, their parents and teachers, interviews were considered the most effective method through which to obtain a suitable level of insight.

Furthermore, individuals with ASD are a group whom research is often conducted *on* rather than *with* (Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006; Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2013). Since this research aimed to give students with ASD, their families and teachers a forum for their voices to be heard, it was anticipated interviews would provide an appropriate method to ensure participants consider themselves active and valued contributors. In addition, interviews have successfully been used within a range of research to examine the views and experiences of children with ASD of similar age and ability regarding their school experiences (Gumaste, 2011; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Connor, 2000; Carrington et al., 2003; Wainscot et al., 2008).

3.8.1 Types of Interviews

Cousin (2009) outlines three types of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Willig (2001) describes semi-structured interviews are a suitable method to utilise when undertaking exploratory research. A semi-structured interview is structured around specified topics, which guide the interview discussion (Cousin, 2009). The interviewer is able to be flexible, allowing interviewees to develop and expand their thoughts and responses, and thus

provide rich sources of data (Denscome, 2007). Questions are prepared in advance to ensure similar topics are covered, which ensures data are comparable and data organisation and analysis is manageable (Patton, 2002). For these reasons, a semi-structured interview approach was chosen for the present study, and interview schedules were developed (see Appendices 7-9). Interviews can be undertaken either one-to-one or in groups (Cousin, 2009). Since this research aimed to gain insight into the unique experiences of each of the students, it was considered important for each participant to have an opportunity to consider the questions specifically in relation to their own / their child's experiences. Consequently, one-to-one interviews were considered to be the most appropriate technique for this study.

3.8.2 Designing Interviews

Semi-structured interview schedules were developed for child, parent and teacher interviews (see Appendix 3). Open-ended questions were used to elicit respondents' experiences and opinions to provide opportunity for exploration, enable respondents' true views to be revealed, and allow unanticipated answers to be captured (Sharma, Sharma & Pathak, 2006). Interview schedules were revised, amended and piloted before producing the final interview schedules, to ensure wording of questions was free from ambiguity, leading questions were avoided, and questions did not elicit socially desirable responses. Questions included in the schedules were determined by the aims of the study, and adapted from interview schedules used in two previous studies that also sought to examine the secondary school experiences of children with ASD (Gumaste, 2011; Brooks, 2012).

Interviews with students sought to elicit their experiences of school in the broadest sense, including relationships with staff and peers, experiences of lessons and learning, and perspectives on social situations such as lunch times and after-school clubs. Interviews with parents examined their views regarding the suitability of their child's secondary school placement, including how well their child was coping and progressing within secondary school, how satisfactory they considered the placement to be, and how the provision met or did not meet their child's needs. Questions also prompted parents to be reflective, examining their reasons for choosing this secondary school placement, and what type of provision they would ideally have liked or would now like to see their child attending. Interviews with teachers elicited their views on whether the current

placement was suitable for this young person, how the school met or did not meet this young person's needs, and how well they considered this young person to be coping within secondary school.

3.8.3 Piloting the study

A year prior to completing this study, the researcher conducted a study in another LA, interviewing children with ASD and their parents regarding secondary school experiences. This provided an opportunity to develop the researcher's interview technique with this population (Brooks, 2012). A pilot was also carried out within the commissioning LA, involving one child attending an MLD school, their parent and teacher. As part of this process, the teacher and parent were consulted regarding the interview schedule design and questions. Since no major changes were made to the interview schedule, pilot data were included in the final sample and written report.

The pilot session with the child highlighted a number of important considerations when gathering the views of children with ASD. Informed by previous research (Gumaste, 2011), a visual schedule was prepared to show the order in which tasks would be presented in an attempt to reduce any anxiety arising from the change in routine or meeting with an unfamiliar adult. To accommodate children's communication needs, emotion cards were prepared to facilitate discussion about feelings, and picture cards reinforced verbal prompts given for some interview questions. Lewis, Newton & Vials (2008) found the use of Cue Cards to be particularly helpful in eliciting children's views, describing how they provided "a structure which, while scaffolding elicitation processes and responses, do not constrain or bias" (p. 27). Furthermore, Nind (2008, p. 10) suggests that "this is the kind of practical, visual complement to open-ended approaches which is seen as particularly useful for participants with autism." The pilot child relied heavily on these visual resources to follow the session, extract meaning from the interview questions, and express their views, emphasising the importance of visual supports when gathering the views of children with ASD and additional learning difficulties.

Informed by previous research (Gumaste, 2011), the more concrete and less personal WASI-II assessment tasks were presented first. This aimed to allow the child to familiarise themselves with the researcher and feel more comfortable in the researcher's presence prior to talking about more personal matters during the

interview. This strategy was found to be supportive and effective. The pilot session also highlighted that the researcher's plan to ask children to complete the AASP within the session would not be appropriate. Due to the length of the questionnaire, the pilot child was unable to attend to this task sufficiently to complete the questionnaire. Instead, parents were asked to support their children to complete this questionnaire within the home, which allowed for the questionnaire to be split into small chunks more appropriate to the children's attention span.

3.8.4 Conducting Interviews

Prior to meeting with the researcher, children were sent a 'child-friendly' letter introducing the researcher, and describing the session (see Appendix 10). Sessions took place in school, within a quiet and familiar room, to support children to feel comfortable within their environment. Children were offered to have a familiar member of school staff present during the session to support them to feel safe and comfortable, and reduce any anxiety from meeting with an unfamiliar adult. Five children opted for this (child 6, 12, 13, 14 and 15). Adults were asked to avoid speaking during the session to ensure only children's views were elicited. One child opted to meet with the researcher at home so as to prevent any interruption to their lessons (child 11). Care was taken to ensure sessions with children were appropriate to children's age, needs and level of ability. A brief pre-prepared script introduced the study and the researcher to the child to acclimatise the child to the session. As for the pilot, the WASI-II was administered at the start of the session and a visual schedule and visual supports were used to reduce anxiety and facilitate engagement and understanding. Paper and pens were also available to allow children to draw or scribe their answers if preferred. The assessment and interview together took approximately 45 minutes to complete with each child.

Interviews with parents and teachers were conducted in quiet settings within the home and school respectively. It was anticipated this would allow the researcher to clarify questions, encourage participation and involvement, and monitor affective responses of interviewees to ensure sensitive debriefing could be employed where necessary (Gumaste, 2011). Children and teachers were seen on the same day. The order in which they met with the researcher was determined by what was most convenient for the school. Interviews with parents were completed last. If it was not possible to organise face-to-face interviews with

parents due to logistical or time constraints, telephone interviews were offered as an alternative. Interviews with teachers took approximately 30 minutes. Interviews with parents took approximately an hour.

3.8.5 Transcribing Interviews

With participants' prior consent, face-to-face interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and telephone interviews were recorded using an online recording service. Sound files were transferred onto a computer and transcribed verbatim. Whilst transcription is laborious and time-consuming, this process helps "bring the researcher close to the data" (Denscombe, 2007, p. 183), thus enhancing the quality of data analysis.

3.8.6 Analysing interviews

Transcribed interviews were analysed through thematic analysis to identify key themes arising (see Appendix 11). This method was selected for a few reasons. First, thematic analysis has been tailored specifically for use in psychological exploratory research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, thematic analysis is free from any particular theoretical or epistemological position, enabling it to provide "a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5). Nevertheless, Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013) highlight it is important the researcher make explicit their chosen theoretical position since this carries a number of underlying assumptions. This research was undertaken from a 'contextualist' perspective, acknowledging that both individuals themselves and the social context influence the way meaning is created.

Third, thematic analysis provides the possibility for both data-driven and theoretically-informed analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study aimed to examine the unique secondary school experiences of children with ASD and elucidate the broad range of systemic factors that can either support or hinder children's experiences in secondary school. It was therefore essential this research remained open to all possible factors raised. As such, an inductive, data-driven approach to analysis was employed.

Fourth, thematic analysis allows for themes to be explored across an entire data set, whilst at the same time remaining open to salient idiographic issues emerging and being identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One aim of this study was

to determine whether any group differences existed between the secondary school experiences of children with ASD attending different types of provision. The aim to identify both themes emerging across the entire data set, and themes emerging from the varying experiences of children in different types of provision was well suited to a thematic analysis approach.

Finally, thematic analysis allows for both semantic and latent level analysis. A semantic approach involves development of themes derived from the semantic content of the data, what Braun and Clark (2006) describe as 'surface meanings'. For this research a latent-level approach was adopted in order to allow identification of "underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations" that were shaping and informing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13; 2013). A constructionist approach was adopted, and identification of emerging themes involved interpretation of the accounts of children, parents and teachers to elucidate those factors perceived to be most significant and important to the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. This approach to data analysis was selected since "the analysis that is produced is not just description, but is already theorised" (Braun & Clark, 2006). Braun and Clark (2006) highlight that latent thematic analysis fits well with the social constructionist paradigm adopted in this research, since it enables "broader assumptions, structures and/or meanings" (p. 13) to be theorised regarding what underpins the semantic content of the data.

The interview data from all participants (children, parents and teachers) were analysed using the 6-step process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcription of interviews by the researcher provided enhanced familiarity with the data. Transcripts were read repeatedly, allowing key ideas and significant features of the data to emerge. A systematic approach was then used to generate initial codes derived from these key ideas and features. Coding was undertaken using a 'units of meaningful text' approach, to enable the context of a statement to be considered in identifying and clarifying the meaning of statements. Following this, initial codes were categorised into potential themes, and relationships between codes, sub-themes, themes and overarching themes were explored. Finally, these themes were defined, refined and named through a process of ongoing clarification and revision. This process was supported by ongoing discussion and reflection of emerging codes and themes during research supervision.

Results

4.0 Overview

This chapter will present the findings of the present study. First, analysis of the measures utilised to examine the intrinsic characteristics of child participants shall be presented. Second, analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted to elicit views of children, parents and teachers shall be presented.

4.1 Individual child characteristics

Table 3 shows the individual scores for each child participant for the WASI-II, SRS, AASP and SCAS-P, outlining the measures obtained for each child for the intrinsic characteristics of cognitive abilities, social skills, sensory needs and trait anxiety. Children's individual subscale results from each measure are presented and discussed thereafter.

Table 3. *Scores for all child participants on measures of cognitive ability, social responsiveness, sensory preferences and anxiety*

Provision	Child	Age (Y:M)	Gender	WASI-II[a] Full Scale IQ (Composite Score)	SRS[b] (Total T-Score)	AASP[c] (Total Quadrant Raw Scores)				SCAS-P[d] (Total Raw Score)
						LR[e]	SS+[f]	SS-[g]	SA[h]	
Special (MLD)	1	14:10	Male	56	-	-	-	-	-	-
Special (MLD)	2	12:10	Male	67	≥ 90	56	45	41	39	41
Special (MLD)	3	12:05	Male	-	89	32	44	46	46	34
Special (MLD)	4	12:04	Male	52	≥ 90	37	34	40	51	31
Special (MLD)	5	14:02	Male	71	80	39	40	50	51	39
Special (MLD)	6	14:08	Male	-	≥ 90	46	30	49	55	26
NMI Special (ASD)	7	13:05	Male	-	≥ 90	50	26	55	65	29
NMI Special (ASD)	8	13:06	Male	108	≥ 90	58	35	57	65	46
Base (ASD)	9	11:05	Male	75	78	30	45	45	48	21
Base (ASD)	10	11:07	Male	67	75	32	42	46	46	20
Local Mainstream	11	15:10	Male	106	88	40	34	51	52	58
Local Mainstream	12	13:03	Male	88	73	36	32	32	34	41
Local Mainstream	13	13:01	Male	87	89	44	25	39	63	51
Local Mainstream	14	12:00	Male	104	79	40	42	41	51	37
Local Mainstream	15	14:02	Male	73	-	-	-	-	-	-
Local Mainstream	16	14:03	Male	-	74	38	38	53	56	19

Notes. [a]WASI-II: Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence 2nd Edition – A composite score 90-110 is considered to be within the average range; [b]SRS: Social Responsiveness Scale - A total SRS T-score of >60 is associated with a clinical diagnosis for an autistic spectrum disorder. A T-score of >76 is indicative of a diagnosis in the 'severe' range; [c]AASP: Adult / Adolescent Sensory Profile; [d]SCAS-P: Spence Children's Anxiety Scale for Parents – Total raw scores of >31.4 and >30.1 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively; [e]LR: Low Registration – A total quadrant raw score <27 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [f]SS+: Sensory Seeking - A total quadrant raw score <42 and >58 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [g]SS-: Sensory Sensitivity - A total quadrant raw score <26 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [h]SA: Sensation Avoiding - A total quadrant raw score <26 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years

4.1.1 Cognitive Ability: WASI-II

Children's full-scale composite scores on the WASI-II ranged from extremely low (52) to average (108) (see Table 4). This demonstrates wide variation in children's general cognitive abilities. There was also variation in individual children's performance on the verbal comprehension (VCI) and perceptual reasoning (PRI) components of the assessment. Eight children achieved a higher VCI score than PRI score, and 4 children achieved a higher PRI score than VCI score. For 4 children, the difference between VCI and PRI was statistically significant at p=0.05 (see Table 4). This discrepancy made the full scale IQ scores for these children less reliable. Consequently, verbal and perceptual scores were both utilised in further analyses.

Table 4. *Scores for Individual Children on the WASI-II*

Provision	Child	Gender	Age (Y:M)	Full Scale IQ[a]	VCI[b]	PRI[c]	Significant difference VCI & PRI
				(Composite Score) (CS)			
Special (MLD)	1	Male	14:10	56	59	45	-
Special (MLD)	2	Male	12:10	67	76	61	-
Special (MLD)	4	Male	12:04	52	52	57	-
Special (MLD)	5	Male	14:02	71	70	79	-
NMI Special (ASD)	8	Male	13:06	108	107	106	-
Base (ASD)	9	Male	11:05	75	87	67	p =.05
Base (ASD)	10	Male	11:07	67	67	73	-
Local Mainstream	11	Male	15:10	106	116	94	p =.05
Local Mainstream	12	Male	13:03	88	89	88	-
Local Mainstream	13	Male	13:01	87	90	88	-
Local Mainstream	14	Male	12:00	104	90	118	p =.05
Local Mainstream	15	Male	14:02	73	95	55	p =.05

Notes. [a]WASI-II: Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence 2nd Edition – A composite score 90-110 is considered to be within the average range; [b]VCI: Verbal Comprehension Index; [c]PRI: Perceptual Reasoning

4.1.2 Social Responsiveness: SRS

All child participants showed elevated T-scores on the SRS, indicative of ASD (see Table 5). Eleven children fell within the 'severe' range, whilst three (child 10, 12 and 16) fell just below this range. The subscale of the SRS that showed the highest mean T-score across the sample (n=14) was autistic mannerisms, suggesting that this particular aspect contributes most to these children's social difficulties.

Table 5. *Scores for Individual Children on the SRS*

Provision	Child	Age (Y:M)	SRS Total[a]	SA[b]	SCog[c]	SCom[d]	SM[e]	AM[f]
			(T-score)					
Special (MLD)	2	12:10	≥ 90	≥ 90	≥ 90	≈ 80	≈ 75	≈ 85
Special (MLD)	3	12:05	89	≈ 75	≈ 88	≈ 83	≈ 80	≥ 90
Special (MLD)	4	12:04	≥ 90	≈ 85	≥ 90	≈ 82	≥ 90	≥ 90
Special (MLD)	5	14:02	80	≈ 68	≈ 81	≈ 75	≈ 70	≈ 85
Special (MLD)	6	14:08	≥ 90	≈ 88	≥ 90	≥ 90	≥ 90	≥ 90
NMI Special (ASD)	7	13:05	≥ 90	≈ 80	≥ 90	≥ 90	≥ 90	≥ 90
NMI Special (ASD)	8	13:06	≥ 90	≈ 88	≥ 90	≥ 90	≥ 90	≥ 90
Base (ASD)	9	11:05	78	≈ 78	≈ 78	≈ 70	≈ 72	≈ 75
Base (ASD)	10	11:07	75	≈ 68	≈ 81	≈ 68	≈ 65	≈ 73
Local Mainstream	11	15:10	88	≈ 68	≈ 78	≈ 68	≥ 90	≥ 90
Local Mainstream	12	13:03	73	≈ 59	≈ 70	≈ 61	≈ 85	≈ 78
Local Mainstream	13	13:01	89	≈ 75	≈ 85	≈ 80	≈ 85	≥ 90
Local Mainstream	14	12:00	79	≈ 62	≈ 82	≈ 75	≈ 74	≈ 82
Local Mainstream	16	14:03	74	≈ 52	≈ 65	≈ 65	≈ 78	≥ 90

Notes. [a]A total SRS T-score of >60 is associated with a clinical diagnosis for an autistic spectrum disorder. A T-score of >76 is indicative of a diagnosis in the 'severe' range; [b]SA: Social Awareness; [c]SCog: Social Cognition; [d]SCom: Social Communication; [e]SM: Social Motivation; [f]AM: Autistic Mannerisms

4.1.3 Sensory preferences: AASP

Table 6. *Scores for Individual Children on the AASP*

Provision	Child	Age (Y:M)	AASP Total	LR[a]	SS+[b]	SS-[c]	SA[d]
			(Raw Score)				
Special (MLD)	2	12:10	181	56	45	41	39
Special (MLD)	3	12:05	168	32	44	46	46
Special (MLD)	4	12:04	162	37	34	40	51
Special (MLD)	5	14:02	180	39	40	50	51
Special (MLD)	6	14:08	180	46	30	49	55
NMI Special (ASD)	7	13:05	196	50	26	55	65
NMI Special (ASD)	8	13:06	215	58	35	57	65
Base (ASD)	9	11:05	168	30	45	45	48
Base (ASD)	10	11:07	166	32	42	46	46
Local Mainstream	11	15:10	177	40	34	51	52
Local Mainstream	12	13:03	134	36	32	32	34
Local Mainstream	13	13:01	171	44	25	39	63
Local Mainstream	14	12:00	174	40	42	41	51
Local Mainstream	16	14:03	185	38	38	53	56

Notes. [a]LR: Low Registration – A total quadrant raw score <27 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [b]SS+: Sensory Seeking - A total quadrant raw score <42 and >58 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [c]SS-: Sensory Sensitivity - A total quadrant raw score <26 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [d]SA: Sensation Avoiding - A total quadrant raw score <26 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years

The AASP revealed children in the study experienced sensory preferences that frequently fell outside of the range considered typical for the general population (see Table 6). Where children's sensory preferences were dissimilar to those of the typically developing population, these were found to follow a consistent pattern of more low registration, less sensation seeking, more sensory sensitivity and more sensation avoiding.

4.1.4 Trait anxiety: SCAS-P

Child participants scored well above the anxiety scores usually found in the typically developing population (see Table 7). Nine children within the sample had a SCAS-P total score within the range suggestive of high anxiety levels (see Table 7). For the 5 children who did not reach the threshold for high anxiety, their scores were above that which is representative of typically developing children, suggesting somewhat elevated levels of anxiety in all of the children. Each of the mean individual subscale scores across this sample (n=14) crossed the threshold for anxiety difficulties apart from the generalised anxiety disorder subscale.

Table 7. *Scores for Individual Children on the SCAS-P*

Provision	Child	Age (Y:M)	SCAS-P[a] Total	PA[b]	SA[c]	PI[d]	SP[e]	OC[f]	GAD[g]
			(Raw Score)						
Special (MLD)	2	12:10	41	3	10	7	10	7	4
Special (MLD)	3	12:05	34	6	6	5	6	3	8
Special (MLD)	4	12:04	31	5	12	5	2	3	4
Special (MLD)	5	14:02	39	4	12	7	7	3	6
Special (MLD)	6	14:08	26	5	4	1	7	5	4
NMI Special (ASD)	7	13:05	29	4	9	3	7	1	5
NMI Special (ASD)	8	13:06	46	7	8	6	16	3	6
Base (ASD)	9	11:05	21	3	7	3	4	1	3
Base (ASD)	10	11:07	20	4	7	1	3	3	2
Local Mainstream	11	15:10	58	11	13	6	4	8	16
Local Mainstream	12	13:03	41	5	8	10	9	2	7
Local Mainstream	13	13:01	51	6	11	4	14	7	9
Local Mainstream	14	12:00	43	10	6	8	7	6	6
Local Mainstream	16	14:03	19	4	2	0	10	1	2

Notes. [a]SCAS-P: Spence Children's Anxiety Scale for Parents – Total raw scores of >31.4 and >30.1 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively; [b]PA: Panic Attack and Agoraphobia – raw scores of >2.9 and >4.4 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively; [c]SA: Separation Anxiety - raw scores of >7.2 and >5.8 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively; [d]PI: Physical Injury - raw scores of >4.4 and >3.0 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively; [e]SP: Social Phobia - raw scores of >7.3 and >7.5 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively; [f]OC: Obsessive Compulsive - raw scores of >3.1 and >3.0 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively; [g]GAD: Generalised Anxiety Disorder - raw scores of >6.5 and >6.6 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively

4.1.5 Relationship between behavioural measures

Correlational analyses were completed to examine whether inter-relationships existed between children's scores on the 4 measures: cognitive ability, social responsiveness, sensory preferences and anxiety levels (see Table 8). Children's verbal and perceptual abilities were significantly positively correlated with anxiety levels (Verbal: r(10) =.74, p=.05; Perceptual: r(10) =.68, p=.05). In addition, children's autistic behaviours were significantly positively correlated with two quadrants of the AASP, low registration and sensation avoiding (LR: r(14) =.70, p=0.01; SA: r(14) =.61, p=.05), and marginally significantly negatively correlated with sensation seeking (r(14) =-.50, p=.07).

Table 8. *Pearson correlation coefficients between measures of verbal and perceptual cognitive ability, autistic behaviours, anxiety levels and four quadrants of sensory preferences*

Measure	SRS Total[b]	SCAS-P Total[b]	AASP-LR[b]	AASP-SS+[b]	AASP-SS-[b]	AASP-SA[b]
WASI-II VCI[a]	.23	.74*	.36	-.27	.35	.27
WASI-II PRI[a]	.23	.68*	.31	.30	.29	.45
SRS Total	-	.19	.70**	-.50	.46	.61*
SCAS-P Total	.19	-	.39	-.26	-.16	.08

Notes. **Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *Significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed), [a]n=10, [b]n=14

4.1.6 Between group differences

One aim of this research was to determine whether a relationship existed between individual child characteristics and type of secondary school provision. To examine group differences between children attending mainstream school and those attending specialist provision, one-way ANOVAs were performed on scores measuring children's cognitive ability, social responsiveness, sensory preferences and anxiety levels. Due to the small sample size, for the purposes of this analysis, children attending both independent and LA maintained special school were grouped together to represent children attending specialist provision, and children attending both LA maintained mainstream school and bases attached to mainstream were grouped together to represent children attending mainstream provision. Table 9 shows the mean scores by type of provision for the WASI-II, SRS, AASP and SCAS-P.

Table 9. *Mean scores by type of provision on measures of cognitive ability, social responsiveness, sensory preferences and anxiety.*

	Provision					
	Special			Mainstream		
Measure	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Range**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Range**
WASI-II (VCI[a])	72.80	21.28	52 - 107	90.57	14.36	67 - 117
WASI-II PRI[a]	69.60	23.72	45 - 106	83.29	20.56	55 - 118
SRS[b] T-score	88.43	3.74	80 - 90	79.43	6.56	73 - 89
AASP LR[c]	45.43	9.86	32 - 58	37.14	4.88	30 - 44
AASP SS+[d]	36.29	7.09	26 - 45	36.86	6.99	25 - 45
AASP SS-[e]	48.29	6.47	40 - 57	43.86	7.22	32 - 53
AASP SA[f]	53.14	9.53	39 - 65	50.00	9.0	34 - 63
SCAS-P[g]	35.14	7.15	26 - 46	36.14	16.08	19 - 58

Notes. [a]WASI-II VCI / PRI: A composite score 90-110 is considered to be within the average range; [b]SRS: A total SRS T-score of >60 is associated with a clinical diagnosis for an autistic spectrum disorder. A T-score of >76 is indicative of a diagnosis in the 'severe' range; [c]AASP LR: A total quadrant raw score <27 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [d]AASP SS+: A total quadrant raw score <42 and >58 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [e]AASP SS-: A total quadrant raw score <26 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [f]AASP SA: A total quadrant raw score <26 and >40 is indicative of unusual sensory preferences in children 11-17 years; [g]SCAS-P: Total raw scores of >31.4 and >30.1 are suggestive of anxiety difficulties in boys 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively.

Grouping the children in this way, no significant differences were found between children attending mainstream and special schools in terms of their cognitive abilities (Verbal: F(1,11) =3.02, p=.113; Perceptual F(1,11) =1.41, p.=.31), anxiety levels, (F(1,13) =.02, p=.883) or sensory preferences (LR: F(1,13) =3.97, p=.07; SS+: F(1,13) =.023, p=.882; SS-: F(1,13) =1.46, p=.25; SA: F(1,13) =.40, p=.54). There was however a statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of autistic behaviours, F(1,13) =9.964, p=.008. In this sample, children attending mainstream schools demonstrated fewer autistic behaviours as assessed through the parent-report SRS than children attending special schools.

4.2. Interviews

As discussed in Chapter 6, a thematic analysis was carried out on the interview data from child, parent and teacher participants. It was intended that analysis would be completed separately for the four types of provision. However, it became clear during the course of analysis that many of the emerging themes were common to all types of provision. For this reason, the groups were combined, and the resulting themes are presented holistically to portray the views and experiences of all participants. Some findings were nevertheless noted

to be specific to participants from a particular provision, and shall be highlighted where relevant.

Analysis across the range of participants involved in this study highlighted an overall picture to the data gathered, which provided the overarching themes for this analysis (see Figure 1). Analysis of interviews conducted in this research highlighted 5 broad thematic layers, which were consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecosystemic Model discussed earlier (see Figure 1). The overarching themes began with individual school experiences, and progressed to include the increasingly broader systems of direct teaching strategies, whole school approach to ASD, collaborating with families and other professionals, and finally wider issues of consideration for the LA. The interview data shall be presented under these 5 broad headings.

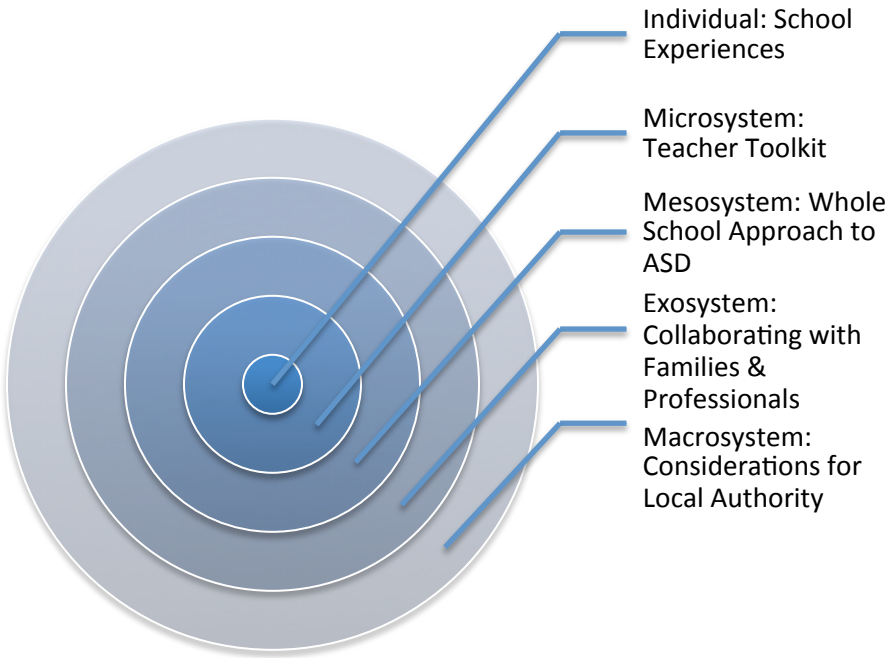

Figure 1. *The overarching thematic analysis themes*

4.2.1 Individual: School experiences

This section shall present those factors at the 'individual level' that were found to influence the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. An overall thematic map for the 'individual' level is shown in Figure 2.

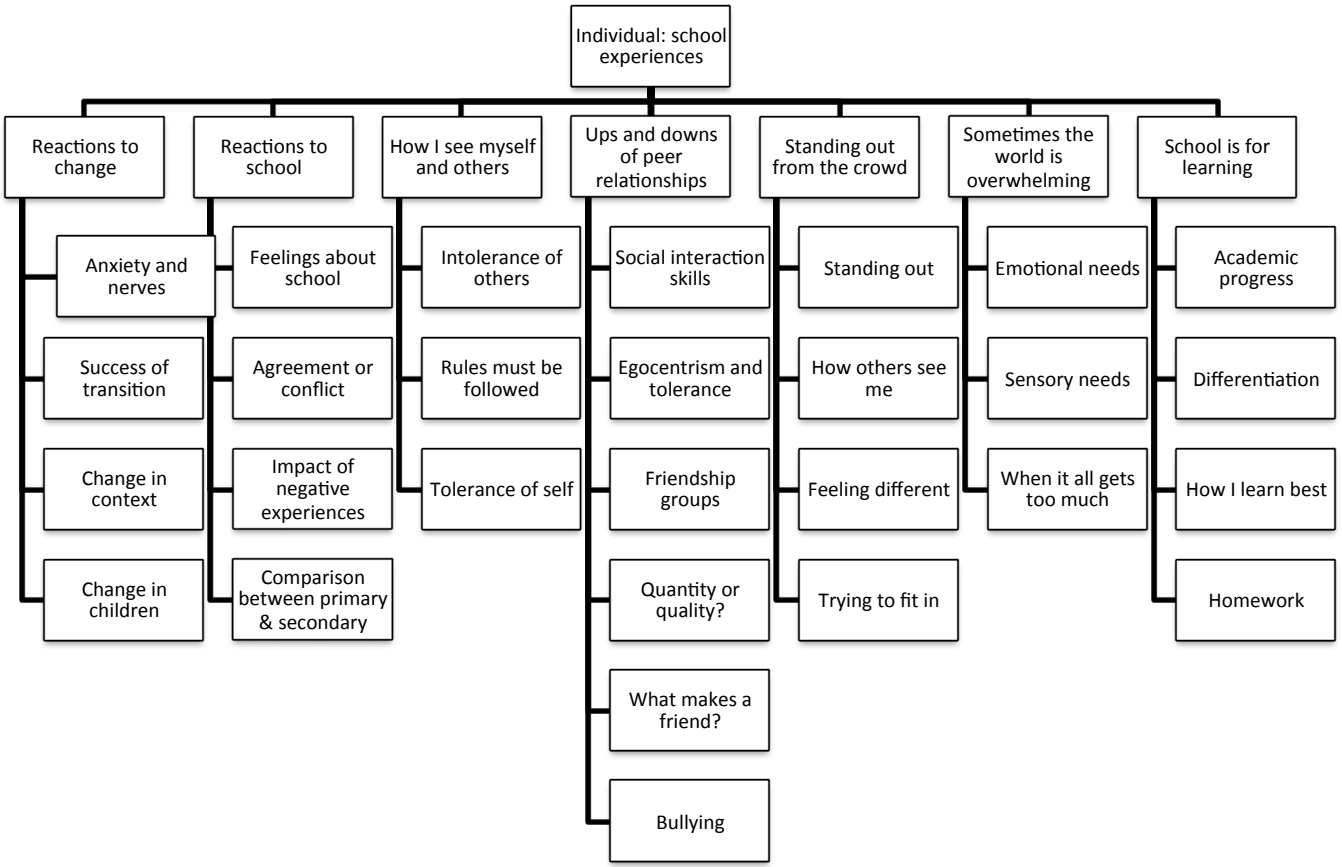

Figure 2. *Thematic map for 'individual' level*

Seven themes were identified within the overarching theme of individual school experiences: i) reactions to change, ii) reactions to school iii) how I see myself & others, iv) ups and downs of peer relationships, v) standing out from the crowd, vi) sometimes the world is overwhelming, vii) school is for learning (see Figure 3).

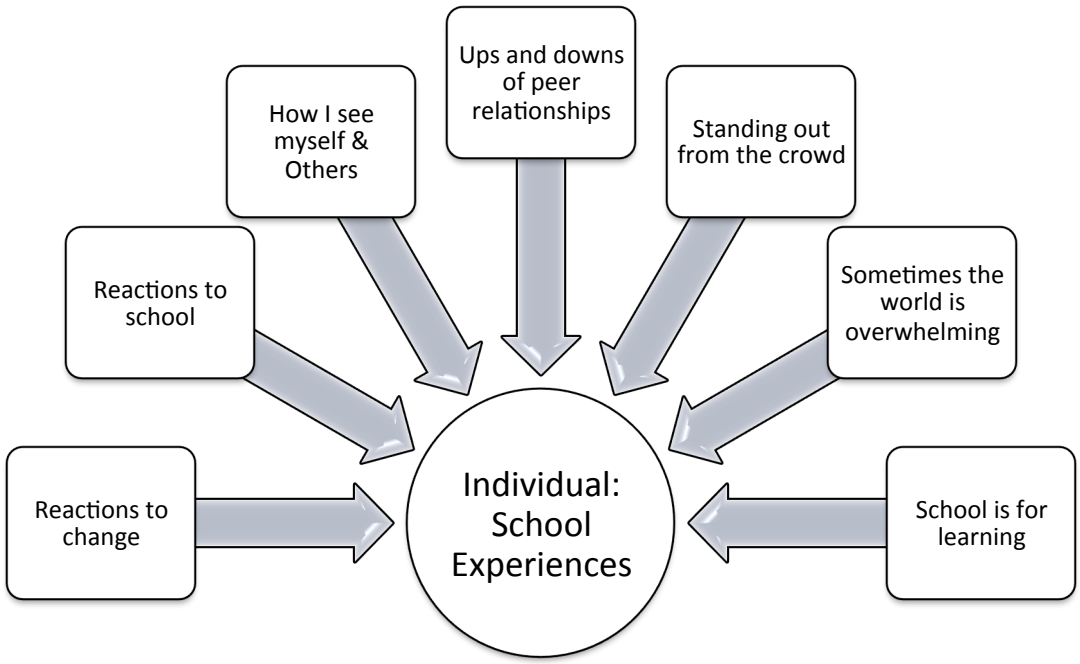

Figure 3. *Overarching Theme 1 - Individual: School Experiences*

4.2.1.1 Reactions to change

> *"transition is difficult for an autistic child particularly…it's a big change…and I think settling in takes time" (Parent 5)*

One theme identified within school experiences related to respondents' reactions to the changes implicit in moving to secondary school. The subthemes found within this theme were i) anxiety & nerves, ii) success of transition, iii) change in context, iv) change in children (see Figure 4).

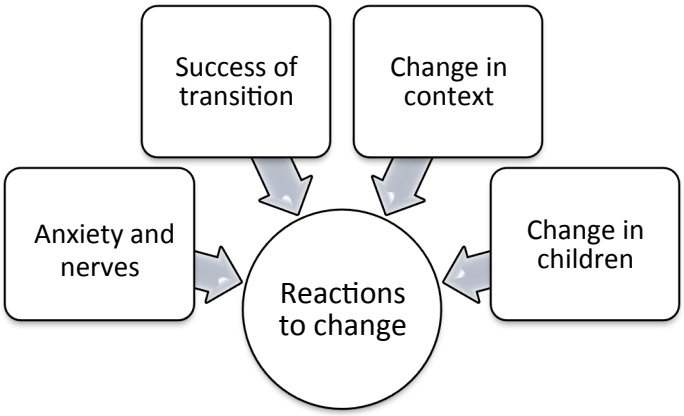

Figure 4. *Theme 1.1 – Reactions to change*

Anxiety and nerves

Children's feelings of anxiety and nerves ahead of transition were a common strand. Six children (38%) either expressed themselves, or were described by parents as having been nervous about the move to secondary school: *"I felt a bit nervous at the start of it [secondary] but now I've got really used to it" (Child 5).* For 5 children (31%) who were not felt to have been nervous about starting secondary, this was primarily attributed to effective transition support: *"he wasn't really nervous because he had a few days before when he visited the school" (Parent 10).* Nine parents (64%) also raised their own concerns ahead of their child's transition to secondary school. This mother remarked, *"I also had my own anxieties because I was thinking oh is he going to be ok" (Parent 16).*

Success of transition

Despite clearly significant anxiety surrounding the transition process for children with ASD and their parents, for 9 children (56%) in the study, respondents acknowledged transition had proceeded smoother than anticipated, and the child had settled well into their new school. This included 4 children in mainstream (67%), 2 children in a base (100%) and 3 children in maintained special school (50%). This teacher commented, *"he's coped really well I feel, he's coped a lot better than what I thought he would" (Teacher 14).* Some children did experience a more challenging transition. Three children (19%) were felt to have taken between a few months to a year to settle fully in the new context: *"it did go on several months, you know sort of trying to find his feet" (Parent 2).* A further 4 children (25%) had failed to settle within their secondary placement (2 children (100%) in independent special, 1 in maintained special (17%) and 1 in mainstream (17%)). This resulted in 2 parents withdrawing their child from school, and a third actively exploring this option. This parent articulated, *"right*

from the beginning of when he started secondary it just started to break down, and when we had the annual review we were saying this has not worked" (Parent 7).

Change in context

Difficulties arising from adjusting to the secondary school context were articulated both for children who had struggled or failed to settle and for those who were perceived to have settled well within secondary school. For 10 children (63%), difficulties arose from adjusting to their new peer group. Five children's (31%) difficulties stemmed from struggling to make friends, either due to transitioning alone or being placed in a form class without existing friends. Five children (31%) struggled to cope with the more challenging social context of secondary, including the behaviour and language of peers. As this parent voiced, *"there's older children there so there was a lot of swearing going on that he wasn't really used to… it was just quite a large culture shock for him" (Parent 2).* For 3 children (19%), difficulties arose from inadequate support in school, such as schools' lack of understanding of the child's needs, and failure to provide the necessary support: *"there was real misunderstanding. Not just of the autism, but of what their requirements were" (Parent 11).*

Change in children

Another prominent subtheme was the changes the move elicited in children, both positive and negative. Children, parents and teachers alike spoke about positive changes, including increased maturity (5 children, 31%): *"I feel like an older person going to secondary school. More grown up" (Child 12)*; increased independence (4 children, 25%): "*he is enjoying it, and he is definitely getting more independent" (Parent 14)*; and increased confidence (5 children, 31%): *"he is continually gaining in confidence" (Teacher 2).* For some children negative changes following transition to secondary were described, including deterioration in behaviour (3 children, 19%), which parents attributed to their child copying the behaviours of other children at the school. This parent verbalised *"he's learning wrong behaviours…unfortunately he did learn how to be aggressive there" (Parent 3).*

4.2.1.2 Reactions to school

"I actually feel quite distraught by my son's experiences [at secondary school]" (Parent 3)

A powerful message from children, parents and teachers related to overall feelings of satisfaction of dissatisfaction with children's secondary school experiences. The subthemes within this theme were i) feelings about school, ii) agreement or conflict iii) impact of negative experiences, and iv) comparison between primary and secondary (see Figure 5).

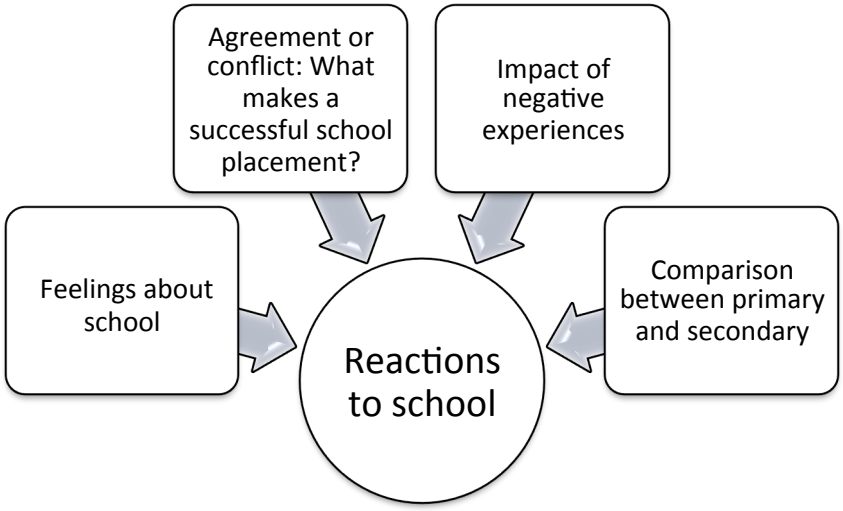

Figure 5. *Theme 1.2 – Reactions to school*

Feelings about school

Eight children (62%) voiced that overall they were happy at secondary (3 (60%) maintained special, 2 (100%) base, 3 (60%) local mainstream) – "*I'm just happy to be here. I like learning new things…I like it because I have a few friends here at the moment" (Child 14).* Five children (38%) expressed overall feelings of unhappiness (2 (40%) maintained special, 1 (100%) independent special, 2 (50%) mainstream): "*I don't like coming to school" (Child 8)*.

Eight parents (57%) were overall happy with their child's secondary school experiences – *"on the whole I would say it's been very positive" (Parent 5),* whilst 6 (43%) were unhappy (comprising 1 (20%) maintained special, 2 (100%) base, 2 (100%) independent special, and 1 (20%) mainstream): *"I really would hate for this school to fail, I think it would be a real shame for it to fail, but I think it is doing" (Parent 9)*. This was interesting since it suggested that for the group of children involved in this study, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with secondary

school experiences did not appear to be related to type of provision (special versus mainstream). However, those parents who had sought out of county placements to access a type of provision not available within the LA were consistently unhappy with their child's school placement.

Agreement or conflict: What makes a successful school placement?

Of the 12 sets of children and parents both interviewed within this research, 2 sets (17%) were in agreement at being unhappy about the experience, and 4 (33%) were in agreement at being happy about the experience. In the remaining 6 cases (50%), conflict existed between children's and parents' views. In 3 cases (25%) parents were happy whilst children were unhappy, and in 3 cases (25%) children were happy whilst parents were unhappy with their child's secondary school experiences. This suggested that, in some cases, the criteria by which children and parents judged secondary school differed. Where conflict existed, further examination revealed that when children were happy and parents unhappy, children expressed having friends and feeling socially comfortable in school, whilst parents voiced concerns about academic progress and quality of staff support. Where children were unhappy and parents happy, children described feeling sad and isolated within school, whilst parents focused on children's academic progress and the high quality support their child received in school.

Impact of negative experiences

For children who were unhappy at school, this resulted in periods of school refusal for 7 children (44%), with parents of 4 children (25%) considering withdrawing their child from the school, 2 children (13%) voicing that they wanted to leave their current school, and parents of 2 children (13%) having already withdrawn their child in favour of an alternative placement. In addition, at the time of interview, one child and parent dyad voiced being desperate to find an alternative school: *"In the last 3 annual reviews, all of us have said this is not the school we want him to be in" (Parent 8)*. The impact of children's unhappiness in school on family life was described, and parents talked about their distress at seeing their child unhappy. This provided some insight into the negative experiences some children with ASD experience in secondary education, and how this can impact on both children and families. A more in depth exploration of the reasons behind children's feelings towards school will take place as further themes are discussed herein.

Comparison between primary and secondary

Respondents frequently made comparisons between children's experiences in primary and secondary education. Of the 16 children in this study, 9 (56%) had had negative experiences and been unhappy in primary education. As this parent expressed, *"it's 100% better than his experience at primary…he basically had a really bad time in primary school. And we were fighting for years to get him out of mainstream school" (Parent 6)*. These negative experiences included bullying, exclusions, school refusal, withdrawal from school, reduced timetables, physical isolation, social isolation, and numerous school placements. One parent reported *"one of the changes from primary to secondary has been him actually wanting to go in. At the end of primary we had problems with him not actually wanting to be there, so that's been a really big positive change" (Parent 5).* As a result, 6 children (38%) were substantially happier in secondary than they had been in primary school, with secondary school perceived as a fresh start for these children. This finding was particularly surprising, since much literature suggests that children with ASD generally have more positive experiences in primary education.

4.2.1.3 How I see myself and others

A third theme identified across child, parent and teacher interviews provided interesting insight into the perceptions of children with ASD of both themselves and other people. The subthemes identified were i) intolerance of others, ii) rules must be followed and iii) tolerance of self (see Figure 6).

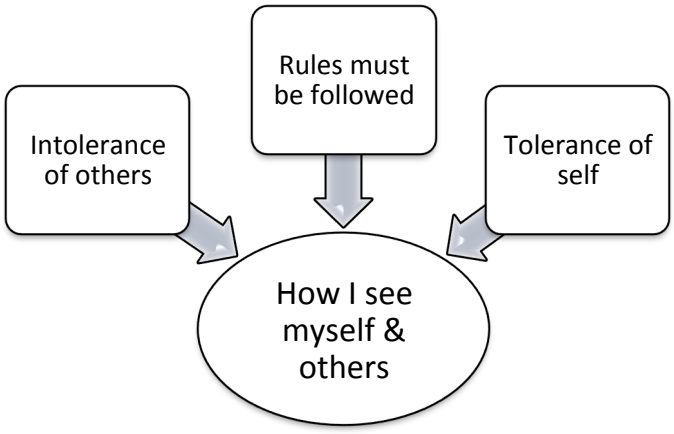

Figure 6. *Theme 1.3 – How I see myself and others*

Intolerance of others

This theme highlighted that many children with ASD struggle to be tolerant of other children. Ten children (63%) either described themselves, or were

described by parents or teachers to be easily vexed by peers, including finding them 'annoying', 'weird', and 'childish'. These children expressed *"some of the students aren't very normal…They're irritating and too loud and they don't make any sense. It makes me feel annoyed." (Child 8)* and *"there is this one girl that really annoys me…I don't want her near me" (Child 2)*.

Rules must be followed

A particularly prominent sub-strand of children with ASD struggling to tolerate their peers, was the difficulty children experienced coping when peers were not conforming to classroom rules. Seven children (44%) either described themselves, or were described by parents or teacher to be easily frustrated when peers did not follow classroom rules. As this parent voiced, *"his biggest problem is he hates people that break rules. And he gets more uptight about other people not following the rules than about what he's doing himself" (Parent 13).*

Tolerance of self

In contrast to children with ASD's low tolerance for the behaviour of their peers, none of the children interviewed felt that they were in any way annoying to other people. This conflicted with reports from parents and teachers of 4 children (25%), who described children would irritate and annoy peers, although agreed that the children themselves were largely oblivious to this. As these teachers described: *"it's that whole recognising when he's annoying other people [that he struggles with]" (Teacher 6)* and *"he will quite happily turn round and tell someone when they are annoying him, but he can not see when what he is doing annoys others" (Teacher 5).*

4.2.1.4 Ups and downs of peer relationships

The social experiences of children with ASD were a powerful theme prevailing across the views of children, parents and teachers alike. Subthemes within this were i) social interaction skills, ii) egocentrism and tolerance, iii) friendship groups iv) what makes a friend?, v) quantity or quality?, vi) bullying (see Figure 7).

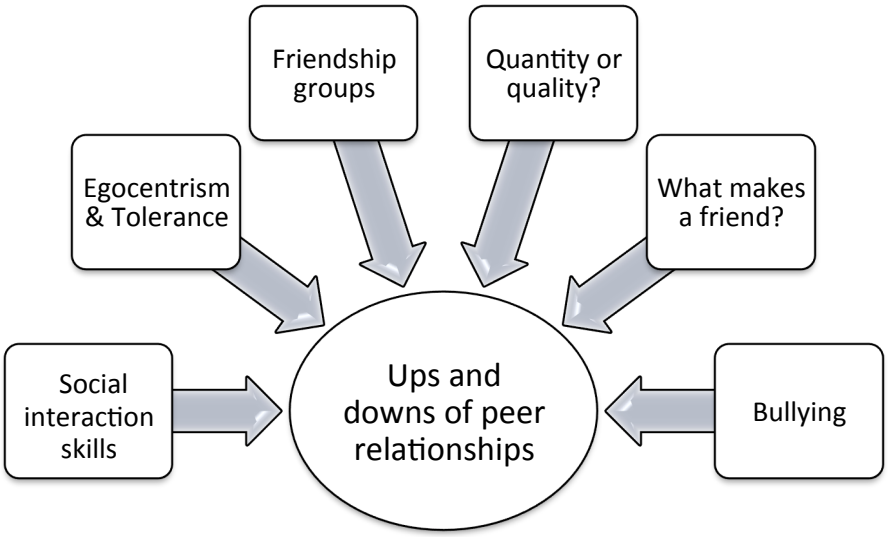

Figure 7. *Theme 1.4 – Ups and downs of peer relationships*

Social interaction skills

Demonstrating the wide variation typical of children with ASD, there was considerable diversity in the social experiences reported. A consistent subtheme was social interaction difficulties, with 12 children (75%) described to have difficulty interacting with peers and building friendships: *"his lack of social skills which has made it a bit difficult to develop relationships with other pupils" (Teacher 1).* In contrast, 4 children (25%) were described to be confident at developing friendships with peers: *"he makes friends with everybody. He approaches them, says hello to them, so he is confident with that" (Teacher 9).* Four children (25%) were mentioned to prefer interacting with adults than peers: *"he identifies more with adults than with children" (Teacher 15).* In addition, 5 children (31%) were felt to struggle to manage the social banter of their peers. This parent voiced *"sometimes he does have friendships issues. You know kids they're always teasing each other, and he'll come home and complain that they keep saying he talks really quickly and he has a high pitched voice, and I'll say they're just teasing you, they're just joking… it's adapting to the social side of people having a joke" (Parent 16).*

Egocentrism & Tolerance

One difficulty regarding development of peer relationships, was children with ASD's preference for social interactions to be 'on their terms.' This was mentioned for 4 children (25%), with one parent describing *"he doesn't like football. He likes his games like Nintendo and Sony…I tell him, even if you don't like football, if you just read up about your friends' teams, then at least when they*

talk about it you can actually join in, rather than you trying to interrupt the conversation to talk about games" (Parent 16). Many respondents also felt children with ASD's low tolerance for their peers, as highlighted earlier, impacted on children's ability to tolerate their friends and their willingness to make new friends. These mothers commented *"he does say that he [his one friend] annoys him sometimes and he finds that really hard" (Parent 13),* and *"if people get in to his space at school he will lash out, and I know there is children at school who have tried to befriend him and he just is not interested one bit" (Parent 6).*

Friendship groups

Ten children (63%) either described themselves, or were described by parents or teachers, to have either one friend in school, or a small number (2-4) of friends: *"probably Owen [is my friend]. We just like play outside or play in the library or something" (Child 2).* Two children (13%) had a large friendship group - *"the great thing about him is he does have friends, a slightly geeky bunch of boys that he relates well to" (Teacher 11)* - whilst 3 children (19%) either articulated themselves or were described by adults to have no friends. In response to the question 'Have you made friends at secondary school?' these two children replied *"Barely. Are we going to get to the next question because I don't like this question. It's weird" (Child 13)* and *"No not really… most of them are too, they're too crazy and everything really for me" (Child 15).* It was notable that for 3 children (19%), they themselves felt confident they had a good friendship group in school, whilst parents or teachers felt the child had very few reciprocal friendships and was largely on the periphery of the group they perceived to be their friends. This teacher expressed: *"socially, I would say with the group of friends he's with he's always on the periphery, just you know he's never right in there with them…he's always on the outside of the group" (Teacher 12)* and this mother voiced *"I think the kids in the mainstream really like him. Whether they think of him as their friend I don't know. He would think of them as his friends" (Parent 10).*

Quantity or quality?

When discussing friendships, 10 children (63%) either voiced themselves, or were described by others to be happy with their social situation. In contrast, 2 children (19%) were unhappy and wanted more friends: *"he does say he wants more friends…He's acutely aware now I think that the relationships he has with others are quite different, very different to his peers" (Parent 13).* For 6 children

(38%), whilst parents hoped for them to have more friends, children themselves were happy with their friendship group. As this parent described *"we would like him to have more friends but I think he's happy at the moment with what he has" (Parent 14).* For four children (25%) it was recognised they sought time alone during break times to relax and have 'down time.' This parent noted *"he said to me oh do you think I could get an office at school mummy? I could just go off and be there when I want to be on my own" (Parent 12)* and this teacher shared *"I think sometimes he needs that coming down space and is quite happy on his own with no-one around him" (Teacher 14).*

What makes a friend?

Children, parents and teachers discussed the reasons why children with ASD identified certain children as friends. A consistent reason was similar interests, a key factor for 7 children (44%): *"they have similar interests to me which is good because it gives us something to talk about" (Child 12)*. Another common reason raised for 5 children (31%) was that they had built friendships with others 'like them': *"[my friend] has the same medical condition like me, which is autism" (Child 14).* Four children (25%) described choosing friends who are 'sensible,' and 'not rude,' which seems to correlate with children's difficulties coping with peers who do not conform to rules. One child, when describing why he liked his friend, commented, *"he's sensible" (Child 2)*. Another child, whilst talking about the problems he had experienced making friends, expressed *"I suppose one of the main things is that none of them like what I like…and [they're] too silly really, it drives you a bit insane really sometimes" (Child 15).*

Bullying

The final subtheme articulated by children, teachers and parents alike was that of bullying. Twelve children (75%) were either currently experiencing, or had experienced bullying within school. Three children (19%) were bullied in primary, whilst 9 (56%) had experienced bullying at secondary school. As these children voiced *"[I don't like] when I like get bullied…they call me names…mostly it's during play times" (Child 5)* and *"they can be very horrible sometimes…they make fun of you…yeah the laughing, the whispering and the looking…it makes you a lot more nervous because you know they're all going to start sniggering and laughing" (Child 15)*.

4.2.1.5 Standing out from the crowd

Another powerful message was that of 'standing out from the crowd' and being different to peers. Subthemes within this were i) standing out, ii) how others see me, iii) feeling different, iv) trying to fit in (see Figure 8).

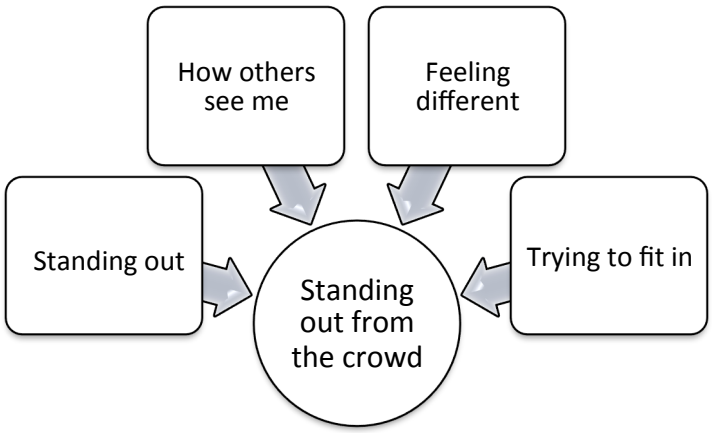

Figure 8. *Theme 1.5 – Standing out from the crowd*

Standing out from the crowd

For all children in the study, parents and teachers described unusual or inappropriate social, emotional or behavioural responses which they felt made the child obviously *"stand out so much" (Teacher 15)* from peers. This parent described, *"he doesn't particularly look any different, but when you speak to him, and especially if you speak to him from a peer point of view, you have to have a big understanding of him to know that he's not taking the miccy" (Parent 2).*

How others see me

For 4 children in mainstream (25%), teachers expressed concerns that a consequence of this unusual behaviour was children being perceived as 'strange' by peers, resulting in social isolation and vulnerability to bullying: *"he's quite loud and is quite tearful which draws attention to himself…as he goes up the school I can see him being maybe a bit of a laughing stock…he's a bit vulnerable socially" (Teacher 14).* In contrast, for 2 children in maintained special provision (13%), teachers stressed that a key benefit of attending specialist provision was that *"a child like that is able to thrive once in a special school environment as he no longer stands out as 'different' to his peers and his confidence is able to grow" (Teacher 1).*

Feeling different

It was also highlighted that many children with ASD have a heightened awareness of feeling different to peers. Eight children (50%) either expressed themselves, or were described by parents or teacher to be aware of being different to peers. Two children (13%) perceived their difference in a positive light, for example this child who voiced *"as an autistic person I am better than them. I'm more highly evolved" (Child 11).* For both of these children this lead them to be perceived as 'arrogant' by other students - *"that air of supremacy and superiority that he radiates, they don't like it" (Teacher 15)* – increasing their social vulnerability. Six children (38%) viewed their difference in a negative light, for example this boy who commented *"most of them are earthlings that's my problem and I'm an alien. They can adapt to the planet better. Things on this planet are weird…aliens feel different to everyone else because they have a disability" (Child 13).*

Trying to 'fit in'

A common consequence of this feeling of difference was children with ASD's desire to 'fit in' with peers, a point raised for 6 children (38%), all of whom attended either mainstream schools, bases attached to mainstream or independent specialist settings. Children consequently sought to blend in with peers, copying them, refusing help from the teaching assistant or to be withdrawn for individual sessions, declining to use strategies such as exit passes which made them further stand out, and not seeking help when needed. As these teachers expressed, *"he doesn't want to appear different, he doesn't want to ask for help…for that kind of fear of not wanting to be different" (Teacher 10)*.

4.2.1.6 Sometimes the world is overwhelming

The emotional and sensory needs of children with ASD were another dominant theme influencing their secondary school experiences. The subthemes identified within this were i) emotional needs, ii) sensory needs iii) when it all gets too much (see Figure 9).

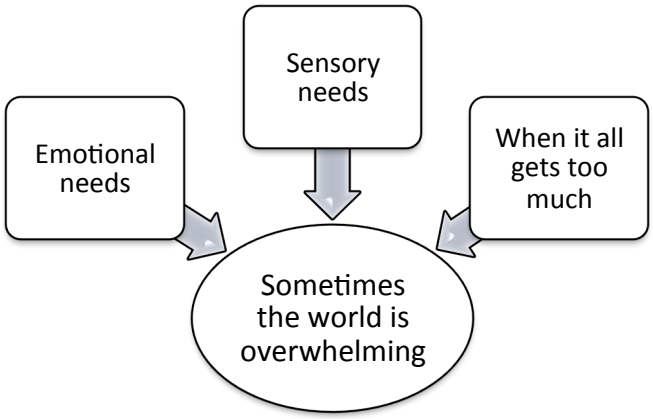

Figure 9. *Theme 1.6 – Sometimes the world is overwhelming*

Emotional needs

All children experienced emotional needs that impacted on their ability to cope within school. This included anxiety, low self-esteem, lacking self-confidence and presenting with emotional outbursts. Children's worries related to a range of different issues, including schoolwork, behaviour of peers, being late for lessons, transitioning between lessons, being punished for not doing homework and taking exams. They also worried about the future, including coping in 6th form and failing school. Children's low self-esteem was articulated by children and adults as them feeling 'stupid,' 'dumb' and 'like a failure.' This child remarked *"I think I will fail that's all. Because I'm not very smart. Because I always make stupid mistakes, and always say stupid things." (Child 13).*

Children's low self-confidence was demonstrated through their refusal to attempt difficult work, participate in class or complete work independently. This teacher articulated, *"he says I can't do this I can't do this…he doesn't have the self-esteem to believe that he can do better" (Teacher 9)*. These emotional difficulties were felt to be exacerbated by children with ASD struggling to voice their feelings and concerns or to seek help, an issue raised for 8 children (50%). For example this teacher commented *"he still struggles with coming to find us if there is an issue…so I think we need to build up that confidence of getting him to address it there and then, rather than him taking it along with him all day, and it can become 10 times worse than what it really is" (Teacher 12).*

Sensory needs

Nine children (56%) were reported to experience sensory difficulties within school, in particular auditory sensitivities that impacted on their ability to cope in

noisy and crowded situations including group discussions, corridors during transition, lunch queues and canteens. This parent explained, *"the noise…recently he couldn't eat that [his packed lunch] and he wanted pasta and he'd never been in the lunch queue before and apparently he had a little bit of a wobble then, yeah that was all a bit too much for him…so he did become a little bit overwhelmed with that" (Parent 16)*.

When it all gets too much

These emotional and sensory difficulties lead to some children becoming overwhelmed, displaying emotional and behavioural outbursts and needing time to calm outside the classroom. This teacher commented *"once he's there and has reached crisis then he needs to be removed from the situation because he needs to calm down" (Teacher 6).* Other children 'bottled up' and 'masked' the anxieties, emotions and stresses encountered over the day in order to 'fit in' with their peers in school, and subsequently 'exploded' once home. These parents explained, *"when he comes home he's like a pressure cooker, because he's been so good, he's kind of been on his best behaviour all day for everybody and he just needs time alone…he really does need time to unwind when he gets back…sometimes I just think he thinks it's all just too much really" (Parent 12)* and *"he hides it perfectly you know, he just, he strives so hard to fit in…it's the whole duck analogy isn't it, serene on the top, but the legs are going like mad underneath, and that is my son you know, he's working so hard, 10 times harder than everyone else, but everyone sees this serene exterior you know, and that has an impact…he's hiding it at school and then it all comes out at home" (Parent 11).* This 'bottling up' was felt to further exacerbate problems, since staff were not able to recognise when children were distressed.

4.2.1.7 School is for learning

Another theme identified within children's experiences of secondary school was that of their academic and learning experiences. Subthemes within this were i) academic progress, ii) differentiation, iii) how I learn best, iv) homework (see Figure 10).

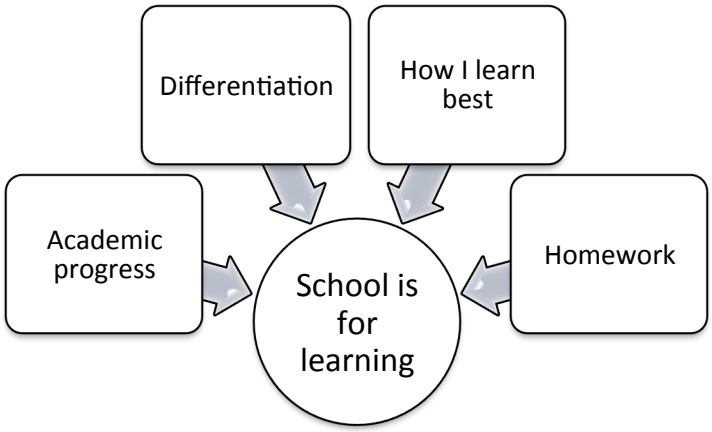

Figure 10. *Theme 1.7 – School is for learning*

Academic progress

Parents and teachers of 10 children (63%) perceived they had been successful in making academic progress since starting secondary school. This parent commented *"he actually left primary at the level he went in there, maybe with a couple of level 3s. But now the school are giving him level 4 and 5" (Parent 9)*. In contrast, parents of 5 children (31%) felt that although their child had made progress, they had not been adequately supported to achieve to the best of their potential. This parent remarked *"actually he's coasting, because actually in a lot of cases he can do what they're doing…and as a result I think the sort of academic side of it he could have been pushed a bit more" (Parent 2).* Interestingly, this viewpoint was only articulated by parents of children in special provision, who felt that whilst their child was receiving many benefits of a broader curriculum, academically they were not being sufficiently challenged to fulfill their potential. Only 1 parent felt their child had made no progress since starting special secondary school.

Differentiation

Children, parents and teachers alike raised the issue of work not being appropriately differentiated. Five children (31%) either expressed themselves, or were described by parents or teachers to regularly receive work that was too challenging for them to access. This teacher described, *"academically to be honest I am a bit concerned…He is finding it difficult to understand what is going on and what teachers are teaching him" (Teacher 10).* In contrast, 4 children (25%) found the work too easy: *"we just need to challenge him more…make him do more work…help him to learn more" (Teacher 8).*

How I learn best

The majority of children – 12 (75%) – were described by children, parents and teachers to be visual learners. Visual resources and practical tasks were described to enhance engagement, understanding and learning. This child explained, *"sometimes if we do like more visual work that's good, like if we're reading a book and they also made a film about it then we can watch the film about it which will help me see it in my head rather than just looking at the text" (Child 12).* However, some staff stressed how difficult it can be finding time to appropriately differentiate lessons and prepare necessary resources: *"it's kind of sorting out the time to get the resources in place [that is the problem]"* (Teacher 6). For 2 children (13%) it was also raised they were struggling to follow the fast pace of lessons in mainstream, and were unable to engage with the auditory learning opportunities. This teacher remarked *"one of the things about school lessons that we're really concerned about for him is the pace, because they're told do this, this this, you know…and it's the pace, because that increases the teachers' use of language, and that is when he finds it even more tricky" (Teacher 10).* In addition, the benefit of a focus on motivation and reward was mentioned for 6 children (38%). This parent stressed, *"I really think that motivation and reward is the right way, and I think this school has more of that notion than others" (Parent 5).*

Another concern was lessons being too long for a child's attention span – *"because it's moved on to the proper secondary model, they had lessons, he would have for example double maths. He's a 10-15 minutes attention span child" (Parent 3)*. In addition, children struggled to participate in and benefit from group work activities due to their social interaction difficulties: *"the majority of lessons now involve a lot of group work, a lot of peer interaction with joining in the classroom, and with that he holds back, so he's not fully interacting and participating in the classes I would say" (Teacher 13)*. Another issue was that some children were overly dependent on teaching assistant support, and presented with a profile of 'learned helplessness,' *"if you're in class…he wants to monopolise your time. I support him in ICT and I've been asked to arrive by the teacher ten minutes late, because if I go in, he's like how do I log on, what do I do, how do I do it, whereas if he goes in by himself he gets on and does it" (Teacher 15).*

Homework

"Homework has been a big issue… mum has had to support him, sometimes she said they'd be sitting there for hours" (Teacher 13)

Eight children (50%) either described themselves, or were described by teachers or parents to dislike homework: *"homework I don't like, no no" (Child 14)*. For 5 children, difficulties centered around the volume of homework, and the time required to complete it. This student voiced, *"the homework, sometimes I get quite a lot and sometimes it kind of ruins my time at home because all I'm doing is just follow-up work from school" (Child 12).* For 2 children (13%), issues arose from homework not being differentiated appropriately, and thus being too challenging for them to complete: *"homework…it's often quite hard for me…it's very challenging" (Child 15).* Eight (50%) children experienced fine motor skills difficulties that impacted on handwriting. The challenges of the writing requirement of homework were specifically mentioned for 2 children (13%). Children voiced they would prefer the option to complete work through other means: *"the ones where I don't have to write anything are better. Most of them I have to write. I don't like writing" (Child 13).* These issues were primarily raised by or about those children in mainstream schools.

Another prominent issue raised in relation to homework was children not wanting to work at home, since they perceived schoolwork to be something they should only be required to do whilst at school. This parent articulated, *"homework has always been an issue from day one… he can't quite correlate that homework should be done at home basically, it's school work why am I doing it at home?" (Parent 12).* Another difficulty raised was children struggling to concentrate in the home environment due to distractions. Consequently they could spend hours completing a 20 minute homework, and required intensive adult support throughout: *"we have had a lot of problems with homework … getting him to do it independently has been a real struggle for us…it's just the high support that he needs to do it…you have to keep prompting him through it. It can be a long evening" (parent 13).*

4.2.2 Microsystem: Teacher Toolkit

This section shall present those factors at the 'teaching approach level' that were found to influence the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

A dominant topic running throughout child, parent and teacher interviews was that of effective strategies to support children with ASD in school. This included both strategies schools were already using, and strategies suggested by schools, parents and children. There were 6 themes identified within the overarching concept of the 'teacher toolkit': i) social, ii) emotional, iii) learning and behaviour, iv) sensory, v) homework and vi) transition (see Figure 11). An overall thematic map for the 'teacher toolkit' is shown in Figure 12 below.

Encompassing this theme, was the overarching concept of individuality, with children, parents and teachers alike highlighting that every child with ASD is different, and strategies need to be developed for the individual: what works for one will not necessarily work for another. This parent articulated, *"autism it's a spectrum of need so you can be anywhere, if you're autistic it doesn't describe you as anything. It doesn't give any indication to the teacher of how to teach you because you are an individual" (Parent 3).* With this in mind, strategies have been collated to provide a 'Teacher Toolkit' and are presented in Tables 10-15 below under these themed headings.

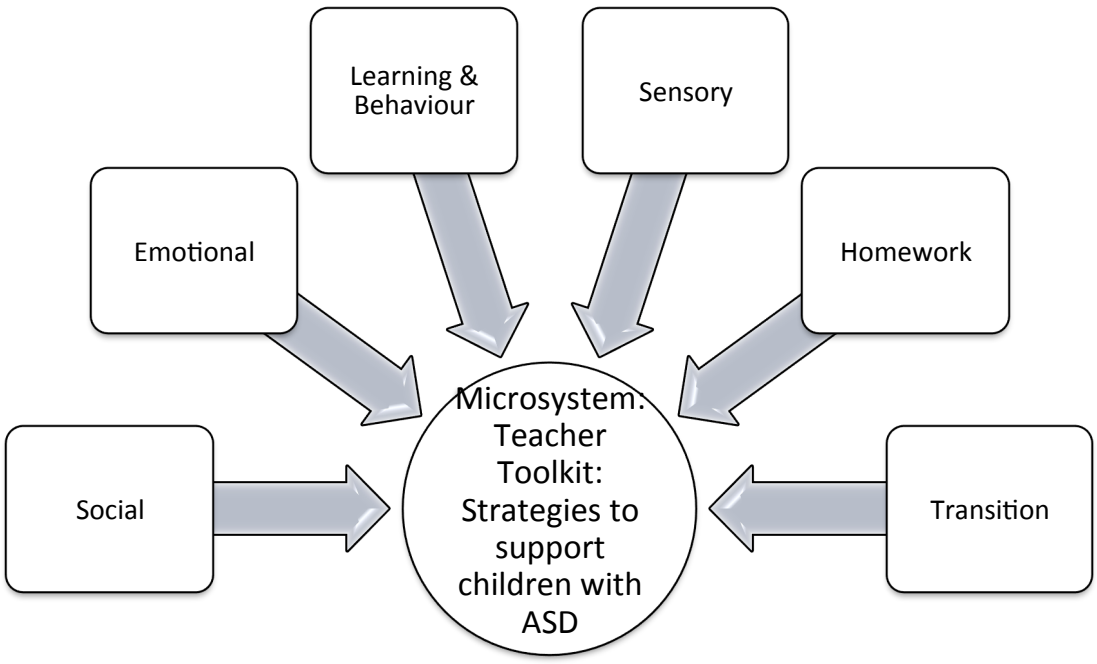

Figure 11. *Overarching Theme 2 – Microsystem: Teacher Toolkit*

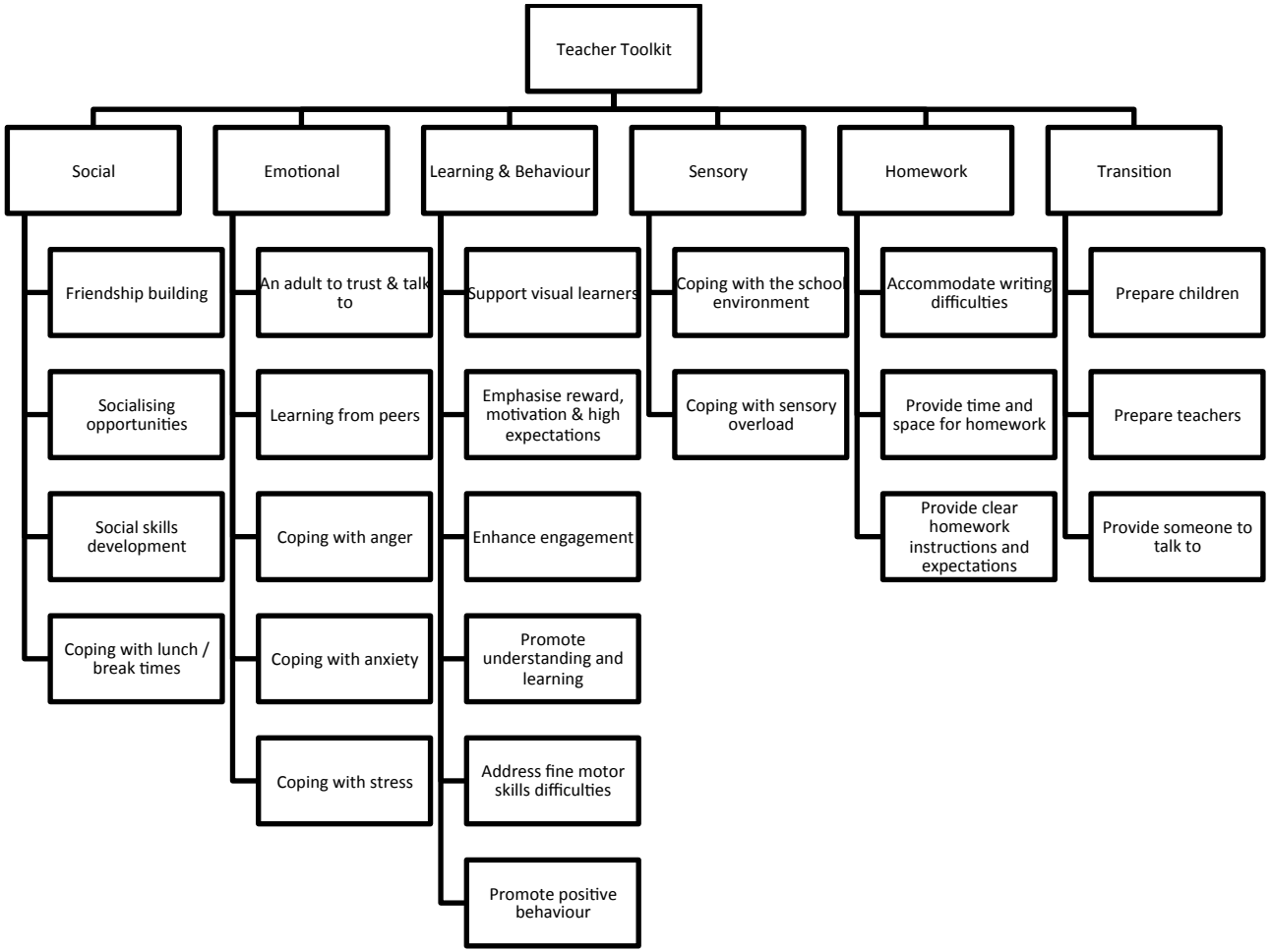

Figure 12. *Thematic map for the 'teacher toolkit'*

4.2.2.1 Social: Friendship, Social skills, Bullying

Table 10. *Strategies to address social needs*

Strategy	Purpose
Friendship building:	
Lunch time friendship clubs	Support children in building friendships
Circle of support	Support children in building friendships
Friendship building activities	Support children in building friendships
Socialising opportunities:	
After school clubs / groups	Provide opportunities for socialising with peers
Social skills development:	
Social stories	Develop social skills
Social skills groups	Develop social skills
Structured social skills programs	Develop social skills through explicit teaching
Lunch time activity clubs	Provide structured activities so children can have somewhere to go and something to do
Coping with lunch / break times:	
Staff available at lunch times	Adult for child to approach if alone / experiencing bullying
Peer buddy system for lunch times	Ensure child has someone to sit with at lunch
Designated space available at lunch times	Provide a space for children to spend time alone or with peers in a less busy, less noisy environment

Within this theme, parents and teachers stressed that any activities intended to develop social skills should involve a reasonable sized group of children, and most essentially should include children who can provide a social role model for children with ASD to learn from. Parents also highlighted that care should be taken in determining which lessons children are removed from for social skills interventions, since some lessons naturally provide more social interaction opportunities than others (see Table 10).

4.2.2.2 Emotional: Anxiety, Worry, Anger, Self-Esteem, Confidence

The importance of routines and warning before change was particularly prominent, with 13 children (81%) either describing themselves, or being described by teachers or parents to have a preference for routines, and to require warnings before change in order to reduce anxiety. This mother described an incident arising from her son not being given sufficient warning before a change to his routine: *"there was an incident…when they sort of threw swimming on him*

the day before, so he was going to be swimming the next day, and he just got really really agitated in the morning and he didn't want to go because it wasn't, we hadn't had time to prepare him and it was a bit of a surprise and he didn't know what to expect" (Parent 4) (see Table 11).

Table 11. *Strategies to address emotional needs*

Strategy	Purpose
An adult to trust and talk to:	
Link adult within school as contact for child and parent	Reduce anxiety through providing consistent adult to build trusting relationship with and liaise with when concerns arise
LSA Mentor to discuss concerns / worries with	Reduce anxiety through providing allocated time and person to talk through concerns with
Consistent form tutor	Build trusting relationship with staff
Learning from peers:	
Vertically streamed tutor groups	Provide a nurturing 'family' environment which allows children to learn from older peers
Peer mentor / buddy system	Enable children to take concerns to an older child at the school
Coping with anger:	
Anger management strategies	Build skills to cope with emotions
Coping with stress:	
Calming strategies	Build skills to cope when stressed
Time out / Exit card	Allow child to subtly leave lesson if stressed
Coping with anxiety:	
Routines	Ensure children know what is happening to reduce anxiety
Warnings before change	Provide warnings before change to routine, to reduce anxiety and allow preparation
Timetabled transition times between lessons	Reduce anxiety of being late for lessons
Transition buddy	Provide a peer to transition between lessons with to reduce anxiety about getting lost

4.2.2.3 Learning and Behaviour

The importance of visual supports, teaching assistant support, and use of rewards to promote positive behaviour for learning were frequently raised. This teacher gave an example of finding motivating rewards for a child: *"so you've got the whole carrot side of things which works quite well…at one stage we were using we had some pigs and if he had a good day we'd go and see the pigs" (Teacher 6)* (see Table 12).

Table 12. *Strategies to address learning and behaviour*

Strategy	Purpose
Support visual learners:	
Visual timetable	Provide visual routine for the day
Visual supports / resources / inputs	Enhance understanding through visuals
Multi-sensory / practical learning opportunities	Enhance understanding and engagement
Emphasise reward, motivation & high expectations:	
Certificates / merits for good behaviour / work	Reward and motivation
Relate to individual interests	Motivation
Praise, Encouragement, Reward, Build on success	Motivation and reward
Have high expectations	Support child to try their best
Enhance engagement:	
Seating position	Ensure child is comfortable and can see the board
TA Support	Provide additional adult support to facilitate learning
Consistent staff	Ensure staff are familiar with children's needs, and children trust adults
Address fine motor skills difficulties:	
Reduced writing requirements	Limit handwriting demands
Fine motor skills groups	Develop handwriting skills
Laptop	Provide alternatives to handwriting
Reader / Scribe	Reduce reading / writing requirements
Promote understanding & learning:	
Repetition	Enhance understanding
Strategies to request help	Support child to seek help when needed
Keep instructions clear & concise	Enhance understanding
Regularly check understanding	Enhance understanding
Break down learning into small steps	Enhance understanding
Peer support in lessons	Allow child to receive help without standing out by requiring adult support
Slow down pace of lessons	Enhance understanding
Link to prior learning	Enhance understanding
Timers	Clarity regarding work expectations
Small group / 1:1 extra support sessions	Further develop skills / Catch up
Promote positive behaviour:	
Positive behaviour management plan	Proactive response to behaviour
Risk assessment	Appropriate planning for behaviour

4.2.2.4 Sensory needs

Recognising the sensory needs of children with ASD, a number of respondents commented on the importance of designated spaces where children can go to relax and calm and the use of passes to allow children to avoid busy corridors and lunch queues. This teacher commented: *"it would be good maybe to have a*

base, somewhere that literally just the autistic children can go to…if when the anxiety sometimes gets too much if they had somewhere that they could go to…somewhere specific to withdraw to" (Teacher 14) (see Table 13).

Table 13. *Strategies to address sensory needs*

Strategy	Purpose
Coping with the school environment:	
Early lunch pass	Avoid queues and crowds
Early lesson exit pass	Avoid corridor crowds
Quiet desk in the classroom	Work independently
Ear defenders	Block noise
Coping with sensory overload:	
Sensory room	Space to calm when stressed / overwhelmed
Quiet space away from main school	Calm when stressed / overwhelmed

4.2.2.5 Homework

Table 14. *Strategies to address homework*

Strategy	Purpose
Accommodate writing difficulties:	
Range of options to present homework	Overcome writing difficulties
Allowed to do homework on computer	Overcome writing difficulties
Provide time and space for homework:	
After school homework club	Provide designated space and time to complete homework in school
Lunch time homework room	Provide designated space and time to complete homework during school day
Free periods designated to homework	Provide designated space and time to complete homework during school day
Provide clear homework instructions and expectations:	
Limit of time to be spent on homework	Ensure students do not spend hours every evening completing homework which should take 20 minutes
Appropriately differentiated homework	Ensure homework is within students' ability and achievable
Communication of homework to parents	Ensure parents are informed to support children with homework
Allocated time with a member of staff	Opportunity to review homework for the week and discuss any concerns

A frequently raised issue was parents receiving inadequate information regarding homework requirements. Many children with ASD struggled to recall and relate sufficient information about the homework set to parents. This parent explained,

"they don't write enough information of what to do and we did try to explain that our son…most of the time when we ask him what do you have to do he says I don't know…We had one example, it just said he has to do revision for his test next week. Well revision of what?... is it from the beginning, is it last month? I don't know, so we're going through all of it but it's a lot" (Parent 14) (see Table 14).

4.2.2.6 Transition

Table 15. *Strategies to support transition*

Strategy	Purpose
Prepare children for the move:	
Pre-transition meeting with child & parent	Discuss concerns and plan proactive intervention
Transition group – series of weekly visits	Develop familiarity with new school
Induction days	Develop familiarity with new school
School map	Help navigate school
Visual picture book	Increase familiarity over summer holidays
Primary school preparation	Prepare child for move
Moving up pack	Provide all information re form class, teachers, map of school etc.
Prepare teachers:	
Transition passport	Transfer information about child from primary to secondary
Provide someone to talk to:	
Transition buddy	Older child to seek support from / discuss concerns with
Post-transition follow-up meeting with child & parents	Discuss first few weeks and any remaining concerns

A frequently lauded topic was the benefit of transition groups, allowing children to visit their new school once a week for a series of weeks towards the end of the summer term in Year 6. This was crucially important in allowing children to become familiar with the new setting, reducing their anxiety when starting their new school the following September. This parent described, "*they had a programme, and he spent one afternoon a week there for the last half term of primary which I think was invaluable for him really…I think that really really helped… it meant he wasn't so worried about actually starting when the time came" (Parent 13)* (see Table 15).

4.2.3 Mesosystem: Whole School Approach to ASD

This section shall present those factors at the 'whole school level' that were found to influence the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

Another prominent overarching theme arising from child, parent and teacher interviews related to important systemic principles regarding schools' overall approaches to meeting the needs of children with ASD. Within this there were 5 themes, comprising i) school ethos, ii) knowledge and understanding of ASD, iii) school practice, iv) deployment of TAs, v) training (see Figure 13). An overall thematic map for the 'whole school' level is shown in Figure 14.

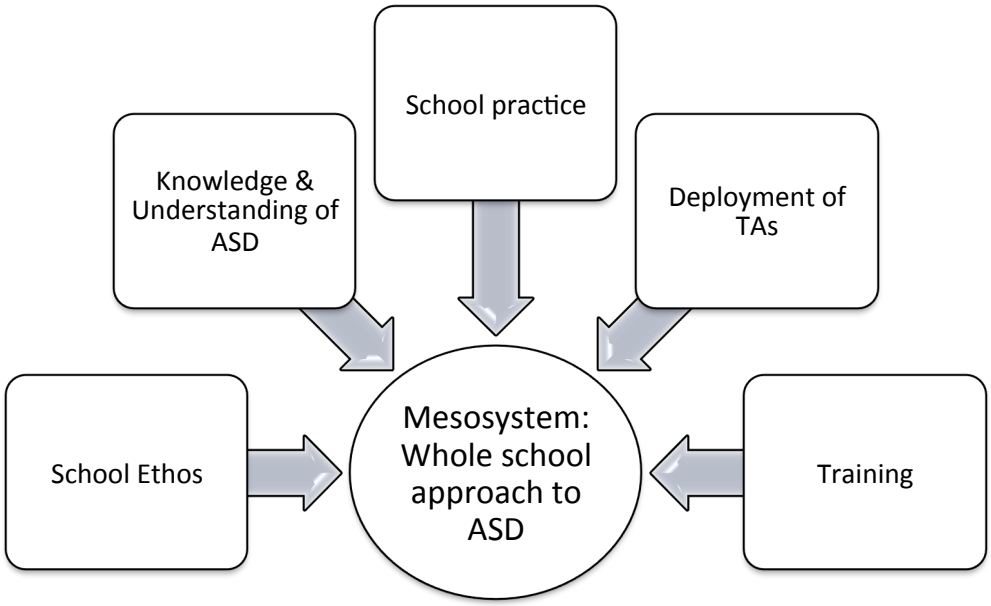

Figure 13. *Overarching Theme 3 – Mesosystem: Whole school approach to ASD*

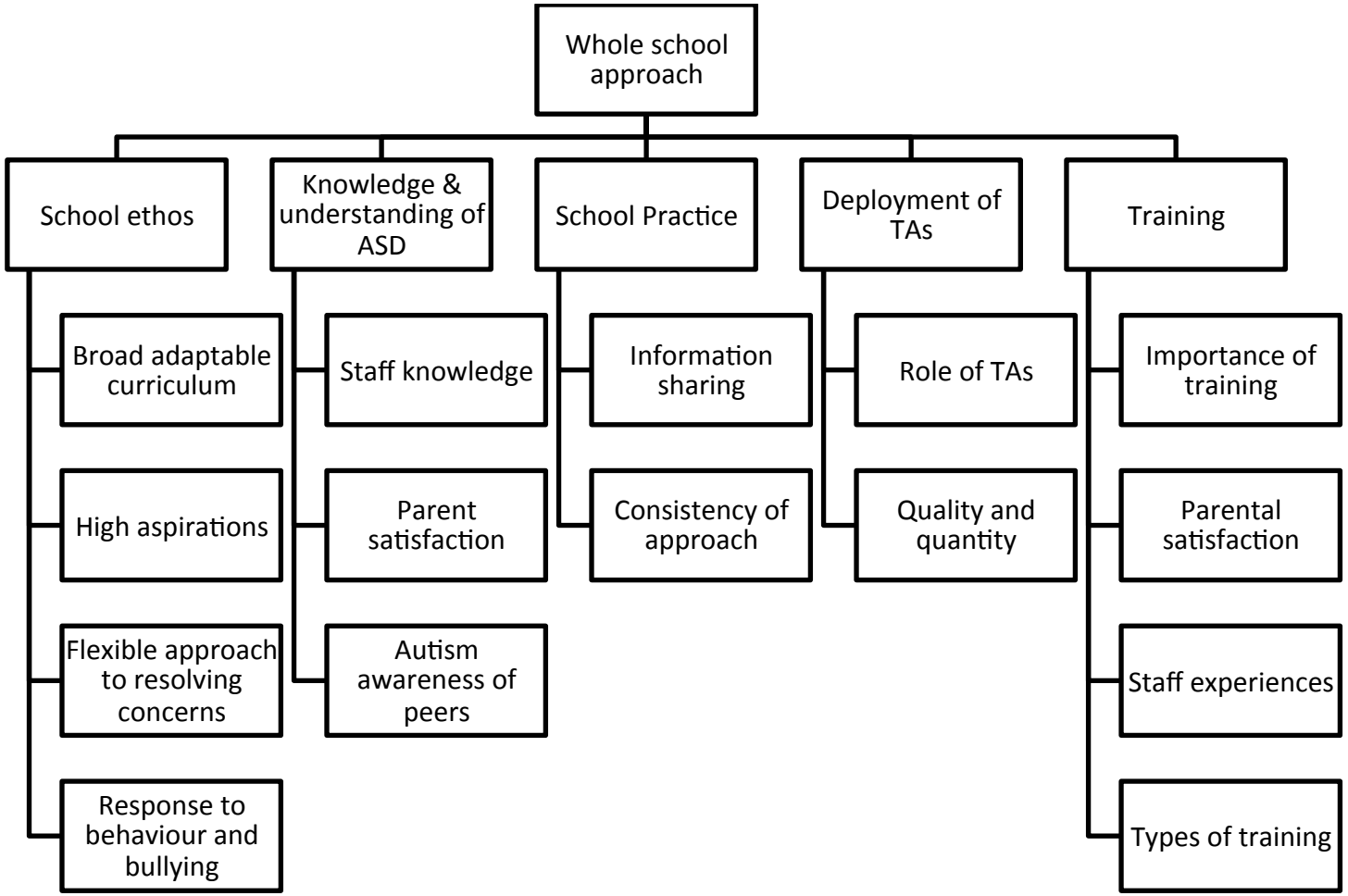

Figure 14. *Thematic map for the 'whole school' level*

4.2.3.1 School Ethos

A whole school ethos of flexibility, high aspirations and willingness to individualise alongside strict behavior expectations was a dominant theme arising from interviews. The subthemes identified within this were i) broad adaptable approach to the curriculum, ii) high aspirations, iii) flexible approach to resolving concerns; iv) response to behavior and bullying (see Figure 15).

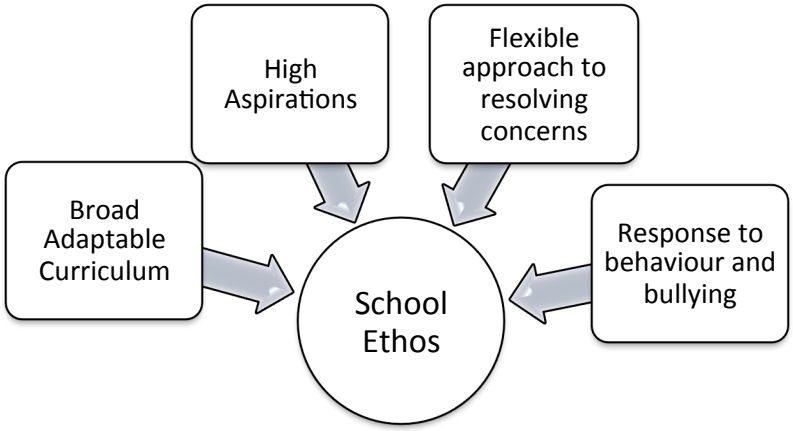

Figure 15. *Theme 3.1 School Ethos*

Broad Adaptable approach to the Curriculum

A powerful message voiced related to the curriculum. For 13 children (81%), the benefits of a flexible approach to the curriculum, which enabled children to have a wide range of educational experiences and engage in a broad range of activities and learning opportunities was articulated. The benefits of outdoor curricular activities were discussed for 6 children (38%), including both those attending mainstream and specialist settings. This teacher commented: *"with the ASDAN…a lot of things we have done have been outdoor orientated towards the things that he enjoys… we went to a local forest and he was brilliant" (Teacher 15).*

A broader curriculum with a focus on life skills and social skills was highlighted as important by parents and teachers of 6 children (38%) in specialist settings. Comments included *"it's not all like off the curriculum, it's broader they do like life skills and things like that, yeah definitely that's important" (Parent 6)* and *"the new school, I think the whole of one afternoon is about life skills training and that is essential, that is just where he's at at the moment (Parent 7).* Other areas of curriculum adaptation discussed to meet the needs of children with ASD in

secondary school, included the option to be dis-applied from modern foreign languages and the option of alternative more practically oriented courses as alternatives to GCSE, such as ASDAN and off-site placements.

Despite the benefits of a broader curriculum, many parents of children in special schools highlighted their desire for schools to offer more academic options where appropriate. This parent described her experience of accessing the opportunity for her son to do a GCSE: *"the original comment was we don't think there is a group [to do GCSE Maths], so it might not be possible, and I said well you know if my son is able then I would like him to be able to do it…they then looked at the entry level and seeing how that goes, and actually…there were several other children who also got a distinction, so they will now be able to do GCSE, and I think it's a big win. I don't think they naturally think of GCSE" (Parent 5).* Another aspect of curriculum adaptation highlighted by parents of children in special schools was opportunities for social and academic integration. Parents of 3 children (19%) described being refused integration opportunities because it was considered too complicated for the school to organise: *"There has been huge obstacles for the last 3 years where we've asked that he is extremely good at P.E. and Science, and can he go to other schools to have these lessons, and they have not catered that for us" (Parent 8).*

High aspirations

As noted earlier, parents of 5 children (31%) felt that although their child had made academic progress since starting secondary education, they had not been adequately supported to achieve to the best of their potential. This highlighted the importance of high aspirations for children with ASD, as well as the educational support and provision to fulfill these aspirations.

Flexible approach to resolving concerns

The importance of a whole school ethos centred around flexibility and an openness to individualisation in order to resolve any concerns or issues which arise was another aspect raised by all parents and many teachers as essential to enhance the secondary education of children with ASD. Overall, parents of 6 children (38%) voiced that the school were not willing or able to resolve concerns they had raised, whilst parents of 5 children (31%) voiced that the school had been proactive in responding effectively to their concerns. As this happy parent described, *"if some things occasionally go wrong, having someone there who is*

understanding and wants to resolve it, rather than someone who's saying well these are our rules and like it or lump it, which is sort of what I have been told in the past, or find another school, which I actually was told…then that's fine, you can move forwards then" (Parent 5). Unfortunately, this parent did not have as positive an experience: *"I'd say what they have done is nothing. They have not…the school itself I don't think are opening enough doors for him, so no my answer to that is no [I do not think the school have done anything specifically to accommodate my child] (Parent 8).*

A number of examples were given to demonstrate situations where schools had been helpful in accommodating children's individual needs. This included modifying the curriculum, accommodating children's individual likes or dislikes for particular subjects or activities, and introducing individual strategies to accommodate children's needs. Unfortunately, despite these examples, a number of parents also described experiences of schools being unaccommodating and refusing to individualise or personalise to meet their child's needs. This parent articulated, *"you will be normal is what it is…You will be normal. You will fit us, and not we will fit you" (Parent 11).*

School response to behaviour and bullying

A final theme found within the school ethos was the school response to behaviour and bullying, an issue raised by children, parents and teachers alike, although only in relation to children in mainstream education. The importance of a strong behaviour code to prevent bullying, and effective management of bullying when it does occur was articulated in relation to five children (31%). This teacher described *"this school is very, it is very structured, there is a good behaviour code…so it is a good place for autistic students to function really, because it is so, the expectations are clear" (Teacher 11)* and this parent articulated *"we actually wanted a school that is quite structured and quite strict, so obviously if there is bullying it's quite quickly picked up and dealt with… there is bullying in every school, it's just how you deal with it is the most important thing" (Parent 14).*

4.2.3.2 Knowledge & Understanding of ASD

"they suggested I look at a local MLD special school, so I did…The chap who showed me around…I said to him 'How would you accommodate a sensory diet?' and he said 'Oh we have all sorts of diets here, we can do gluten free, anything' and I just thought oh my god…and ran screaming to my car…50% of their pupils are autistic, so what they're doing I don't know." (Parent 7).

A key topic raised by parents and teachers was the importance of knowledge and understanding about ASD. Subthemes identified within this were i) staff knowledge, ii) parent satisfaction, iii) autism awareness of peers (see Figure 16).

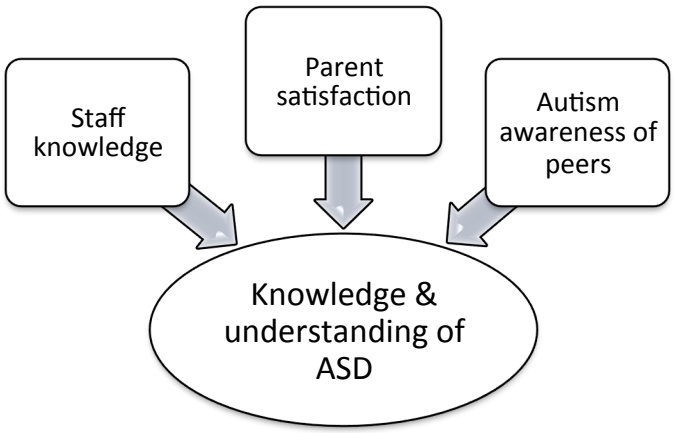

Figure 16. *Theme 3.2 Knowledge and understanding of ASD*

Staff knowledge

Central to the views of parents and teachers of children with ASD, was the importance of school staff's knowledge, awareness, understanding and experience of ASD in order to meet children's needs, a topic raised by the majority of respondents.

Many parents also raised the importance of school staff understanding the specific needs of their individual child. This parent described her frustration at school staff's lack of understanding about her son's abilities: *"I think lack of knowledge of…staff in the base about the children in the base. The teacher of the provision emailed me with a new timetable for [child X]…here is his current timetable, a written timetable of lessons for the week…Then this is what he emails me on Monday night. Visual pictures for each lesson…It looks like something he had in infant's school…even the teacher in the provision doesn't understand what level he is at. My son has been able to read for quite a long time…this is sending him backwards" (Parent 9).*

Parent satisfaction

Across all types of provision, parents' views varied as to whether they felt staff had sufficient knowledge, understanding and experience of ASD or not, with 50% of respondents speaking favourably, and 50% unfavourably. This parent described her positive experience, *"I think probably experienced staff really, I think quite a few of them have been there a long time and you know have seen it all…so I think the experience of the staff. His form tutor's really good and you know I think really understands him" (Parent 4),* whilst this parent described her negative experience, *"essentially lack of awareness, lack of understanding, no knowledge of how to actually teach autism, how to individualise and how to manage behaviour" (Parent 7).*

Autism awareness of peers

Another topic raised for 7 children (44%) was the importance of other children having knowledge and understanding of ASD. Strategies suggested or being employed to achieve this included whole school assemblies on ASD, 'autism awareness training' for students, and discussion of ASD during form times.

4.2.3.3 Training

Training of school staff was another topic raised by teachers and parents with regards to the whole school approach to supporting children with ASD. Subthemes within this were i) importance of training, ii) parental satisfaction, iii) staff experiences iv) types of training (see Figure 17).

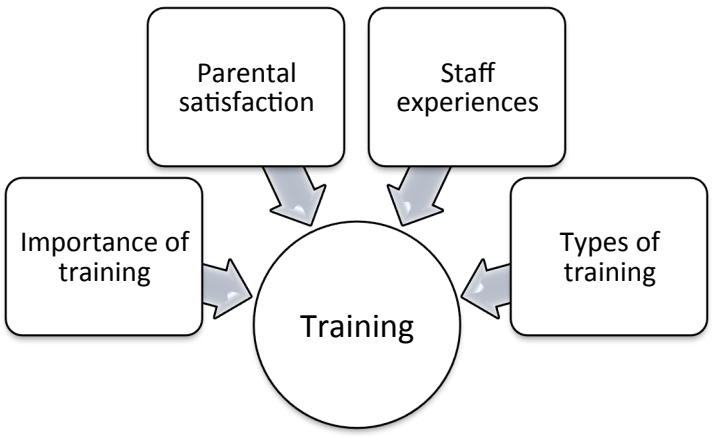

Figure 17. *Theme 3.3 Training*

Importance of training

For 10 children (63%), parents and teachers highlighted the importance of school staff being adequately trained in ASD and SEN to most effectively meet the needs of children with ASD in secondary education. This parent commented, *"they're obviously trained in dealing with children like Child X, whilst at Primary no one was, so I think all that helps" (Parent 6).*

Parental satisfaction

Of the 10 parents who raised the topic of training, 2 (20%) were happy with the level of training received by teachers in their child's school, both of whom had children attending maintained special schools, whilst an overwhelming 8 (80%) were unhappy. This comprised parents of children attending all four types of provision included in this study. This parent articulated, *"I think there needs to be more training of what it actually means to be autistic, why things happen, the root cause" (Parent 5).* One parent went on to stress the dangers of giving staff only a snapshot of training: *"there's so many people who have had some autism training, TAs, teachers or inset training but it's just not enough, but it's almost dangerous because they say we know autism"* (Parent 11).

Staff experiences

Teachers' experiences of training revealed that all staff spoken to had in fact received some training in ASD. Of these, 11 (85%) had received training in their current position, whilst 2 (15%) had received training in a previous post. Five teachers (38%) stressed the importance of training being regularly refreshed in order to keep knowledge and skills up to date.

Types of Training: What works best?

A variety of different types of training were described. Staff in special provision described receiving INSET training primarily provided by staff with expertise at the school, with some involvement from external professionals including Speech & Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists. In contrast, staff in mainstream described receiving INSET training provided entirely by external professionals, primarily the Autism Advisory Service. Of note for this research, is that no staff had received training on ASD that was either wholly or in part delivered by Educational Psychologists (EPs). One teacher raised the issue of LA services moving to trading, with the result that it is now more difficult for schools to access INSET training by external professionals due to the cost implications.

Staff from all types of provision had attended ASD training off-site run by the LA. In mainstream, it tended to be staff from the SEN department, including SENCos, teaching assistants and LSAs who received this off-site ASD training. Reasons for this were largely financial and practical. As this SENCo articulated, *"the training staff currently go on is usually the teaching assistants. It's during the working day so you have to arrange cover if you want staff to go, plus for instance Child X could have the majority of 16 different teachers, so it wouldn't be worth two going. So if they came in and were to do a whole school training session that would be much more time effective for us" (Teacher 14).* Staff therefore suggested that INSET training would be a more effective model for training.

Four teachers (31%) highlighted that the most effective way of training staff is to employ people with expertise in school: *"it's going out and getting someone who is really skilled so that that can drip out. Attacking that whole school awareness" (Teacher 11).* In addition, one teacher highlighted the benefits of a person in this role to ensure that training is translated into practice: "*the knowledge base is there, but… to make sure it's happening in lessons. Knowing and doing are different… to look at how well ASC strategies is being delivered in lessons… we've got the knowledge base, but ensuring that that is delivered" (Teacher 6).*

4.2.3.4 Deployment of TAs

The vast majority of parent and teacher respondents discussed the issue of TA support for children with ASD in secondary education. The subthemes arising within this were, i) roles of TAs, ii) quality and quantity (see Figure 18).

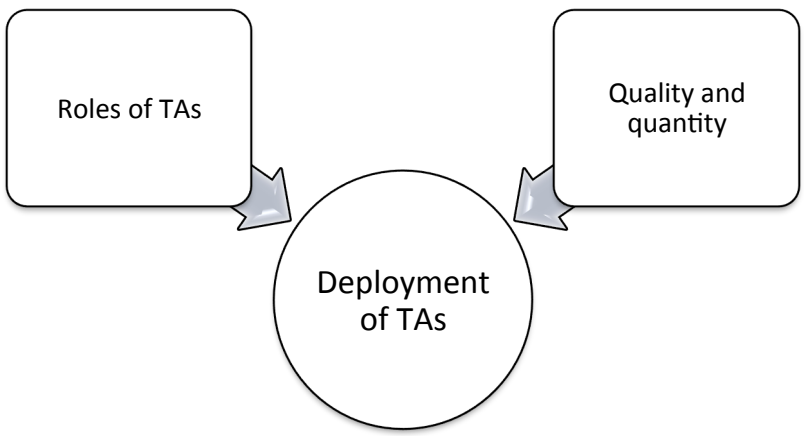

Figure 18. *Theme 3.4 Deployment of TAs*

Roles of TAs

Deployment of TAs included 1:1 support in class, 2:1 support in class, floating support in class and TAs providing out of class support sessions targeted to children's individual needs. Other roles undertaken by TAs included running lunch-time clubs and holding areas of specialism within the school. In addition, TAs acting as a keyworker, or link for children, staff and parents was also highlighted as a crucially important role they could take. As this teacher described, *"the keyworker always attends the annual review. They are the key person that information will come back to, and then that person will feed the information to me…so there's always that opportunity to pull that information together…it depends on what the need is. Some students don't need that direct keyworker contact, whereas a Year 7 autistic boy, the keyworker will be going in to registration every day to check in with them" (Teacher 11).*

Quality and quantity

Respondents largely talked positively about the role of TAs in supporting the education of children with ASD. Parents and teachers of 6 children (38%) raised the need for higher staff ratios in order to meet children's educational needs: *"I'd like to see more learning support staff… bearing in mind there's 19 statements I do think there needs to be a significant increase on what there is now…children are being let down at the moment" (Parent 16).*

One concern raised in relation to 4 children (25%) was the impact of 'velcro' TAs reducing children's independence and limiting their interactions with peers. As these parents described, *"the whole LSA thing was you know having someone velcroed to his shoulder was that he had absolutely no independence skills at all, and you know even the work that got sent home was the LSAs work, you know it was lovely but it just wasn't his" (Parent 7)* and *"he would need so much support that I don't think he would be in a position to make genuine peer friendships, because you know you as a child yourself you wouldn't have wanted to make friends with the child that's always got an adult hovering around them" (Parent 2).*

4.2.3.5 School practice

Respondents highlighted the importance of information sharing and consistency of approach with regards to whole school practice to support the secondary school experiences of children with ASD (see Figure 19).

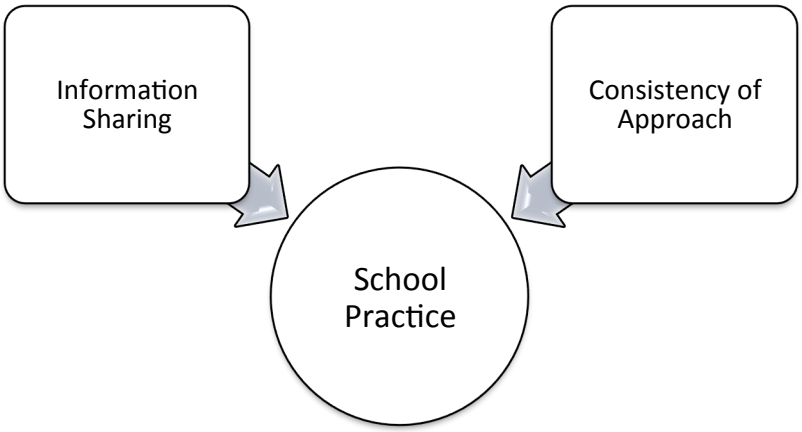

Figure 19. *Theme 3.5 School Practice*

Information Sharing

The importance of information sharing between staff in secondary school was another area highlighted in relation to 13 children (81%). It was emphasised that all staff should be familiar with children's needs. Some parents voiced that to be familiar with children's needs, all teachers should receive a copy of the statement. Most teachers described ways in which information was shared amongst staff, including pen portraits, pen pics, student passports and student profiles, which they described as readily available and easily accessible summaries of a child's needs. Some teachers stressed that a regular slot at team meetings to discuss children's needs was essential to ensure all staff were up to date and familiar with children's needs. This teacher expressed, *"we have team meetings where we will share information amongst staff. We have asked for a half hour discussion slot for LSAs to be able to share relevant information about students because we need time to actually get to know the students other people support" (Teacher 10).*

Consistency of Approach

Another area raised by parents and teachers in relation to 5 children (31%) was staff throughout school having a consistent approach. This parent described her son's experience of lack of consistency, *"the strategy given was a time out card to show to teachers if he needs to leave the room, but…the teachers have to subscribe to that and not all the teachers do, some teachers have challenged him*

when he's tried to use it, they'll say do you really need to go or can you just hang on 10 more minutes" (Parent 11).

4.2.4 Exosystem: Working with Families and Professionals

This section shall present those factors at the 'family and professionals level' that were found to influence the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

Moving beyond the school, interviews also revealed a number of important factors relating to the involvement of families and professionals in supporting the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. There were 3 themes within this: i) working with professionals, ii) collaborating with parents, iii) supporting transition (see Figure 20). An overall thematic map for 'working with families and professionals' can be seen in Figure 21.

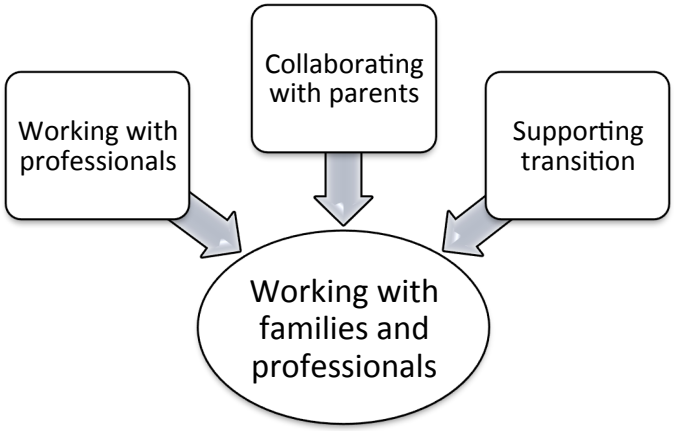

Figure 20. *Overarching theme 4 – Exosystem: Working with families and professionals*

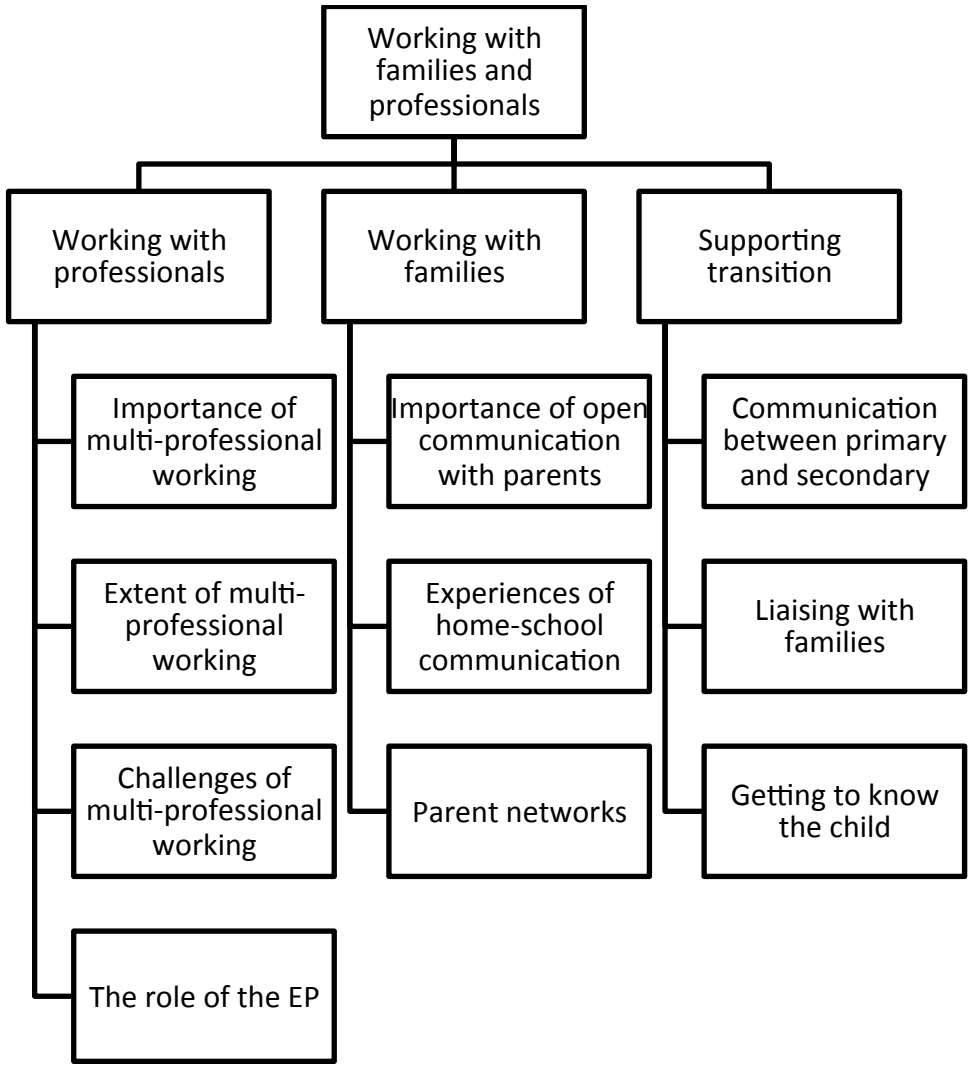

Figure 21. *Thematic map for working with families and professionals*

4.2.4.1 Working with Professionals

Within the theme of working with professionals, 4 subthemes arose: i) importance of multi-professional working; ii) extent of multi-professional working; iii) challenges to multi-professional working; iv) the role of the EP (see Figure 22).

Figure 22. *Theme 4.1 Working with professionals*

Importance of multi-professional working

The importance of schools working together with other professionals to support the secondary education of children with ASD was highlighted by almost all adult respondents. This teacher voiced, *"always working openly with parents and visiting professionals [is important]" (Teacher 1).*

Extent of multi-professional working

All schools mentioned the involvement of the Autism Advisory Team working at a whole school level to support the education of children with ASD through providing training and support to schools. At an individual level, the involvement of speech and language therapists was mentioned for 11 children (69%), autism advisory teachers for 4 children (25%), EPs for 7 children (44%), occupational therapists for 4 children (25%), and music therapists for 3 children (19%). Alongside these figures, 3 children (19%) were reported to have received no involvement from outside professionals since transition to secondary school, two of whom attended mainstream, and one maintained special school.

Challenges to multi-professional working

Where children were receiving involvement from outside professionals, a variety of concerns were nevertheless raised. Parents of 5 children (31%) described having a battle to access necessary professional advice. Parents of 4 children

(25%) reported that despite them raising concerns with the school, outside professionals only became involved when they themselves requested this either to the school or by contacting the LA directly. Parents of 3 children (19%) resorted to paying for professional advice privately. Parents of a further 4 children (25%) reported not having received any information regarding the involvement their child was receiving from professionals. This included not receiving a report, not knowing what targets their child was working towards, how frequent the sessions were, or when the sessions were. In addition, parents of 4 children (25%) noted that although they had received professional advice, and in some cases this had informed children's statements, the school were not implementing this advice.

The role of the EP

Of particular importance for this research, is the role of the EP in supporting the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. Seven children (44%) involved in the study had received EP involvement since transferring to secondary school, whereas 56% had not. Of those who had received EP involvement, parents of 4 children (25%) reported that they themselves had to request this, either to the school or directly through the LA. For these 4 children, EP involvement was requested due to parental concerns about the suitability of the child's school placement. For the 3 children (19%) referred by schools, EP involvement was requested for one child in Year 7 to evaluate the child's transition, and for one child in Year 9 ahead of transition review. For one further child EP involvement was recalled, although the details regarding reasons for referral and outcomes were unclear.

4.2.4.2 Collaborating with Parents

Within the theme of collaborating with parents, 3 subthemes arose: i) importance of open communication with parents; ii) experiences of home-school communication; iii) parent networks (see Figure 23).

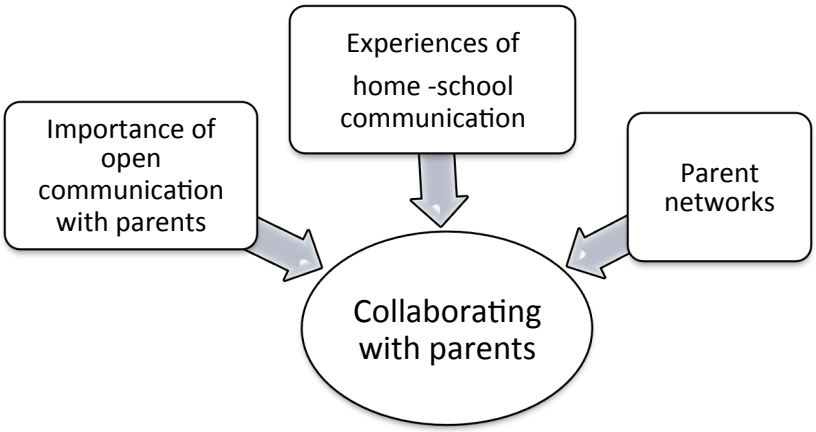

Figure 23. *Theme 4.2 Collaborating with parents*

Importance of open communication with parents

Parents and teachers of 12 children (75%) highlighted the importance of open communication between parents and schools. To facilitate communication, parents strongly advocated the benefits of a link adult in the school. Parents of 7 children (44%) described feeling 'out of the loop' regarding their child's education since the move to secondary, due to poor communication from school. Whilst most parents had a home-school book to facilitate communication, parents of 7 children (44%) stressed that often the level of detail provided was not sufficient, since children struggled to recall and share even basic information about their day: *"home communication book we're still working on it, I don't think they write enough, I think that's the one thing that we've found that umm I suppose that teachers don't understand that. Every time I speak to someone I have to say you have to understand you have to treat me like a dumb person because I know nothing, and you have to be very clear and clarify because my child will not come home and say [about his day]" (Parent 14).* Parents were therefore left feeling largely in the dark when schools did not keep lines of communication open.

Experiences of home-school communication

Parents of 6 children (38%) described experiences of poor communication from school, including ignored emails, nothing written in home-school communication books, or what was written being illegible. This parent described, "*lack of communication with the school – the school not answering emails…[and] written communication in the book, it's just so frustrating…it is impossible to understand what she writes. I'm relying on the communication books, not only to tell me how his day was, but also what he covered in lessons and what homework he has, it's*

just not good enough. It's so frustrating" (Parent 9). In addition to improved use of the communication book, parents made a range of other suggestions to facilitate improved communication between school and home, including a link designated adult for them to liaise with, a weekly allocated time slot to call and speak with teachers, more frequent parents evenings with longer time slots to speak with staff, and questionnaires sent home at the end of each academic year to provide parents with an opportunity to express their views and raise any concerns.

Parent networks

Providing opportunities for parents to meet up with each other was another aspect raised regarding collaborating with parents. Parents of 4 children (25%) stressed that there is a lack of 'parent network' once children move to secondary school, which can make it difficult for parents of children with SEN to find other parents in a similar position in order to share their experiences and seek support. Parents and teachers of 4 children (25%) discussed the use of coffee mornings within school for parents to network, meet other parents and share experiences. One parent also mentioned the school organising parent events, including inviting speakers such as young adults with ASD.

4.2.4.3 Supporting Transition

Within the theme of supporting transition, 3 subthemes arose: i) communication between primary and secondary; ii) liaising with families; iii) getting to know the child (see Figure 24).

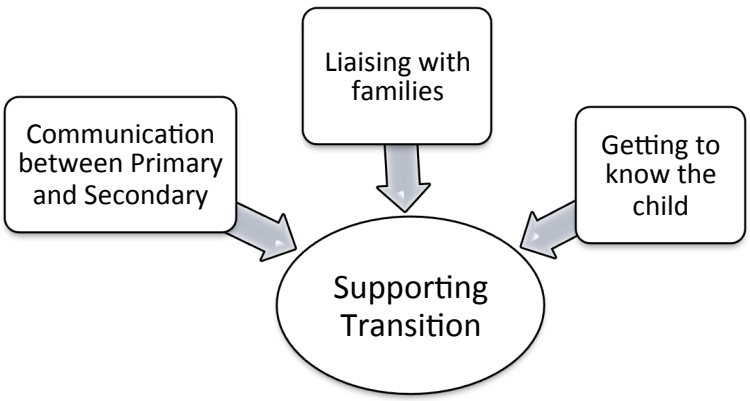

Figure 24. *Theme 4.3 Supporting Transition*

Parents of 12 children (75%) felt that where placement decisions were made in sufficient time to enable schools to provide transition preparation, the

collaborative support offered by schools and professionals was sufficient. A number of strategies were highlighted which schools used to facilitate a smooth transition to secondary school for children with ASD, involving collaborative working between primary, secondary, professionals and parents (see Table 16).

Table 16. *Whole-school approaches* to *supporting transition*

Strategy	Purpose
Communication between primary & secondary:	
Review statement / paperwork from primary	Ensure staff are well informed about child's strengths and needs
Liaise with staff from primary school	Gather further information about child's strengths needs
Visit primary school during Year 6	Speak with staff to gather further information about child's strengths and needs
Attend Year 6 annual review	Facilitate a smooth transition
Observe child in primary school	Observe child in school to gather further information about strengths and needs
Transfer of strategies from primary to secondary	Ensure familiar and effective strategies are put in place to ease transition
Liaising with families:	
Pre-transition information evening	Provide information to families about the secondary school
Liaise with parents	Gather further information about child's strengths and needs
Getting to know the child:	
Observe child during transition group	Gather further information about child's strengths and needs
Talk with child during transition group	Ascertain child's views regarding move to secondary school

4.2.5 Macrosystem: Considerations for Local Authority

This section shall present those factors at the 'Local Authority level' that were found to influence the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

A final overarching theme arising from child, parent and teacher interviews concerned wider issues impacting on children's secondary school experiences of consideration for the LA. An overall thematic map for the considerations for Local Authority can be seen in Figure 25. Three themes were identified within, consisting of i) transition process, ii) suitability and availability of provision, iii) reasons for parents' placement choices (see Figure 26).

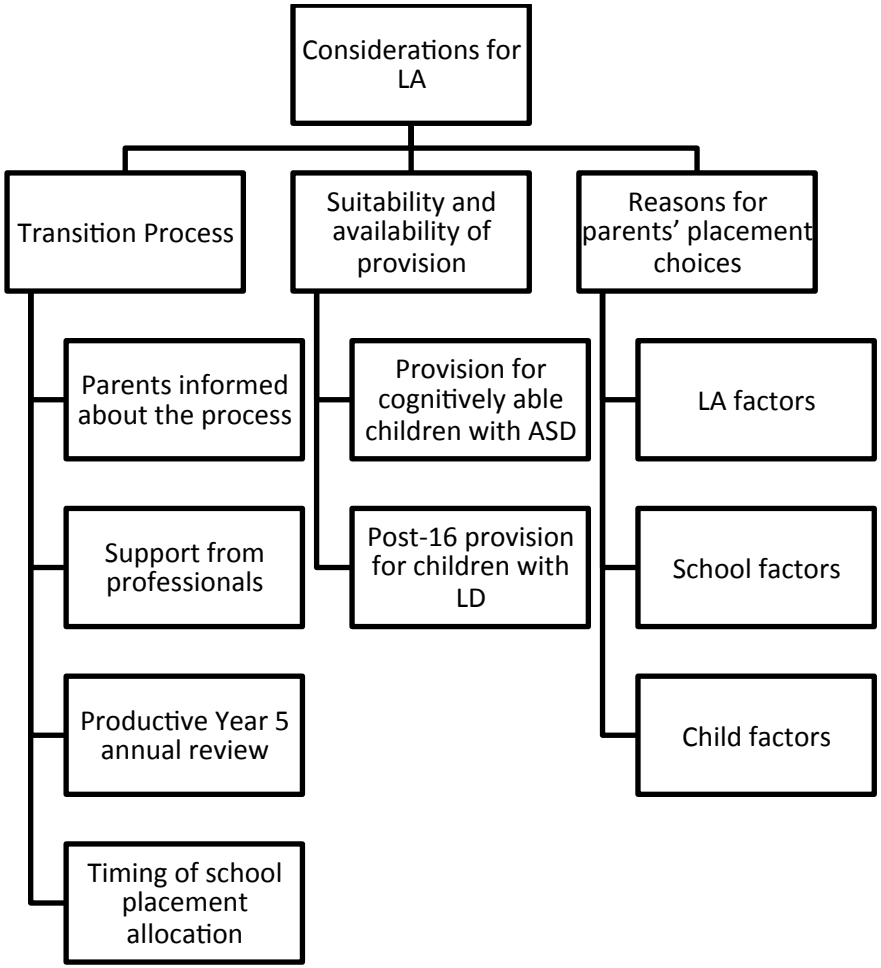

Figure 25. *Thematic map for considerations for Local Authority*

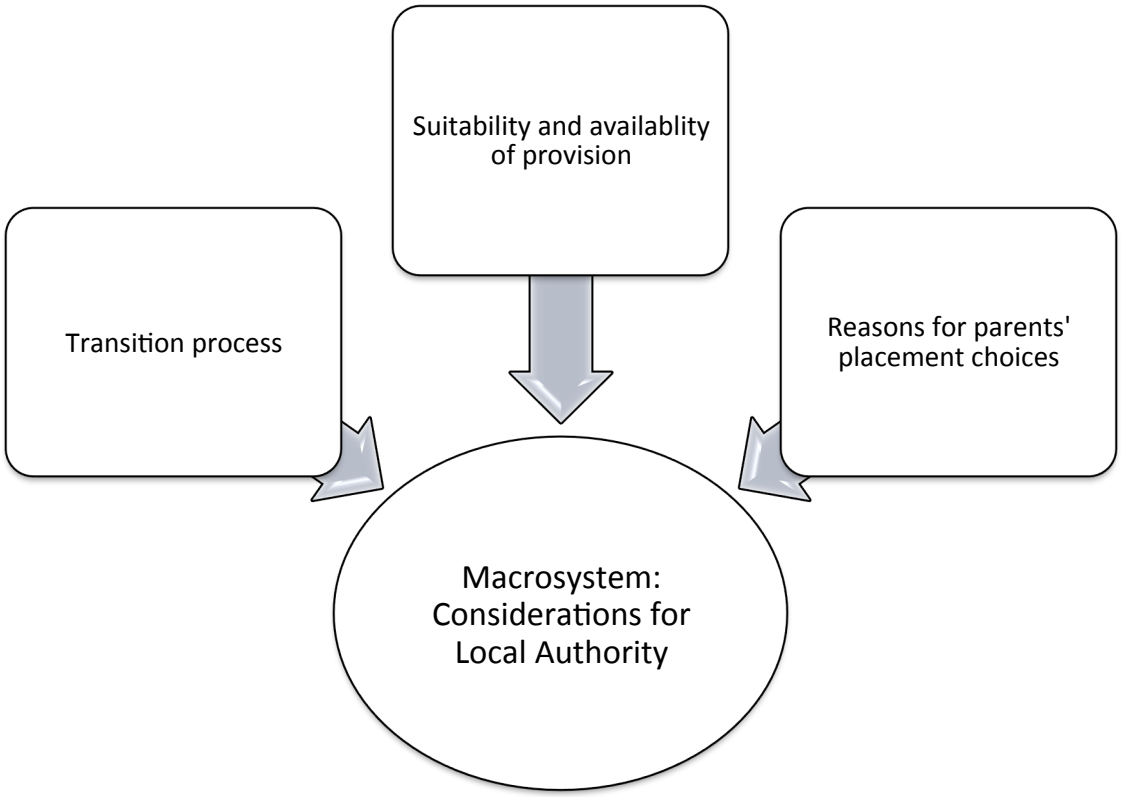

Figure 26. *Overarching Theme 5 – Macrosystem: Considerations for Local Authority*

4.2.5.1 Transition process

Within the theme of the transition process, 4 subthemes arose: i) parents being informed about the process; ii) support from professionals; iii) productive Year 5 annual review; iv) timing of school placement allocation (see Figure 27).

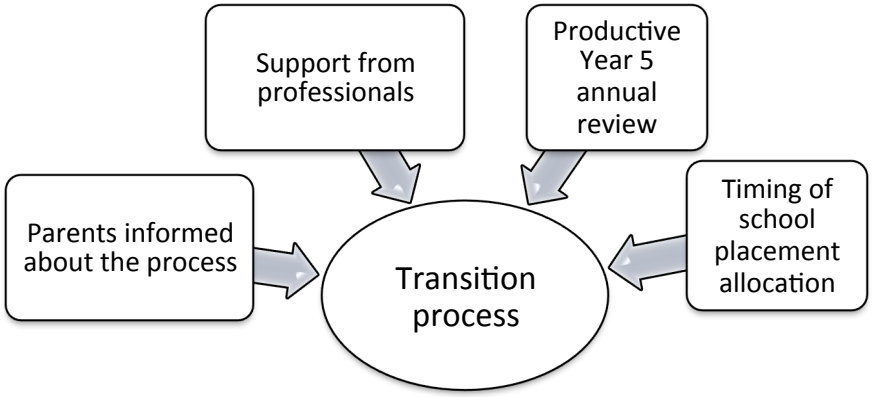

Figure 27. *Theme 5.1 Transition Process*

Ten children (63%) had experienced a smooth and effective transition process. This included parents feeling informed and knowledgeable about the process, effective and efficient support from professionals, parents aware of the opportunity to visit secondary schools during Year 5 in order to inform their decision-making, a productive Year 5 annual review in which a school was requested, and the child subsequently being allocated the school of their and/or their parents' choice in sufficient time for transition preparation to be put in place for the child.

Four children (25%) did not experience a smooth transition process, all of whom were transferring to specialist and/or out of county placements, highlighting the potential challenges encountered at the time of transition by this group of children and families. For 3 of these children the special school place was not confirmed until either very late in the summer term, or the beginning of the autumn term, with the result children did not benefit from any transition preparation, and schools had little or no information about children prior to their first day.

4.2.5.2 Suitability and availability of provision

Within the theme of suitability and availability of provision, 2 subthemes arose: i) provision for cognitively able children with ASD; ii) post-16 provision for children with learning difficulties (see Figure 28).

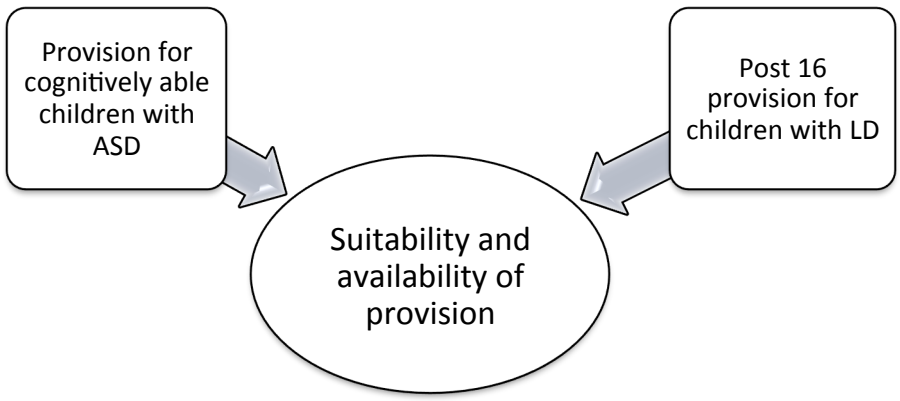

Figure 28. *Theme 5.2 Suitability and availability of provision*

Provision for cognitively able children with ASD

"it broke my heart the other day, my son, my secondary school boy wrote a report…he's written to the government the MP to say he wishes the Local Authority would be more inclusive and have a disabled school because he's so sad his brother has to travel an hour and a half every day to a school in London. So it's a big impact, not just on Child X, obviously it's affecting his brother" (Parent 8).

Ten children (63%) were felt to be in the right provision most suitable to meet their needs. This parent voiced, *"I think we made the right decision because he has done really well. I think we definitely made the right choice" (Parent 13).* In contrast, 6 children (38%) were felt to be in the wrong provision, and for the majority, parents were either considering, or already had withdrawn their child and sought alternative provision. This comprised 2 children attending independent specialist provision (100%), 2 children attending a base (100%), 1 child in maintained special provision (17%), and 1 child in local mainstream provision (17%). For all but one of these children (31%), the dilemma parents experienced centred around identifying suitable provision for a child who was academically too able to fit within an MLD school, and yet whose ASD significantly impacted on their ability to cope and function within a mainstream school. The paucity of suitable provision for cognitively able children with ASD was an issue raised not only in relation to these 5 children, but also by other parents and staff discussing the needs of children with ASD more generally. These parents explained,

"I think there needs to be more choice…quite a lot of autistic children…end up in mainstream and…really struggle…and I just think that there should be an alternative…I think it's another category of school that is needed…a free school, for children with high functioning autism…because at the moment there isn't an alternative, you know the only options are mainstream or special school…it needs to be different sort of provision to support autistic children" (Parent 4), and

"there's no-one in society who will take him, because he's too difficult for mainstream to manage…and less and less high functioning children are able to get into his school…there's nowhere in the Local Authority that will take him…I would just love it if there was a free school for children with high functioning autism, and I would fully support it, and if I could get my son in I would just jump through hoops" (Parent 8).

Post-16 provision for children with LD

The message articulated by parents and teachers alike was that the most suitable post-16 option for children with ASD was to remain in the school environment for further education. Parents of children in mainstream settings were not concerned, since this was an option available to their child. In contrast, parents of children in maintained special schools were seriously concerned, since at present in the commissioning LA, specialist provision for children with MLD is only available until 16. At this point children are expected to transition to further education colleges. Parents and teachers alike emphasised that these children are not ready for college placements, and would benefit considerably from in-school provision. These parents explained:

"we're hoping I think that by the time he gets there that there'll be the schooling up until 18, because I can't see that at 16 he's going to be ready to get a job or go to college, so that's what we'd like, we'd like him to be able to continue in school education until 18… I don't think he would be [ready] at 16. I think it's too young for someone that's got lots of additional needs" (Parent 4)

"Apparently the Local Authority have said they will not put a 6th form in an MLD school and I think that's really wrong…if there were any group of children who would benefit it's this group of children who are if you like moderately affected because these ones and particularly the ones who are on the spectrum have difficulty coping with change and they may also have additional delays and things like that, so to try and expect these children to make the same leap to college as mainstream children is ridiculous and often I think they're just not ready… I can only see benefits of having a 6th form" (Parent 5).

4.2.5.3 Reasons for parents' placement choices

Within the theme of reasons for parents' placement choices, 3 subthemes arose: i) LA factors; ii) school factors; iii) child factors (see Figure 29).

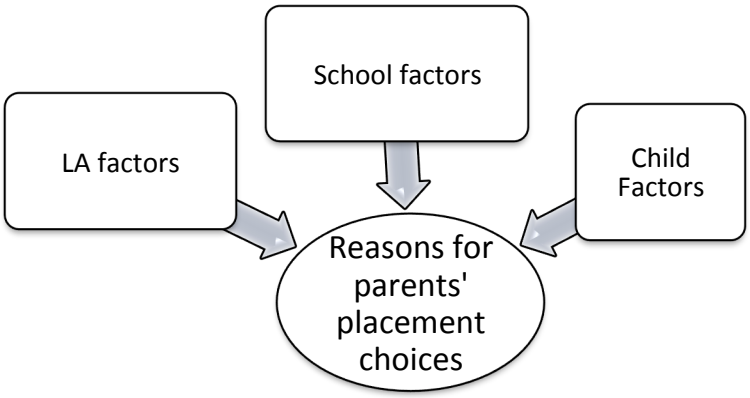

Figure 29. *Theme 5.3 Reasons for parents' placement choices*

Parents of 7 children (44%) had been clear from the outset what type of provision would best meet their child's needs, and only explored this option, whilst 7 (44%) visited a range of different types of provision before identifying what they perceived to be the most suitable provision for their child.

Local Authority factors

A prominent view expressed by all parents of children in maintained special provision was the limited choice available within this, and a feeling that in fact there had not been enough options available to make a choice. Furthermore, parents of children in independent special and base provisions stressed that there was no suitable provision for their child in LA.

School factors

Regarding size of school, parents of children in mainstream voiced differing views. Most parents voiced concerns about the large size of secondary schools, and how their child coped socially within this. One parent voiced a different view, describing that she had wanted a large school for her son, since she felt this presented more opportunities for him to find like-minded peers with similar interests to befriend.

Child factors

When discussing the importance of listening to children's views on secondary provision, many parents articulated that they were surprised how much of a view their child had about choice of secondary school, and consequently they had included their child in the decision-making process far more than they had originally anticipated. This parent explained *"we actually gave Child X a lot more*

choice than we thought we would, and he said he preferred to go to a school where there were others like him. So that's why we decided that that wasn't the place for him" (Parent 13).

Cumulatively, parents identified a number of factors they considered important when choosing secondary provision (see Table 17).

Table 17. *Parents' reasons for choosing different types of provision*

All types of provision
School factors:
Reputation: Ofsted reports, feedback from other parents of children at the school, feedback specifically from parents of children with SEN / similar SEN at the school
Experience meeting the needs of children with SEN and ASD
Other children at the school with SEN / their child's type of need.
Child factors:
The 'best fit' for the child
Taking children to view prospective schools and listening to their opinions and choices
Local Mainstream
School factors:
Strict behaviour code
Prompt and efficient response to bullying
School size
Maintained/Independent Special
LA factors:
Limited choice of schools
No suitable provision in LA
School factors:
Small school
Small class sizes
Concerns about mainstream: large size/classes, bullying, being in bottom set, staff lack of expertise/training in ASD, inflexible / unaccommodating, lack of understanding of ASD
Specialist environment with staff skilled in ASD
Broad curriculum including life skills / independence skills / social skills / outdoor learning
More nurturing environment
Child factors:
Child had a negative experience in mainstream primary
Base attached to Mainstream
LA factors:
No suitable provision in LA
School factors:
Social experiences and opportunities provided by mainstream, alongside the educational support provided by the specialist provision of the base
Lack of opportunities for integration with local mainstream schools in maintained special schools

Discussion

5.0 Overview

This study aimed to investigate the secondary school experiences of children with ASD by examining the influence of both intrinsic characteristics and broader systemic factors. This chapter presents a discussion of the main findings of this study. It begins by summarising the research aims and discussing how the study addressed these aims, as well as limitations that may have affected the findings, and recommendations for future research. It then proceeds to discuss the implications for professionals working with children with ASD, their parents and schools before concluding with recommendations for professional practice.

5.1 Addressing the research aims: Main findings

5.1.1 Research Question 1: Do secondary school placements for students with ASD vary according to intrinsic child characteristics?

Unlike the majority of previous research in this area, this study gathered data to profile the intrinsic characteristics of child participants. The broader ASD profile was examined, including cognitive ability, autistic behaviours, sensory preferences and anxiety. Existing literature, including studies reporting the views of children with ASD, their parents and teachers has implicated these characteristics as affecting children's experiences of secondary school (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Connor, 2000; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a, Gumaste, 2011). Yet, the relationship between these characteristics and school placement decisions has rarely been directly examined. On the basis of the literature available, it was anticipated children with higher cognitive abilities, fewer social difficulties, fewer sensory needs and lower anxiety were more likely to attend mainstream settings.

Examination of group differences in individual characteristics between children attending special (both maintained and independent) and mainstream (including bases attached to mainstream) secondary schools revealed no significant differences in cognitive abilities, anxiety or sensory preferences. This absence of group differences may have a number of possible explanations. First, although the number of child participants in this study exceeded that of many other studies (e.g. Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003), the final sample nevertheless included 12 children who completed cognitive assessment, and 14

for whom questionnaire data were gathered. The absence of group differences may have been a consequence of this relatively small sample size, and it is likely that a larger sample size with more participants in each group would be necessary to reveal a group difference. The small number of child participants attending base and independent special provision (n=4) may also have affected the findings, since it was necessary to group these participants with others. Future research with a larger sample size, examining group differences between each type of provision separately may reveal different findings.

Second, it may be that the measures utilised did not adequately capture subtle differences in the profile of children's needs. However, as documented in Chapter 3, all the measures employed in this study (WASI-II, SRS, SCAS-P and AASP) are standardised measures which have previously been used in research with children with ASD, and have been shown to have strong validity and reliability for this population (McCrimmon & Smith, 2013; Constantino & Todd, 2003; Nauta et al. 2004; Crane et al. 2009). Nevertheless, since the SRS and AASP are parent-report measures, it is possible that measures that directly assess these characteristics in children may have revealed different findings.

Third, it is possible that measurement of other characteristics of children with ASD may have revealed group differences between children in special and mainstream placements. Anxiety disorder was assessed in the present study since it was the most common co-occurring condition found by Simonoff et al. (2008), and has been implicated in much research as influencing the secondary school experiences of children with ASD (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Carrington & Graham, 2001). Nevertheless, ADHD was the second most common co-occurring condition identified by Simonoff et al. (2008). Assessing children for difficulties related to attention and hyperactivity may have revealed a group difference between those in special and mainstream settings.

The groups did differ, however, on autistic behaviours, suggesting children attending mainstream demonstrated fewer autistic behaviours than children attending special schools as assessed through the parent-report SRS. Cumulatively, this replicates the findings of Gumaste (2011), who conducted a similar analysis of group differences on measures of cognitive ability, autistic behaviours, anxiety and sensory preferences for children with ASD who transitioned to either mainstream or special secondary schools, and revealed the

same results – a difference in autistic behaviours alongside no difference for other measures. The lack of appropriate in county provision for cognitively able children with ASD highlighted through this research, together with the atypical anxiety levels and sensory preferences found for all children in this study irrespective of type of provision would seem to have great implications for schools in effectively meeting the needs of children with ASD in the secondary phase.

5.1.2 Research Question 2: What are the experiences of students with ASD in a range of secondary provision and the broad range of systemic factors which can either support or hinder children with ASD's experiences in secondary school?

This study directly sought the views of children with ASD, their parents and teachers to examine the broader systemic factors that might influence children's secondary school experiences. Whilst this holistic approach to data collection has rarely been undertaken, previous research has nevertheless suggested that secondary school can be a challenging time for many children with ASD, and influenced by a range of systemic factors including relationships with peers, the sensory environment of the school and support processes at transition (Gumaste, 2011; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Connor, 2000). Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic model, this study identified a range of factors at the individual child, teacher, whole school, family, external professional, and LA levels, all of which influenced the secondary school experiences of children with ASD in this study (see Figure 1). This discussion shall centre around some of the key findings arising.

5.1.2.1 Satisfaction and happiness at school

Whilst many children and parents recalled anxieties about the move to secondary school, almost two thirds of children reported being happy at secondary school, despite the range of difficulties they stated encountering. Wainscot et al. (2008) interviewed 30 children with ASD in mainstream secondary school and similarly found that 80% reported having had a good day at school, and 60% said they looked forward to coming to school, despite the variety of difficulties they reported experiencing in school. Furthermore, Stewart (2012), following an NAS survey of 151 parents of children with ASD, and 66 young people with ASD in Northern Ireland, found 73% of children with ASD reported feeling happy at

school, despite many simultaneously reporting not feeling safe, experiencing bullying and feeling misunderstood by staff.

There are many possible reasons for this interesting finding. It may be that children with ASD report being happy at school because they perceive this to be the desired response. Alternatively, the criteria which children with ASD use to make a judgment about their happiness and enjoyment in school may be different to that expected. Another possible explanation relates to the documented difficulties individuals with ASD experience in emotional awareness and introspection (Silani et al., 2008; Ben Shalom et al., 2006) since this may make it more difficult for them to reflect on their feelings and emotions towards school.

The present study found parents were overall less satisfied with children's secondary school experiences than children themselves. Just under half of parents described being unhappy about their child's secondary school experiences. Whitaker (2007) similarly found that 40% of parents of children with ASD reported being dissatisfied with their child's educational experiences, a finding comparable to Barnard et al. (2000). Stewart (2012), also reported that 52% of parents were dissatisfied with their child's school experiences, and found a similar discrepancy to the present study between children's and parents' satisfaction, since 73% of children with ASD reporting feeling happy at school.

Through the views of child and parent dyads, the present study allowed further exploration of this discrepancy between child and parent satisfaction levels. Of the 12 dyads interviewed, half expressed conflicting views regarding overall satisfaction with school, and interestingly, their reasons were qualitatively different. Whilst children's views centered around social experiences and friendships, parents' views focused on academic issues, including support for learning and academic progress. Whitaker (2007) revealed that dissatisfied parents were more likely to agree that their child was happy and had friends at school than that they were making satisfactory academic progress, suggesting some support for the findings of this study. Additionally, Barnard et al. (2000) found that whilst 40% of parents were dissatisfied due to resourcing, staffing and inadequate progress, 76% nevertheless reported their child was happy at school. These conflicting views suggest that what children with ASD and their parents consider a priority for creating a successful secondary school experience for children with ASD may differ between children and parents. To date,

disappointingly little research has acquired the multiple perspectives of children and parents regarding the secondary school experiences of children with ASD (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Connor, 2000), highlighting the need for further research using a multi-informant approach.

The differing priorities articulated by children and their parents in the present study with regard to secondary school experiences raises an important issue. Cushman & Rogers (2008, p. 191) highlight that "the social world of young adolescents comes into the classroom with them." They stress that children's ability to engage with learning and be active participants in the classroom is reliant upon their social and emotional well-being, and a desire for social acceptance can easily outweigh a desire for academic success. This would seem to reiterate the views of children with ASD, that happiness at school is in many ways inextricably interlinked with social factors. As such, it would seem essential for all those involved in supporting the secondary school education of children with ASD to prioritise strategies and support to develop friendship building and support children to feel socially accepted within school such that they are able to be happy in school and make academic progress.

5.1.2.2 Listening to children's views

It was notable in the present study that some parents highlighted their surprise at the extent of their child's views on choice of secondary school, as well as the benefits of listening to and including children in decision-making. This provides significant evidence to highlight the importance of accessing the views of children with ASD regarding secondary school placements. Two decades ago the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994) emphasised children's right to have their opinions heard regarding decisions that affect them. The importance of listening to children's views has also been emphasised in much UK legislation and guidance (Children Act, 2004; DfES, 2001). The SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) emphasises the importance of a 'listening culture' in schools, and states that children with SEN "have a unique knowledge of their own needs and circumstances and their own views about what sort of help they would like to help them make the most of their education" (DfES, 2001, p. 27). This research provides support for the Government's continuing emphasis on accessing the views of children and parents through the Children and Families Act (2014) and the new SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014).

5.1.2.3 Primary school experiences

An unexpected and significant finding of the present study was that over half of children had had negative experiences in primary school, including bullying, exclusions, school refusal, withdrawal from school, reduced timetables, physical isolation, social isolation, and numerous school placements. This finding was particularly surprising, since the literature suggests that children with ASD generally have more positive experiences in primary education, and parents are consequently more satisfied (Barnard et al., 2000; Starr & Foy, 2012). A study by Gutman and Feinstein (2008) exploring the well-being of primary school children identified that whilst the majority of children of primary age experience positive well-being, a significant minority, 1 in 5, experience declining trajectories of well-being, for which there is a high level of continuity and inter-relatedness. Worryingly, if children experience negative well-being at age 8, this is likely to continue at age 10 and in to secondary school. This highlights an important and urgent need for more research in this area to better understand the primary school experiences of children with ASD such that children's positive well-being can be promoted at this young age, to provide the best possible chance of positive well-being in adolescence and throughout secondary education.

5.1.2.4 Social difficulties

Similar to the findings of Humphrey and Lewis (2008a), there was wide variation in the extent to which children with ASD in this study managed the complex context of secondary school, demonstrating the considerable heterogeneity in individual presentation and need characteristic of ASD. Nevertheless, reports of social difficulties affecting the secondary school experiences of children with ASD were particularly prominent in respondents' accounts, a finding consistent with much previous research in this area (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Connor, 2000; Gumaste, 2011). The social interaction difficulties experienced by children with ASD were described to negatively impact on children's ability to interact with peers, build friendships, manage social banter, and cope during free time and group learning activities. This is all the more concerning if we consider that children's perceptions of happiness at school were often directly linked to their social experiences and friendships.

Nevertheless, interestingly, despite these difficulties, almost two thirds of children in this study voiced having friends and being happy with their friendships. It was also recognised by respondents that often children were happy with their smaller

social groups and preferred to be alone during break times to relax and have 'down time.' Wainscot et al. (2008) similarly found children with ASD reported enjoying school, despite having fewer friends than peers, spending less time with friends, and preferring to spend break times in quieter areas of the school with adult supervision to avoid bullying. Calder et al. (2012) also found children with ASD reported being satisfied with their friendships, despite providing poorer ratings of friendship quality than typically developing peers.

Interestingly, the high level of satisfaction with friendships articulated by children was not always a view reiterated by adults. In some cases, whilst children described having good friendships, their parents and teachers felt they had very few reciprocal friendships, were on the periphery of their social group, and would benefit from more friends. Calder et al. (2012) similarly noted that whilst some children with ASD reported being happy with their small friendship groups and wanted to spend time alone, parents and teachers voiced feeling compelled to encourage children to be more sociable. These conflicting views of children with ASD and their parents and teachers regarding friendships may have arisen in the present study for a number of possible reasons.

First, it is possible that children with ASD articulated more positive experiences about friendship than were in fact the reality, either because they were providing what they deemed to be the socially desirable response, or due to the sensitive nature of the topic. One child asked for the interview to move on from this topic, highlighting his reticence to talk about friendships. Second, children with ASD and their parents may have differing perceptions regarding what constitutes a good friendship. What children with ASD seek and desire in terms of social interaction and friendship may be qualitatively different from the expectations of parents. Calder et al. (2012) suggests that this raises important issues regarding interventions to support friendship building for children with ASD. Certainly, these conflicting views highlight the importance of accessing children's views to ensure interventions are not instigated based on the views and preconceptions of familiar adults.

Particularly noticeable within this research was that children with ASD struggled to be tolerant of their peers. They were easily vexed by the behaviour of others, when peers did not follow school rules, or when social interactions were not on their terms. This intolerance impacted on focus and concentration during lessons,

as well as limiting their willingness and ability to build friendships. Gumaste (2011) similarly found that children with ASD who transitioned from mainstream primary to special secondary struggled to be tolerant of the idiosyncratic behaviours of their new 'special' peer group. Locke, Ishijima, Kasari & London (2010) investigated the social experiences of adolescents with ASD in mainstream schools and found that many reported disliking their 'intolerance' of others, and sought the opposite quality in a friend. Konza (2005) recommended 'co-operative learning groups' to support children with ASD to develop skills for tolerating and co-operating with peers. Paal & Berczkei (2007) identified that mindreading ability is closely correlated with the ability to co-operate with and be tolerant of others, and suggested that the difficulties individuals with ASD experience being tolerant of others may be related to deficits in theory of mind, the ability to attribute mental states in others. This suggests that interventions targeting theory of mind may be beneficial to support children with ASD to develop skills to co-operate with and be tolerant of their peers.

The concept of children with ASD 'standing out from the crowd' at school and being seen as different by their peers, was another dominant theme recounted, and was felt to increase the social vulnerability of children with ASD. This provides further support for previous research which also found children with ASD were perceived as 'odd' by peers, leading to alienation and social isolation (Wainscot et al., 2008; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al. 2003). It was also notable that children with ASD, including those in mainstream schools, bases and independent special schools, were acutely aware of feeling different to their peers, and tried hard to 'fit in' through for example refusing support in lessons and masking their difficulties. This extends the findings of previous studies that have found that children with ASD in mainstream schools feel different from, strive to 'fit in' and mask their difficulties in school (Gumaste, 2011; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003).

Perhaps as a result of their tendency to 'stand out from the crowd,' bullying was a worryingly common theme arising in this research, with over half of children having experienced bullying in secondary school, and one fifth having experienced bullying in primary school. This reiterates the accounts of bullying found in previous studies (Gumaste, 2011; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Carrington & Graham, 2001; Wainscot et al., 2008) and highlights the need for effective strategies to manage incidents of bullying in secondary school.

Taken together, these findings emphasise the social difficulties experienced by children with ASD, and their social vulnerability within the secondary school context. Gutman and Vorhaus (2012) highlight the importance of children's social and emotional well-being for school engagement and achievement, and note that as children progress through the school system, well-being becomes an increasingly important influence on school engagement. Furthermore, the consequences of social isolation and bullying for children with ASD are serious, since feelings of social inadequacy and loneliness are linked to development of depression in individuals with ASD (Williamson, Craig & Slinger, 2008).

As such, the extent of these feelings of 'difference,' desire to 'fit in' and accounts of bullying revealed for children with ASD in secondary education, highlight the crucial need for appropriate policy, practice and interventions to address these needs of children with ASD in secondary education. There is clearly a crucial need for psychosocial interventions that focus not only on developing appropriate peer interaction skills, but also on developing children's positive self-perceptions and emotional resilience to cope with feelings of difference and bullying. Wittemeyer et al. (2011) advocate the employment of adults with ASD to act as mentors and role models for children with ASD. Addressing the perceived 'oddness' of children with ASD by their peers through autism awareness programs which provide peers with knowledge and understanding of ASD would also seem important.

5.1.2.5 Emotional and sensory needs

Emotional and sensory needs, including anxiety, low self-esteem, low self-confidence and sensory sensitivities were also frequently reported to impact on children's experiences of secondary school. The prevalence of these reported emotional and sensory difficulties in the present study provides further evidence of the co-occurrence of emotional difficulties and sensory needs in children with ASD reported in previous research (Leyfer et al., 2006; Simonoff et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2008; Pellicano, 2013). This finding was further supported by the data gathered to measure anxiety and sensory needs as part of this research, which showed that this group of children with ASD frequently experienced atypical anxiety levels and sensory preferences. The prevalence of these emotional and sensory needs of children with ASD are concerning since research has highlighted the correlation between sensory and anxiety difficulties and

academic underachievement at school (Ashburner, Ziviani & Rodger, 2008; Gamble, 2009). Sensory and anxiety difficulties influence attention, concentration, memory, engagement in learning, social interactions and ultimately long-term health: anxiety disorders in childhood predict anxiety disorders in adulthood. This clearly highlights the importance of addressing these potential issues when attempting to meet the needs of children with ASD in secondary education.

5.1.2.6 Academic factors

Finally the academic side to school was also raised as important. For almost two-thirds of children in the study, it was felt that they were making good academic progress in secondary school. Participants across all types of provision highlighted the benefits of a flexible curriculum to meet children's individual needs, a finding which supports the conclusions of the AET reports 'educational provision and outcomes for people on the autism spectrum' and 'good practice in autism education' (Wittemeyer et al., 2011; Charman et al., 2011). In the present study, children in mainstream schools were benefiting from schools' willingness to dis-apply them from certain subjects and introduce alternative curriculum options such as ASDAN, and children in special provision were benefiting from a broader curriculum including a focus on independence skills and social skills.

Nevertheless, a common challenge children encountered was inadequate differentiation, an issue interestingly raised for over half of children. Other issues raised included the pace of lessons being too fast, too much language, and insufficient visual supports to meet the needs of a group of children who are predominantly visual learners. All of these have been highlighted by previous research examining the educational experiences of children with ASD (Wittemeyer et al., 2011; Charman et al., 2011). As some staff participating in the present study highlighted, time pressures can make it difficult for teaching staff to address the learning styles and needs of children with ASD. Nevertheless, the findings of this research suggest that improvements are needed in practice with regards to how teachers present lessons and differentiate learning tasks to meet both children's ability level and learning style.

5.1.2.7 Involving families and professionals

The importance of multi-professional working and collaboration with parents to support the education of children with SEN has been central to government

policy and legislation for many years (SEN Code of Practice, DfES, 2001; Children Act, 2004) and highlighted by a range of research (Charman et al., 2011; Parsons et al., 2009a). The present study reconfirms the importance of this emphasis, since parents and teachers alike highlighted the importance and value of professional involvement and collaboration with parents to support the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. This provides a sound evidence base for the Government's continuing move towards prioritising joint working between schools, families and professionals through the Children and Families Act (2014) and new SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014).

Unfortunately, the experiences of children with ASD and their parents in the present study revealed that despite the clear recognition by parents and teachers that multi-professional working is important and valuable, a number of families nevertheless encountered difficulties accessing professional involvement and advice. Almost a third of parents described having a 'battle' to access professional involvement, with one fifth resorting to paying for advice privately. Furthermore for a quarter of children it was highlighted that parents were not aware of children's targets, did not know when involvement took place, had not received reports from professionals or that schools were not implementing advice received. The importance of professionals 'working together' effectively with schools and families to promote positive outcomes for children has long been a focus of government guidance and legislation (Children Act, 2004, DfE, 2013). The findings of this study provide support for this continued legislative focus of the new SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014), yet suggest that improvements are needed in practice with regards to how professionals work with schools and families to support the education of children with ASD in secondary schools.

The involvement of EPs in supporting the secondary school experiences of children with ASD was of particular interest for this research. Under half the children involved in this study had received EP involvement since moving to secondary school. The majority of these were parent-led referrals arising from concerns regarding the suitability of their child's secondary school placement. Despite half the children in the study being of school age Year 9 or above, only one child had received EP involvement to inform transition review. To understand this finding, the context of the commissioning LA is important. This research took place within a large LA in which mainstream secondary schools are allocated on average 10 EP visits per academic year. Furthermore, the LA has an autism

advisory team that provides specialist support and input to schools catering for children with ASD. Given this context, it is possible that schools are retaining limited EP allocation for children for whom alternative specialist services are not available. However, only a quarter of children involved in this study had received an individual referral for involvement from the autism advisory service. Multiple considerations including finite budgets are likely influencing this finding. Nevertheless, this research suggests the provision of EP services within this LA requires greater examination to ensure children, schools and parents are able to benefit from necessary professional support and advice.

Parents also reported difficulties in engaging with schools to support their child's education. Just under half of parents articulated feeling 'out of the loop' regarding their child's education since the move to secondary due to poor communication from school. A particular grievance was schools either not writing in home-school communication books at all, or providing insufficient detail about children's days. Parents also reported frequent experiences of emails and messages being ignored. Where more positive experiences were related, this appeared to be attributable to a key link adult designated for home-school communication. School improvement and effectiveness research consistently identifies that parental engagement has significant positive impact on children's education (Goodall et al., 2010; Harris & Goodall, 2008; 2009). Since 2009, Ofsted has taken into consideration how schools engage with parents. Goodall et al. (2010), following an extensive review of relevant literature concluded that it is essential for parents to receive "clear, specific and targeted information from schools" (p. 5). Although it is important to acknowledge that, as for differentiation, time pressures undoubtedly impact of school staff's ability to communicate effectively with parents, these findings nevertheless suggest that to promote the best outcomes for children, improvements are needed in practice with regards to how schools communicate with and engage parents in the education of children with ASD in secondary school.

5.1.3 Research question 3: Do the experiences of students with ASD in secondary school vary according to the type of provision they attend?

The majority of topics elicited through the perspectives of children, parents and teachers and discussed previously were found to influence the secondary school experiences of children with ASD across types of provision. This discussion shall

focus on some key areas where a difference according to type of provision was either expected or found.

5.1.3.1 Satisfaction and happiness at school

Interestingly, this research found that for children in maintained mainstream and special settings, children's overall feelings towards school, the perceived success of transition, and parents' satisfaction regarding their child's secondary school placement did not vary by type of provision. This finding is pertinent since based on the available literature, it was anticipated that children attending specialist secondary schools would have more positive experiences of school than peers attending mainstream, and that parents of children in specialist provision would subsequently be more satisfied with their child's placement (Barnard et al., 2000).

A possible reason for this unexpected finding may be that those families who chose to participate in this research were experiencing positive experiences of secondary education which are uncharacteristic for this population of children. When recruiting participants, some parents were keen to take part to share their child's positive experiences. By contrast, other parents who were unhappy with their child's placement declined to take part due to their anger and frustration at the LA. Although a large number of difficulties encountered by children with ASD in secondary education were nevertheless elicited through this research, a further study undertaken by an impartial researcher unconnected to the LA may be of value to further examine the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

In contrast to the relatively positive experiences of children in maintained provision, it was notable that all parents and children attending out of county provision, including independent special schools and bases attached to mainstream schools were unhappy and dissatisfied with children's secondary school placement. This is all the more surprising since both settings were 'autism specific,' and previous research has suggested parents of children attending these settings are the most satisfied (Barnard et al., 2000). Due to the small number of child participants attending these provisions (n=4), it is important to be cautious in drawing any far-reaching conclusions regarding these negative experiences, yet these findings nevertheless merit consideration.

In 2007, 27% of out of county placements in England were allocated to children with ASD, at an average cost of £57,150 per child (Audit Commission, 2007).

Furthermore, the majority of transfers to out of county provision occur when children reach secondary age (Audit Commission, 2007). Given the increased cost of educating children out of county, the fact that the present research found these children and their parents remain unhappy and dissatisfied with school experiences highlights an important area for further examination if the LA is to make best use of limited available funds. Furthermore, parents of these children consistently voiced their frustration at the lack of suitable provision for their child within the LA, highlighting the need for the commissioning LA to explore developing suitable local provision to allow children attending out of county provision to be educated closer to home. To date, disappointingly little research has directly examined the experiences of children with ASD in out of county placements, highlighting an important area for future research.

5.1.3.2 Staff knowledge & understanding of ASD

Another surprising finding of this research was that there was no difference according to type of provision for parental satisfaction towards staff knowledge and understanding of ASD or staff training in ASD. This is interesting since the literature suggested that one of parents' main reasons for choosing specialist provision is the increased expertise and skill of staff (Barnard et al., 2000; Kasari et al., 1999; Whitaker, 2007). As such, it was expected that parents of children attending specialist provision would be more satisfied with staff knowledge, understanding and training in ASD. One possible explanation for this may be that, as revealed through teacher interviews, all staff across all types of provision had received training in ASD. However, this is an unlikely explanation since the majority of parents voiced being unhappy with the training of staff in ASD.

A more likely explanation may be that the training received is considered insufficient. Parents highlighted the dangers of giving staff only a snapshot of training. There was also a strong call from staff from all types of provision for training in ASD to be provided via INSET, since this was felt to provide the most beneficial outcomes in terms of the number of staff who could access the training, cost, and implications for cover. Given that no schools had received training in ASD from EPs, this may be a key area in which EP practice could be developed to support schools in meeting the needs of children with ASD in secondary education, and enhance parental satisfaction. Furthermore, staff expressly advocated the potential benefits of having staff highly skilled in ASD as part of the permanent staff team. Wittemeyer et al. (2011) similarly recommended

that “local authorities should support the training of a member of staff to work as an ‘autism expert’ across a network of mainstream schools, with the longer-term objective of employing an autism expert in every mainstream school” (p. 11).

Another possible explanation for this unexpected finding may be the type of knowledge and understanding of ASD that parents desire. Interviews revealed that parents were frequently disappointed by school staff’s lack of in-depth knowledge and understanding about their specific child’s unique strengths and needs. Jones et al., 2008 similarly highlighted that “specific knowledge of the individual child / young person is vital” (p. 7) to effectively meet the educational needs of children with ASD. This would suggest an important area of focus for all secondary schools is to develop information-sharing protocols to raise staff awareness of the specific needs of individual children.

5.1.3.3 The Curriculum

Another key issue raised in regards to children in special provision was that whilst they benefited from a flexible curriculum including social and life skills, limited academic curricular opportunities were preventing children from the academic achievements they were perceived capable of. Children were described as being ‘held back’ academically by schools refusing to offer more advanced curriculum options such as GCSE. Kasari et al. (1999) similarly found that parents did not advocate the curriculum as an advantage of children’s special school placements. Whilst previous research has highlighted the importance of a flexible curriculum including social and life skills to effectively meet the needs of children with ASD (Wittemeyer et al., 2011), the present research suggests that at present this is often at the expense of sufficient academic curriculum opportunities. Jones et al. (2008) similarly identified parents are often forced to sacrifice academic curriculum when choosing special provision for their children. In addition, parents in the present study also voiced their frustration that special schools frequently refused to offer children integration opportunities at local mainstream schools. Since the present study found that identifying the ‘best fit’ placement was central to parents’ decision-making around secondary provision, this would suggest that at present parents can be faced with the need to make difficult compromises and choices when choosing the ‘best fit’ placement for their child, and that the academic curriculum and integration opportunities in special schools require further consideration to effectively meet the needs of children with ASD.

5.1.3.4. The process of transition

For an important minority of over one quarter of children in this study, the process of transition from primary to secondary school was not smooth. Similar to the findings of Gumaste (2011) and Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr and Smith, (2006), late placement decisions were a common cause of negative transition experiences, with this being a factor for almost a fifth of children in this study, all of whom eventually transitioned to specialist and/or out of county placements. This highlights the need for greater consideration by the LA of the timing for secondary school placement decisions for children with ASD, since these studies demonstrate that late placement decisions prevent important transition preparation opportunities for children with ASD, cause anxiety for children and families, and can consequently have serious implications, in some cases ultimately resulting in placement breakdown.

5.2 Strengths and shortcomings of this research study

A number of steps were taken within the present study to overcome limitations in past research examining the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. First, the study examined the experiences of 16 children through a mixed method approach incorporating the perspectives of parents, teachers and children themselves. Whilst the sample size was relatively small, it was greater than that of some other studies (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Carrington et al., 2003), and comparable with others (Gumaste, 2011; Connor, 2000). Furthermore, child participants ranged in age from 11 – 15 years, which incorporated the views of both children who had recently transitioned and those with longer-term experiences of secondary education.

Second, through incorporating the views and perspectives of parents, teachers and children themselves, this study allowed for this rarely sought combination of perspectives to be triangulated to enhance the reliability and validity of the research findings, allowing a thorough investigation of the secondary school experiences of children with ASD through the perspectives of key stakeholders. Furthermore, this revealed that the views of children with ASD sometimes conflict with their parents and teachers, highlighting the importance of listening to children's voices.

Third, this study utilised a mixed methodology to examine the influence of both individual child characteristics associated with ASD and wider systemic factors

on the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. This integration of qualitative and quantitative methods is an approach that has not previously been undertaken specifically to examine the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. This multi-method multi-informant approach enhanced the quality and richness of the data, allowing a comprehensive understanding of children's secondary school experiences.

Fourth, this study sought to understand the profile of needs of children with ASD participating in this research through the use of valid and reliable quantitative measures of the broader ASD profile, including children's autistic behaviours, cognitive ability, sensory preferences and anxiety levels. To make research findings most meaningful, the importance of gathering data to understand the profile of needs of child participants with ASD has been highlighted (Howlin, 1998; 2006) yet has rarely been undertaken in research examining the secondary school experiences of children with ASD.

Fifth, this study purposively sought to include children attending four different types of provision, including local mainstream, maintained special, autism base attached to mainstream, and independent special. The views of children with ASD attending specialist provision regarding their secondary school experiences have rarely been directly elicited through interview. Furthermore, by seeking the experiences of children attending a range of provision, this study provided a valuable opportunity to directly compare the experiences of children with ASD across a range of provision, as well as to compare parental satisfaction levels. This provided unique insight into the secondary experiences of children with ASD, and notably revealed that within the present study, parents of children in special schools were not more satisfied with their children's placements, as expected from previous research.

One shortcoming of this study relates to the absence of a comparison group of either typically developing children or children with other SEN. A comparison group would undoubtedly have been beneficial to enhance the findings of this study through comparison of the secondary school experiences of children with ASD with those of peers. Nevertheless, through focusing in detail on children with ASD, this study provided an in-depth examination of the unique secondary school experiences of this complex population.

The limited numbers of children attending base and independent special provision (n=4) is another shortcoming of this study. There were no further children within the LA with a diagnosis of ASD in Years 7-10 of secondary school who attended an autism base, which prevented the inclusion of any further participants in this type of provision. Whilst other children attending independent special provision met the study inclusion criteria and were contacted, none agreed to participate. The experiences of these children would therefore benefit from further examination using a larger participant base. In addition, this study did not include any female participants. Given the reported male to female ratio of ASD in the general population of 4:1, and the reported 10:1 male to female ratio in research populations, this is not surprising (Attwood, 2007). Nevertheless, a study incorporating the experiences of female secondary school students with ASD would be valuable.

A further shortcoming of this study may lie in the dual and possibly conflicting roles of the researcher. Some families elected not to participate due to the connections of the researcher with the LA, and their grievances with the LA. Nevertheless, others were keen to participate in the knowledge that their experiences would be shared with LA and used to shape LA practice and policy. To gain further understanding of the secondary school experiences of children with ASD within this LA, it may be beneficial for a further study to be instigated undertaken by a neutral researcher.

The absence of a LA perspective is another key shortcoming of this study. Given the lack of EP involvement revealed through this research, incorporating the EP perspective would have been valuable to further explore this finding. Further, since parents and schools expressed clear dissatisfaction with the shortfall in specialist secondary provision for children with ASD, and the sometimes arduous process of attaining these placements, accessing the views of LA professionals to seek further insight into these issues would have been beneficial to triangulate this finding and elucidate the reasons behind this. The LA perspective has yet to be directly explored in the existing literature examining the secondary school experiences of children with ASD, highlighting the need for future research to take account of the views of LA professionals.

Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for Teachers

To accommodate the wide range of difficulties impacting on the secondary school experiences of children with ASD, a number of effective strategies were mentioned by respondents and collated within the 'teacher toolkit' in the previous chapter. The strategies cover many of the areas identified through the literature review to influence the secondary school experiences of children with ASD, including transition, homework, learning and behaviour, as well as social, emotional and sensory needs. This provides a useful and practical resource to support schools in meeting the needs of children with ASD in secondary education. It is widely acknowledged both in the existing literature, and through the accounts of respondents in this study, that the ASD population is diverse and heterogeneous, and that a 'one size fits all' approach is not appropriate (Pearce et al., 2010; Byrne, 2013). For this reason, a toolkit that collates recommended strategies and provides strategies for teachers to try out in their journey to support children with ASD in secondary education has the potential to provide a valuable resource.

Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that the strategies articulated by respondents in this study are not an exhaustive list. As such, this resource should be considered a starting point which teachers should continue to develop, building a resource created 'by schools for schools' to address the needs of the growing population of children with ASD in secondary education. According to Jordan (2008, p. 13) *"schools should really be centres of excellence... pioneering new ways of working with students with ASDs…They should be centres of research as well as teaching…and have a role in working…to bring about more effective inclusion."*

6.2 Recommendations for Schools

At the whole school level, 10 key factors were identified as crucial to supporting the secondary school experiences of children with ASD (see section 6.3). Many of these findings provide further support for previous research that has attempted to identify key elements of good practice for the education of children with ASD. Charman et al. (2011) highlighted flexibility, individualisation and high aspirations as key to supporting the education of children with ASD. Parsons et al. (2009a) emphasised the importance of staff knowledge and understanding of ASD, a

factor also identified by Jones et al. (2008). Morewood et al. (2011) also noted the importance of flexibility, as well as staff training and peer awareness of autism. In addition, Wittemeyer et al. (2011) highlighted many of the same key areas as the present study, including the need for flexible curriculum, peer awareness, staff training, information sharing and management of bullying. The present study provides a helpful addition to the existing literature base, since until now, these factors have not been highlighted through research specifically examining the secondary school experiences of children with ASD directly through the perspectives of children with ASD, their parents and teachers.

6.3 Summary of key recommendations for schools

1	Inclusive school ethos with high aspirations for all
2	Flexible approach to the curriculum
3	Individualising to resolve concerns
4	Staff knowledge and understanding of ASD and individual children's needs
5	Staff training
6	Peer autism awareness
7	Consistency of approach
8	Effective information sharing
9	Management of behaviour and bullying
10	Appropriate teaching and learning support

6.4 Recommendations for EP Professional Practice

This research highlights a clear ongoing role for EPs to work in collaboration with other professionals to support schools in implementing evidence-based interventions to support children with ASD to cope with secondary school life. This study revealed that many children with ASD experience an array of social, emotional and sensory difficulties that significantly impact on their secondary school experiences. Frequently these difficulties are exacerbated by the complex context of secondary school. The SEN Green Paper outlines that through working with schools EPs "can help to develop the skills of teachers and other professionals working with pupils with SEN" (DfE, 2011b, p.105). By working jointly with schools and other professionals, EPs can play an important role in consolidating the advice and support available to schools in order to enable them to meet the complex educational, social, emotional and sensory needs of children with ASD. Through the 'teacher toolkit' this research provides a helpful practical

resource to assist professionals and schools in meeting the wide-ranging needs of children with ASD in secondary education.

At an individual level, this research demonstrated that children with ASD are socially vulnerable within the secondary school context. They frequently struggle to develop meaningful and reciprocal friendships, stand out from their peers, have strong feelings of 'difference' and try hard to 'fit in'. Furthermore, reiterating the findings of previous research, this study revealed that children with ASD are particularly vulnerable to bullying. Schools and professionals must work together to implement evidence-based interventions to support friendship building and enhance the emotional resilience of children with ASD in order that they are better able to manage their feelings of difference and cope with bullying. EPs can support schools to ensure children's psychosocial needs are considered within provision mapping, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and in developing policy and practice to address behaviour and bullying within schools.

At a whole school level this research clearly highlights a range of key areas that require consideration by schools and professionals supporting children with ASD in secondary education. A clearly important role for EPs, which has yet to be fully realised in the commissioning LA, lies in the provision of INSET training to develop school staff skills, knowledge and understanding about ASD. Schools and parents alike highlighted the importance of training for all staff involved in the education of children with ASD. The new SEN Code of Practice (2014) highlights that "joint training and professional development for the various professionals dealing with children and young people with SEN should be encouraged" (p. 39). EPs, in collaboration with other professionals, must seek to fulfill this role and offer INSET training on ASD to all secondary schools.

This research reiterated the findings of previous research and government guidance regarding the importance of schools collaborating with parents and working jointly with other professionals (Lamb, 2009; Goodall et al., 2010). However, this study found schools rarely made referrals for direct involvement for children from either EPs or Advisory Teachers, with the result parents frequently struggled to gain access to professional advice once their child transitioned to secondary school. Additionally, the study found significant evidence of poor communication between schools, parents and professionals. The current government continues to prioritise joint working between professionals and

collaboration with parents. The new SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) stresses the concept of "joint delivery," and a "more integrated, personalised working style" (p. 39). It also highlights "the need to support…parents, in order to facilitate the development of the child or young person and to help them achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes" (p. 12). EPs have an important role in promoting improved communication between schools, families and professionals in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for children with ASD.

This research highlighted the importance of proficient transition support, both in terms of the efficiency of LA decision-making, and the transition preparation provided by primary and secondary schools. Unfortunately, where placement decisions are delayed due to conflicting views between parents and LA professionals, this often leads to the absence of transition programs for the most vulnerable children. It would be of benefit for LA to consider earlier provision panel dates for children with ASD whose parents are requesting a move from mainstream to specialist provision at secondary transfer, to ensure placement decisions are made in sufficient time for children to participate in essential transition programs. EPs have an important role in attending Year 5 annual reviews and identifying those children in mainstream schools whose parents are considering specialist provision for secondary and who would benefit from consideration at earlier provision panels.

This research found that some parents highlighted their surprise at the extent of their child's views on choice of secondary school, as well as that the views of children and parents regarding the secondary school experiences of children with ASD frequently conflicted. This provides a strong evidence base to demonstrate the importance of gathering children's views. The current Government continues to prioritise the importance of involving children in decision-making through the Children and Families Act (2014) and the new SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014). Furthermore, this legislation will give children with SEN over 16 a statutory right to contribute to decision-making that affects them (DfE, 2014). This research provides a strong evidence base in support of the Government's agenda. Furthermore, EPs would seem to be ideally placed to support children with SEN to voice their views, as well as to work to mediate any arising conflict between parents' and children's views.

This research revealed that the prospect of transition to post-16 education can be a cause of stress for some families of children with ASD due to difficulties accessing professional support, alongside a paucity in appropriate post-16 provision. The Government has raised the school leaving age to 18, and through the Children and Families Act (2014) will extend the SEN system from birth to 25, extending the statutory rights of young people with SEN to suitable educational provision. Furthermore, the new SEN Code of Practice (2014) emphasises the role of LA professionals in supporting young people with SEN to make a successful transition to adulthood. As such, it would seem important for EPs to prioritise involvement at the Year 9 transition review of children with ASD such that they are able to work to support children, schools and families during the transition to further education and adulthood.

6.5 Summary of Key Recommendations for EPs

1	**Prioritise accessing children's views** to ensure the perspectives and views of children with ASD regarding decisions that affect them are considered alongside the views of relevant adults.
2	**Attend Year 5 annual review** to provide transition support and advice, and identify children who may be transitioning from mainstream primary to specialist secondary and would benefit from earlier provision panel dates to ensure placement decisions are agreed in sufficient time to allow children to benefit from transition programs.
3	**Undertake individual work** to assist schools to support children with ASD to cope with the array of social, emotional and sensory difficulties that significantly impact on their secondary school experiences, including psychosocial interventions that support children with ASD to build friendships and develop emotional resilience.
4	**Undertake systemic work** to assist schools in meeting the needs of children with ASD, including supporting schools to develop and implement policy to address behaviour and bullying in schools.
5	**Attend Year 9 annual review** to provide transition support and advice and work to ensure children with ASD make a successful transition to adulthood.
6	Where necessary, work to **mediate the conflicting views of children and parents** to promote positive outcomes for children and families.
7	Work collaboratively with Advisory Teachers and other professionals to **provide INSET training** to all staff in secondary schools on supporting children with ASD in secondary education.

6.6 Recommendations for Local Authority

A prominent view expressed by parents of children attending maintained special schools was the limited choice available within this, and a feeling that there had not been enough options available to make a choice. This reiterates the findings of previous research that has also highlighted the shortfall in special provision for children with ASD in the secondary phase, and the subsequent lack of choice available to parents (Gumaste, 2011; Batten et al., 2006), indicating that this too

is a national rather than regional issue. With the current Government's move away from the emphasis on inclusion, this would seem to be an ideal time to address these provision issues.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the negative secondary school experiences reported for children in out of county provision, they constituted the majority of the one third of children for whom a significant concern around suitability and availability of provision was raised. The dilemma parents experienced revolved around identifying suitable provision for a child who was academically too able to fit within an MLD school, and yet whose ASD significantly impacted on their ability to cope and function within a mainstream school. The lack of suitable provision for these children was an issue raised not only by their parents, but also by other parents and staff discussing the needs of children with ASD more generally. This issue was also noted by Gumaste (2011), who found parents reported special schools in the LA were geared towards children with ASD and learning difficulties, meaning there was no appropriate provision in LA for children who were of average cognitive ability yet unable to cope with a mainstream environment. Jones et al. (2008) also reported similar findings, describing how a parent articulated that "in this authority, there is NO provision for children who are academically able but who are unable to access a mainstream environment" (p. 36) and voiced their desire "'to keep children local'; to have better provision for high functioning pupils on the autism spectrum in the secondary phase of education" (p. 49). This suggests that this is a national rather than regional issue, and provides important feedback regarding the need for LAs to consider development of local suitable provision for cognitively able children with ASD.

Finally, parent participants in the present study consistently advocated wanting their child to remain in school-based provision post-16. For parents of children in mainstream settings this was not a concern, since it was an option readily available to their child. In contrast, for parents of children in specialist settings, this presented a serious area for concern, since at present in the commissioning LA specialist provision for children with MLD is only available until 16. At this point children are expected to transition to post 16 college placements. Parents and teachers alike emphasised that these children are not ready for college placements, and would benefit considerably from in-school further education provision. Students with ASD constitute only 0.2% of children in further education (Data Service, 2011). The majority of young people with ASD do not access

further education once they leave school (McGill, Papachristoforou & Cooper, 2005). Clearly therefore it is important for the LA to consider development of local suitable further education provision for children with ASD and MLD.

6.7 Summary of Key Recommendations for LA

1	Consider the availability of **special provision** for children with ASD
2	Consider the availability of provision for **cognitively able children with ASD** whose autism impacts on their ability to cope within a mainstream secondary school
3	Consider the availability of suitable **in-school post 16 provision** for children with ASD and learning difficulties

6.7 Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the impact of both intrinsic child characteristics and wider systemic factors on the secondary school experiences of children with ASD though a multi-method multi-informant approach. The findings of this research have clear implications for the practice of EPs, schools, and other professionals working to support children with ASD and their families throughout secondary education. Furthermore, there are direct implications for the LA in terms of provision for children with ASD in the secondary phase.

Overall, this study revealed that a range of individual child and wider systemic factors significantly influence the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. The social, emotional, sensory and learning difficulties associated with ASD inevitably mean that children can struggle to settle in and have a positive experience in the complex context of secondary school. These factors can be either exacerbated or circumvented by a wide range of systemic factors relating to the strategies and support offered by schools and professionals. Furthermore, the transition process and type of provision available in the LA can further affect the experiences of children with ASD and their families. Whilst, rather surprisingly, the satisfaction levels of children with ASD and their parents were not found to vary considerably by type of maintained provision (special / mainstream), children attending out of county provision were found to have worryingly consistent negative experiences of secondary school.

It is clear from the findings of this research, that EPs have a crucial role in 'working together' with children, parents, schools and other professionals to support the secondary school experiences of children with ASD. Clearly, we must strive to minimise the impact of those individual and systemic factors that

encumber the educational experiences of children with ASD, and endeavour to ensure all children with ASD benefit from the positive secondary school experiences they deserve and to which they are entitled. Furthermore, this research clearly demonstrates that the voice of children with ASD must be heard if families, schools are professionals are to achieve these transformational aims.

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Appendix 1
Parent Information Letter

Understanding the Secondary School Experiences of Children with Autism

Dear Parents and Guardians,

We are writing to invite you and your child to be involved in a new research study.

As you well know, secondary school can be difficult for many young people, and it can be particularly challenging for those diagnosed with an autism spectrum condition. This new study will explore the experiences and perspectives of you, your child and their teacher(s) since s/he made the transition to secondary school.

We are keen to get *you and your child's perspectives* on their experiences of secondary school. This project provides a direct opportunity for the voice of your child and family to be heard.

We very much hope that you and your child would like to take part. This information sheet tells you about the project. After reading this information sheet, please explain the project to your child and discuss whether s/he wants to take part.

Who is conducting this project?
Tamara Brooks, under the supervision of Dr Liz Pellicano and Vivian Hill, will be conducting this study. Tamara is currently a Trainee Educational Psychologist working in Hertfordshire Local Authority. She has extensive experience working with children with autism in a range of settings, including school, home and recreational.

What will happen if my child takes part?
Young people will be seen at school. The session will last approximately 45 minutes and will be arranged at an agreed time with the teacher to ensure lessons are not too disrupted.

Students will be given standard tests of language and reasoning skills. Students will then be asked questions about their experiences of secondary school. They will have the opportunity to give their opinions about their learning, friendships and other experiences since starting secondary school.
We will ask your child if we can audiorecord the interviews for later typing up and analysis, although they can choose whether they wish this to be done.

The session is designed to be informal and straightforward. Importantly, young people are assured that they are free to take a break or stop at any time.

As your child's parent, you are also invited to participate in this research. You will be asked to complete two standard questionnaires about your child's social abilities and his/her anxiety levels, and to support your child to complete a questionnaire about sensory preferences. You will also be asked to participate in an interview about your child's experiences at secondary school. In addition, your child's teacher(s) will also be asked to participate in an interview to explore their perspectives of your child's secondary school experiences.

What will happen to the results of the project?
At the completion of the study, we will send you a report regarding the findings of the study. Individual results will not be disclosed. The information we collect is kept strictly confidential. Children are identified by code numbers only and all information and recordings are kept on a computer and in a locked filing cabinet at the Institute of Education.

Do I have to take part?
It is up to you and your child whether or not you want to take part. At the end of this information sheet there is a form for you to sign if you and your child decide that this is something you would like to be involved in. Anyone who signs a form is still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your child's education in any way.

What should I do next?
Please explain the project to your child and discuss whether they want to take part. It is important that s/he knows that they do not have to take part, and if they do agree, that they are free to change their minds at any time, including during sessions.

If you and your child would like to take part in this study, please fill in the enclosed form and return it to Dr Liz Pellicano. If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have any questions at any time), please do not hesitate to contact:

Tamara Brooks	Dr Liz Pellicano	Vivian Hill
Trainee Educational Psychologist	Research Supervisor	Clinical Supervisor

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Psychology and Human Development's Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education. Thank you for your interest in our research.

Appendix 2
Teacher Information Letter

Understanding the Secondary School Experiences of Children with Autism

Dear Teachers,

We are writing to invite you to be involved in a new research study.

As you well know, secondary school can be difficult for many young people, and it can be particularly challenging for those diagnosed with an autism spectrum condition. This new study will explore the experiences and perspectives of children with autism, their parents and teacher(s) at secondary school.

We very much hope that you would like to take part. This information sheet tells you about the project to help inform your decision as to whether to take part.

Who is conducting this project?
Tamara Brooks, under the supervision of Dr Liz Pellicano and Vivian Hill, will be conducting this study. Tamara is currently a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the Institute of Education. Tamara has extensive experience working with children with autism in a range of settings, including school, home and recreational.

What will happen if I take part?
As the teacher of a child who has agreed to take part in this research, you are also invited to participate in this research. You will be asked to participate in an interview to explore your perspectives of this child's secondary school experiences.

What will happen to the results of the project?
At the completion of the study, we will send you a report regarding the findings of the study. Individual results will not be disclosed. The information we collect is kept strictly confidential. Children are identified by code numbers only and all information and recordings are kept on a computer and in a locked filing cabinet at the Institute of Education.

Do I have to take part?
It is up to you whether or not you want to take part. At the end of this information sheet there is a form for you to sign if you decide that this is something you would like to be involved in. Anyone who signs a form is still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What should I do next?
If you would like to take part in this study, please fill in the enclosed form and return it to Dr Liz Pellicano. If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have any questions at any time), please do not hesitate to contact:

Tamara Brooks	Dr Liz Pellicano	Vivian Hill
Trainee Educational Psychologist	Research Supervisor	Clinical Supervisor

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Psychology and Human Development's Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education. Thank you for your interest in our research.

Appendix 3
Parent consent form

CONSENT FORM: Secondary School Experiences of Children with Autism

Parent/guardian copy - Please keep this copy for your records

I have read the information sheet about the research and discussed the project with my child. ☐ (please tick)

I understand that participation is voluntary and that my child is free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my child's education being affected in any way. ☐ (please tick)

I understand that I can contact Tamara Brooks or her supervisors to discuss this study at any time. ☐ (please tick)

Name of child: _____ _____
(Forename) (Surname)

☐ **(Male)** ☐ **(Female)**

Date of Birth: _____

School:_____
___

Name of parent/guardian:_____

Contact email:
_____

Contact phone:
_____

Contact address:
_____

Signature: _____ **Today's date:**_____

Appendix 4
Teacher consent form

CONSENT FORM: Secondary School Experiences of Children with Autism Project

Teacher copy - Please keep this copy for your records

I have read the information sheet about the research and am happy to take part in the study.	☐ (please tick)
I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	☐ (please tick)
I understand that I can contact Tamara Brooks (tep@tamarabrooks.co.uk /. 07969708906) or her supervisors to discuss this study at any time	☐ (please tick)

Name: _____ _____ ☐ **(Male)** ☐ **(Female)**
(Forename) (Surname)

School:_____
____

Contact email:
_____

Contact phone:
_____

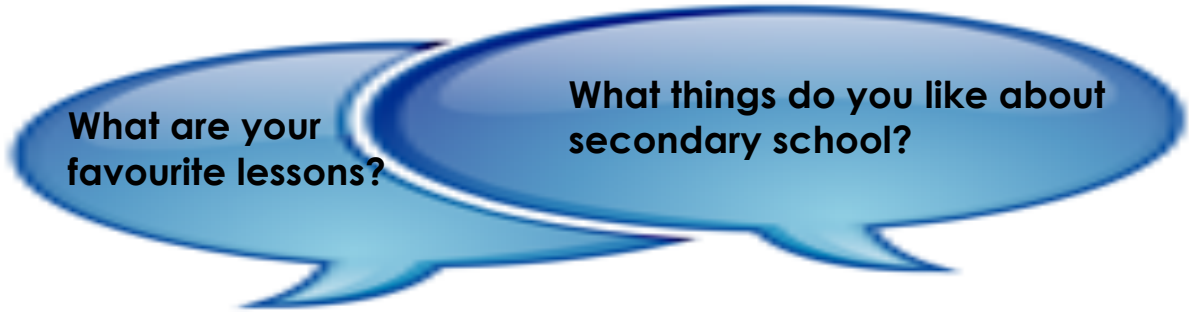
Signature: _____ **Today's date:**_____

Appendix 5
'Child Friendly' Information Letter

My name is Tamara and I am running a project all about young people's experiences of secondary school. I would like to invite you to be a part of this by telling me about your experiences at school.

I have already spoken to your parents/carers about this, and they have agreed for you to take part. Now I would like to know if you would be interested in helping me with my project.

If you decide to join in, I will meet with you at school. I will ask you to have a go at some activities with shapes and words, and give you a questionnaire to fill out at home. I will also chat to you and ask you some questions about your time at school. I might ask:



Any answers you give will be kept between you and me. I will **not** tell your teachers or your parents what you have said. I will **not** use your name in my project so no one will know the answers came from you.

Before you decide whether you would like to be part of my project, please talk to your parents/carers about it. If you would like to join in, let your parents/carers know. If you would prefer not to, then that's ok.

If you do decide to take part, I will arrange a time to meet with you at school. We will then talk about the project and you can ask me any

questions. I will then ask you to write your name to say you want to take part and understand what I have said.

I hope that it will be fun and that you will choose to help me with my project. Please remember that you can change your mind at any time. If you no longer want to take part just tell me or your parents/carers.

Thank you for reading this. If you have any questions, your parents/carers can contact me at any time.

Hope to see you soon!

Tamara

Appendix 6
Child assent form

CHILD ASSENT FORM AND RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

Secondary School Experiences Project

Child/young person to circle all they agree with:

Have you read (or had read to you) about this project?	**YES**	**NO**
Has somebody explained this project to you?	**YES**	**NO**
Do you understand what this project is about?	**YES**	**NO**
Have you asked all the questions you want?	**YES**	**NO**
Have you had your questions answered clearly?	**YES**	**NO**
Do you understand it's OK to stop taking part at any time?	**YES**	**NO**
Are you happy to take part?	**YES**	**NO**

If <u>any</u> answers are 'no' or you **don't** want to take part, then **don't** sign your name!

If you <u>do</u> want to take part, please write your name and today's date:

Your name _____

Date _____

The person who explained this project to you needs to sign too:

Print Name _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix 7
Student Secondary School Experiences Interview Schedule

What things do you like / make you happy about your secondary school

What about things which are not so nice / you don't like / make you unhappy about secondary school?

In what ways is your secondary school different from your primary school? *(Prompt: school building, classrooms, lessons, timetable, homework, teachers, friends).* Is there anything you miss about primary?

How do you feel about going to your secondary school?

Are there things that worry you at the moment? *(Prompt: I get worried when I have lots of work to do)* What are they?

Are there things that worry you about school? What are they?

What could help you feel less worried when you are at school?

How can your parents/ teachers help you feel happier about going to school?

How do you feel about the other children at your secondary school?

Have you made friends at your secondary school? What has helped you to make friends?

Have you had any problems getting along with people at secondary school?

Are there things that other people do that irritate or annoy you? What are they?

Are there things you do that you think irritate or annoy others?

How do you feel about the teachers at secondary school?

How do you feel about the work you do in secondary school?

Is there anything you would like to be different / change about secondary school?

Are there any ways that you feel that you would like to be different at school? (*Prompt: I would like to have been better at maths when I was at secondary school*)

Thank you for helping me with my work. It was great speaking to you. Is there anything you would like to ask me before we finish?

Appendix 8
Parent Secondary School Experiences Interview Schedule

Which primary school did [Your child] attend?

They transitioned in September 20?? So he/she has now been in secondary school for almost 1/2/3/4 years?

How are you feeling about [your child]'s secondary school placement? How have those feelings changed since they first transitioned to secondary school?

How do you think that [your child] feels about their secondary school? How do you think their feelings about school have changed since he/she first moved?

How do you think the transition to secondary school affected [your child]? In what ways? (prompt positively and negatively – school context, curriculum, social, mood, level of anxiety/worry, sense of "who they are")

What do you think have been the main issues or difficulties affecting [your child]'s experiences of secondary school?

What do you think have been the main obstacles or barriers in terms of school provision which have affected [your child]'s experiences of secondary school?

What, if any, mechanisms and structures have been put in place to support [your child] at secondary school. Who at the school has been instrumental in helping your child (and in what way)?

Are there any specific features of [your child]'s autistic spectrum condition that you feel may have impacted on their experiences of secondary school? Can you describe how/in what ways? (PROMPT: anxiety, level of ability, severity of autism/social communication difficulties, sensory symptoms)

What has [your child]'s secondary school done specifically to accommodate [your child]'s specific (autistic) needs? (PROMPT: e.g. introduced a "safe zone" or turned down the fluorescent lights in the class etc.)?

In your opinion, what have been the key factors / main things that have supported and enabled [your child] to have positive experiences of secondary school?

Is there anything you feel could have been done differently for [your child] to support them to have a more positive experience of secondary school? And by whom?

Is there anything that you feel could be done differently now to support [your child] to have a more positive experience of secondary school going forwards? [Either that you, the teacher/school or even [your child] could do?]

Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see made to the current secondary school arrangements that are in place?

Have any external services in the LA (health, social and education) been involved to support [your child] in secondary school? What did they do well / not so well? What more could have been done?

What originally influenced your choice and decisions around secondary school for [your child]? Did you also consider a [specialist/mainstream] placement?

Choosing which sort of school provision is a difficult decision. Is there anything, now, with hindsight, that you would choose to have done differently?

Is there anything which you now know that you feel it would have been helpful to have been informed about prior to [your child's] transition?

Do you feel anything may need to change to support the experiences of other children with an autistic spectrum condition at secondary school in the future?

Have you begun to consider post-16 education? If so, what type of provision would you like [your child] to attend post 16? Why do you feel this best meets their needs?

Before we finish, is there anything else you wish to say or share that we haven't already covered. Is there anything you wish to ask me at this stage? Thank you very much for your time, it is greatly appreciated!

Appendix 9
Teacher Secondary School Experiences Interview Schedule

How would you describe [child X]?

What were you told about [child X] before they joined the school? Were you made aware of [child X's] needs?

What would you say is your understanding of autism and the impact it has on children's learning and their experiences of school?

Have you received any training or support around autism and supporting children with autism in school?

How would you describe [child X]'s experiences of secondary school? (prompt, academically, relationships with teachers, relationships with peers)

Can you describe the mechanisms and structures that have been put in place to support [child X] within your school?

In your opinion, what have been the key features that have supported [child X] to have as positive an experience of secondary school as possible?

In your opinion, what have been the main obstacles and barriers impacting on [child X]'s experiences of secondary school?

Are there any specific features of [child X]'s autistic spectrum condition that you feel may have impacted / be impacting on their experiences of secondary school? (PROMPT: anxiety, IQ, severity of autism/social communication difficulties, sensory symptoms).

Have you and your school done anything specifically to accommodate the specific autistic needs of [child X]? (PROMPT e.g. introduced a "safe zone" or turned down the fluorescent lights in the class etc.)?

Have any external services in the LA (health, social and education) been involved to supported [child X] in your school? What did they do well / not so well? What more could have been done?

Overall, what do you feel could have been done differently for [child X] to support their experiences of secondary school?

What do you feel could be done differently now to support [child X]'s experiences of secondary school going forwards?

What kind of changes or improvements would you like to see made to the current secondary school arrangements that are in place?

What kind of things might need to change to support the experiences of other children with an autistic spectrum condition within secondary school in the future?

Before we finish, is there anything else you wish to say or share that we haven't already covered. Is there anything you wish to ask me at this stage? Thank you very much.

Appendix 10
Child Preparation Letter

Hello!

My name is Tamara Brooks and I am interested in how children learn and what they think about school.

PHOTO OF RESEARCHER

I will be visiting you at school to find out about your learning and to talk to you about your experiences at secondary school.

This is what will happen during my visit to see you at school:

I will come to your school on XXXX to meet with you.

We will meet in a quiet room in your school.

I will ask you to sit at a desk and have a go at some activities with words, blocks and puzzles.

When you finish these activities, I will ask you some questions about your learning, friendships and experiences at secondary school, and how you feel about your secondary school. If there are any questions you don't want to answer, then you can tell me and that will be OK. Any answers you give will be kept between you and me. I will not tell your teachers or your parents what you have said.

When we have finished talking about your experiences at secondary school you may leave the room and go back to your classroom.

Whilst I am at your school I may also speak to your teacher or teaching assistant.

I will also be speaking to your Mum about your experiences at secondary school. If you have any questions about me coming to see you then you can tell your Mum and she can telephone me.

See you soon.

Tamara Brooks

Appendix 11
Example Student Secondary School Experiences Coded Interview

Transcript	Initial Codes
Interviewer: What things do you like / make you happy about your secondary school?	
Respondent: The… I'm just happy to be here. I like learning new things. Err… Science err there are loads of energies and some of them are electric energy.	Happy at school Enjoy learning Enjoy lessons
I: Is there anything else that you really like about it here?	
R: I like it because I have a few friends here at the moment. Err T and A and C. Well C has the same medical condition like me, which is autism, and T is from Poland just like my family. And A well I made friends with him because he's friends with T. And besides he, well we talk a few things about stuff. Yes Yeah. We do.	Have a few friends Friend also has autism Friend of same nationality Like to talk with friends
R: School is great. Everything in it. The teachers, the maps to help you find your way round the school, the merits they give out which is to help pupils work harder I think that's what I believe. I like getting Merits. I have the second Bronze award. When you complete the whole card you put in date card completed in and then you hand it in at the reception. This badge however I got isn't because of the merits. I think it's show your assessment. But this is to show you're Yr 7 I think. At transition you get it.	Enjoys school Maps help you find your way around Merit reward system for motivation
I: What do you like about your friends?	
R: Well T we both like Mindcraft that's one thing. And we like computers, except he prefers PC and I prefer Mac. But that's a completely different story.	Friends have similar interests
R: We like to talk and design things.	
I: What sort of things do you design?	
R: Err buildings really. Well sometimes I bring a few pieces of paper to school and I and I draw things on them somewhere flat so that it doesn't look scrunched like.	
I: What about things which are not so nice / you don't like / make you unhappy about secondary school?	
R: At the moment it is fine. I like everything here.	
I: Is there anything that makes you unhappy?	

R: Not really.	
I: In what ways is your secondary school different from your primary school? Is there anything you miss about primary?	Secondary much bigger
R: My primary school was about slightly bigger than the science block, so basically it's about it's about it's smaller. Yep. Well I mmm there is a few things. In Year 6 I had two teachers instead of 1. We had 1 on a few days and the other on the rest of the days. Here I have even more. About loads. Err there's history, science, art, design, DT, err there's about 7.	Secondary more teachers
I: Is there anything you miss about primary?	
R: Not really no.	
I: How do you feel about going to your secondary school?	Initially scared Worried about getting lost
R: Err on the first day I felt a bit scared actually because I thought I was going to get lost. Well I wasn't sure where to go. And I asked where the 7SC form room was and a teacher told me and so I went there I went to the form room and. But today not really. There's a lot of difference I just I don't feel scared. I don't feel anything really. Apart from slightly excited.	Not scared anymore Now settled and happy
I: And what makes you slightly excited to come to school?	Lessons exciting Enjoy Science experiments
R: Well if it's science and I'm going to wonder whether we do experiments or not because we sometimes do experiments. I like experiments. Also History, more about the Romans because we're learning about the Romans at the moment.	Enjoy History
I: Are there things that worry you at the moment? What are they?	
R: No.	
I: Are there things that worry you about school? What are they?	Other children were a worry
R: Not really because…There used to be. Someone who was from my old school called Anthony comes to this school too and he was annoying me for a very long time since primary school when I came to it and now he's no problem so I'm not worried of him at all.	Other children annoying
I: And why is he no problem now?	Teachers resolve

R: Because he was annoying me so much and I just told my dad and he told the school and everything was resolved. **I: How can your parents/ teachers help you feel happier about going to school?** R: I think it's fine except for in assembly sometimes Year 7s don't get chairs and I don't like crossing my legs because it gives me pains at the joint where my leg meets the main body part. Because it really hurts. **I: Is there anything else that could be done?** R: No not really it's fine. **I: How do you feel about the other children at your secondary school?** R: I just feel like everyone is standing out so that means no-one is standing out. I just feel. I just feel normal. I don't feel scared about the 6th formers or anyone like that. **I: You mentioned your friends at school, what has helped you make friends?** R: We like the same things. **I: Have you had any problems getting along with people at secondary school?** R: Well like I said about A he was annoying me but the problem was resolved so it's fine now. **I: What was he doing that was annoying you?** R: I forgot what he was doing really because I just think that you shouldn't think of the bad things you should only think of the good things so that's why I don't remember any more. **I: Are there things that other people do that irritate or annoy you? What are they?** R: Well C before we were friends we didn't like each other. Well I don't mean we didn't like each other, we didn't didn't like each other, we just, he was just annoying me, but because he was autistic he thinks it wasn't annoying so basically I don't think there, well he was irritating me but we apologised soon after. And besides I. Well I forgot what I did to him. I think it was something physical. But we apologised to each other. **I: Are there things you do that you think irritate or annoy others?**	concerns I don't feel different I feel normal Friends have similar interests Other children annoying Other children annoying Other children with autism annoying

R: No not really. **I: How do you feel about the teachers at secondary school?**	
R: They're fine. Well I like Mrs Whiting because she's my DT teacher but she's really specialised in art. I don't know why she's a DT teacher, but she really just teaches us how to cut paper and stuff like that in DT.	Teachers are fine
I: OK and what do you like about her? R: Well I just like her. And plus as a sign that I like her I gave her some Great British shortbread. Yes but on one condition if she eats one I eat one. And she accepted. Yes she did. She said "Done." R: And Mr Griffiths, and Mr Rye the musical teacher I really like him well I just like him too. I think I just like him that's all. Mr Griffiths teaches History. It is one of my favourite Free my favourite Free subject. I just well again I just like him. **I: Are there any teachers that you don't like so much?** R: No. **I: How do you feel about the work you do in secondary school?**	
R: Hmm a bit stressful but when it's done in the end I feel fine. Like sometimes it's like having to revise and I feel like do I have to revise because it's basically just reading apart from other things, it's just reading about Geography if it's Geography test revision. Well a few things are fun in revision for Geography. Like errr we had, the teacher throws a ball to someone who asks a question, and throws it to another person who has to answer it and sit down.	Work is a bit stressful
R: Art is a bit difficult. Yeah at home it's more easier because my Dad helps me and he's a good artist, believe me. But I'm not very good at art really because at school we are at the moment making poppy seed things and I'm very bad at cutting with a DT knife like this, like I'm more used to doing it like a pen. And and I think so far I ended up with something like the top is coming off but it isn't falling off. It is tricky to me.	Art is difficult Motor skill difficulties
R: Oh homework, I don't like. No no. especially if it takes 30 minutes for my parents to argue. Because my parents usually argue over homework. Like sometime in Art my Dad argues with my mum, in History my Dad	Don't like homework

argues with my mum will maybe maybe not, in English my Dad argues with my Mum. Definitely. In Italian. They just argue about, like my mum says “if it wasn’t for you arguing about it right now because to do it your way, that we have to do it your way, then we would have done it less than 20 minutes ago.” So it takes a long time if you count the argue time as homework.” R: Mmm when it gets done in the end I don’t care if it’s bad or not, because I just feel I just feel fine now. I just want it done as quickly as possible. But my Dad says you have to do it nicely. And Yes I have to do that. **I: Is there anything you would like to be different / change about secondary school?** R: No not really. **I: Are there any ways that you feel that you would like to be different?** R: No. Never.	Want to get homework finished as quickly as possible