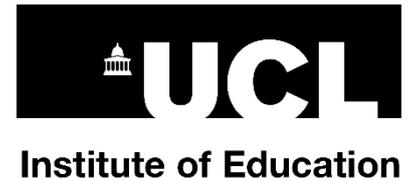


***Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent  
Psychology***

*Programme Director: Vivian Hill*



**UCL Institute of Education**

**Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology**

**Year 3 Thesis Report**

***Educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral  
Units following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school***

**Alan Edward Smith**

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(exclusive of appendices and list of references)

## Declaration

I, Alan Edward Smith, hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.



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Alan Edward Smith

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to offer my sincere thanks and gratefulness to my research supervisors Dr Laura Crane and Dr Karen Majors for their continued support and guidance throughout the duration of this major piece of work.

I would also like to give special thanks to all the educators participating in this research, without whom this research would not have been possible.

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## Abstract

One in four children diagnosed with autism have been excluded from school at some point during their education (Ambitious about Autism, 2014). Mainstream secondary school is a time of particular vulnerability due to challenges associated with the environment, timetabling, and social pressures; along with relationships (Makin, Hill & Pellicano, 2017). Compared to other groups of children identified with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), autistic children are being excluded from mainstream secondary in disproportionate numbers (Department for Education, 2017). As a result, many end up in the generalised setting of a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU); an Alternative Provision (AP) for children who are unable to attend mainstream education. Whilst it is expected that educators support the learning needs of autistic children (Makin et al., 2017), difficulties can be regularly experienced in providing such support (Trussler & Robinson, 2015).

The current research examined educators' perspectives through a semi-structured interview; 16 educators with experience of working in PRUs were recruited. The focus was on supporting autistic children and how educators themselves could be supported. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), four themes were identified: (1) Understanding the needs of PRU-based autistic children; (2) The enabling environment of the PRU; (3) Effectiveness of support through systems and structures; and (4) Preparing autistic children and adolescents for adulthood through the PRU provision. Findings were considered within an eco-systemic framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in relation to individual needs, impact of the context, and the influence of the wider, surrounding systems.

Particular messages related to mainstream secondary schools learning from autism-support that can be implemented by PRUs. Another message is that of promoting a culture recognising that currently applied support is imperative for providing autistic children with a positive future outlook. Implications for Educational Psychologist (EP) support highlighted training, resourcing and supervision, amongst other benefits. The lack of literacy eliciting the perspectives of educators on supporting autistic children at PRUs is exceptional. The current study provided a foundation for understanding the implications that autism support has at individual, group, whole-PRU level and beyond.

**Keywords**

*autism • educators • support • exclusion • inclusive practice  
Pupil Referral Unit • mainstream secondary school*

## Impact Statement

Educators' perspectives show that the discovery, insight, knowledge, expertise and analysis presented in this thesis can be put to a beneficial use. The added value of this work is that it benefits both inside and outside of academia. For inside academia, there are implications for complementing and also extending a research area that is so current, topical and immotive, yet, so lacking in evidence. Inside-academia benefits can also include the inclusion of this topic within modules for initial teacher training programmes, and as part of ongoing debates across academia on: inclusion (versus inclusive practice), exclusion (versus inclusive practice), and what autism support means for autistic children and educators alike.

Outside of academia, there is such an extended reach regarding the impact of this thesis. Training, presentations, workshops, working with charities (as well as non-profit organisations), working with autism advocates (individuals), and implications for many of the autism-based organisations that work with schools and Local Authorities. Schools and colleges will feel the impact of this thesis due to the PRU-based perspectives. Other targets for the impact of this thesis include the police, Youth Offending Service (YOS), Social Services, advocacies (organisations), individual educators, and many others where there is a need for promoting autism support to counteract the wide-reaching consequences of exclusion.

The current research has provided an understanding of autism support that goes beyond the remit of the study. The impact of the findings can resonate at individual level for autistic children and educators, as well considerations on relational aspects, the environment (context for learning), systemic, and societal factors. Another value of this current research is the way in which the findings can link not only with the mainstream secondary school context, but with other settings; hence, the wider impact concerning education. What makes this extended impact possible is the identification of core principles of autism support that relate to autistic children, educators, the surrounding contexts, and encircling systemic influences. Regarding the the current findings (and the benefit to other educational settings), elements of this impact include: inclusive practice influenced by interpersonal relationships, understanding the broader consequences of

transitioning to a PRU, and learning from the systems and structures of support that can be implemented at PRUs.

In terms of this impact, autism-based research should never be about exploring a topic solely for the purpose of addressing an identified gap in existing evidence. Instead, the value of this thesis lies in its position as a catalyst for inclusive action now by challenging assumptions on autism, and moving forward by actively engaging in next-steps. The impact of this thesis is therefore guided by the type of support for autistic children that is not only for their current needs, but that inspires them due to this support impacting on their immediate and long-term future outlook. Hence, the impact of this thesis centres around its practical applications both inside and outside of academia.

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**ii - List of terms and abbreviations**

(including appearances within participant quotes)

<b>CAMHS</b>	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
<b>EHCP</b>	Education, Health and Care Plan
<b>EP</b>	Educational Psychologist
<b>ELSA</b>	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant
<b>HLTA</b>	Higher Level Teaching Assistant
<b>PRU</b>	Pupil Referral Unit
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Needs
<b>SEND</b>	Special Educational Needs and Disability
<b>TA</b>	Teaching Assistant

# Chapter One

## Introduction

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### 1.1 Chapter Overview

This opening chapter discusses the context and rationale for the present study. Each considered area has been selected based on its relevance (to autism research and the current study), and the added value to Educational Psychology as an evolving practice. Discussions here assist with the formulation of research questions and aims (presented at the end of Chapter Two) in response to the review of literature.

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### 1.2 Setting the context

Twenty-one per cent of autistic\*<sup>1</sup> children have been excluded from mainstream school on at least one occasion; with 6% receiving a permanent exclusion from a minimum of one school (Barnard, 2000; National Autistic Society, 2015). This history of exclusion over past decades is not only significantly higher than other groups of children under the umbrella of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), but 20 times higher than the rate of exclusion for those without SEND (Clarke, 2013; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). According to a Department for Education (DfE) report by Whitaker (2014), 70% of autistic children are educated in mainstream schools, with the remainder attending specialist provisions. Although it is unlawful to exclude a child due to their SEN related difficulties (DfE, 2017), questions have been raised regarding the number of exclusions for autistic children, and the extent to which this might originate from poor experiences within mainstream secondary school.

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\*<sup>1</sup> There is ongoing debate about the most appropriate way to talk about autism: whether to use identity-first (e.g., autistic children) or person-first (e.g., children with autism) language. Kenny et al. (2016) argue that whilst person-first language has traditionally been used, this is not the preference of many members of the autistic community. Furthermore, reference to person-first has been thought to perpetuate stigma or labelling (Gernsbacher, 2017). Whilst these debates have not been as widely studied in relation to children's perspectives, there are autistic children/young people who view the differences, strengths and the challenges associated with autism as being fundamental to their self-advocacy and their identity (e.g., Castellon, 2020). As such, identity-first language will be predominately used in this thesis.

### 1.3 Defining autism

Autism is a term for which understanding and definitions have changed over time. When first presented by Kanner (1943), autism was thought to represent two key features: extreme aloneness and insistence on sameness. Autism was also understood as a single condition (Geschwind, 2011; Kanner, 1943). However, a separate development in the early 1940s saw Asperger Syndrome being first described by Asperger (1944; translated in Frith, 1991). Until recently, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association - APA, 2000) had included Asperger Syndrome along with other sub-classifications (e.g., Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified) as parts of the autism spectrum. However, DSM-5 (APA, 2013) no longer identifies these sub-divisions, with this removal reflected in another prominent diagnostic manual - the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11 - World Health Organisation, 2018). In both diagnostic manuals, previous sub-divisions have been merged under the single category of 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (henceforth, referred to as autism).

For the classification of Asperger Syndrome (Wing, 1998), an explanation for its removal relates to current understanding, and whether Asperger Syndrome could truly be seen as definitively different to autism (Bennett et al., 2008). Those with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome share the core features of autism, but, cannot have co-occurring intellectual disability or early language delay. Early language delay does not always link to outcomes (Howlin, 2003) and the difficulty in reliably distinguishing people diagnosed with autism and Asperger Syndrome is one of the reasons for Asperger Syndrome being removed for the current fifth edition of the DSM (Gamlin, 2017). It is worth noting that this was not the only sub-classification of autism that was removed in DSM-5 (Murphy & Hallahan, 2016). Yet, its removal is perhaps most contentious when considering it is regarded by many as an identity from which they have now become disenfranchised (Lord & Jones, 2012; Riley, 2019).

The term 'autism spectrum' has often been used to indicate an individual's position along a continuous line ranging from low- to high-functioning autism. However, as Fletcher-Watson and Happé (2019) recently explained, this is unhelpful and simplistic, as the term high-functioning autism often draws assumptions on coping through cognitive ability without acknowledging wider

needs. This raises the question as to whether high-functioning is merely a shorthand for those who are diagnosed with autism and demonstrate strong verbal skills, but with no co-occurring intellectual disability. Instead, Fletcher-Watson and Happé (2019) advocate for a multi-dimensional construct of an autism constellation (rather than a linear spectrum); with this concept suggesting inter-laced points and patterns. However, both visualisations enforce the idea of no single definition fitting all individuals within this group. Furthermore, regardless of the stance of the definition, what is being promoted across both is the idea of intersectionality (Saxe, 2017): that whether on the basis of diagnosis, gender, class, race or any other individual group, there are interconnected and overlapping elements. This underscores the complexity of autism as a diagnosis. People vary in the degree to which they are affected by different aspects of autism; hence, the difficulty in pinpointing someone on a continuous static line. There has been increased emphasis across research and practice regarding heterogeneity (Georgiades, Szatmari & Boyle, 2013; Hall, Huerta, McAuliffe & Farber, 2012); the notion that autism represents “...a *heterogeneous group, with wide variability...*” (Kanne et al., 2011, p.1007). Overall, it is essential to appreciate the individual nature of autism.

In another significant change regarding the recent diagnostic manuals, the core criteria for an autism diagnosis has changed from a ‘Triad of Impairments’ to a ‘dyad’ of autistic features. Specifically, there are two areas of need now characterising autism: Criterion A and Criterion B, respectively (DSM-5, p.50). Criterion A relates to challenges faced in social communication and interaction. The second relates to the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities (APA, 2013). All people diagnosed with autism will need to have shown these two features, and experience the clinically impairing effect of these features on their everyday life. Additional Criteria (C and D) in the DSM-5 diagnostic features stipulate that: “*These symptoms are present from early childhood and limit or impair everyday functioning...*” (APA, 2013, pp.50, 53).

Two other important points to be considered when defining autism are prevalence and gender ratios. First, the prevalence of autism is reported at one in every 100 children (Baird et al., 2006), with this prevalence also reported in adults (Brugha et al., 2011). Second, there are differences regarding diagnosis and gender. Past research identified boys as outnumbering girls by four to one in

autism diagnosis (McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford & Goodman, 2005). Historically, it was also thought that this varied significantly as a result of intellectual ability. For example, ratios of two to one were reported for those with additional Intellectual Disability, and ratios of nine to one were reported for those without (Bryson, Bradley, Thompson & Wainwright, 2008; Matson & Shoemaker, 2009). However, a recent meta-analysis conducted by Loomes, Hull and Mandy (2017) reports the current male-female ratio at three to one. Thus, ongoing debates on autism remain very much in the public domain.

#### **1.4 An historical context of inclusion: Warnock (1978)**

Over the past decades, and particularly since the Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978), Special Educational Needs (SEN) has received wide attention within areas such as politics, legislation, media, social justice, research and education. In particular, access to education has been promoted through a strong message of inclusion (Ellis & Tod, 2014; MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007). In her role as Chair of a specially commissioned UK inquiry, Baroness Helen Mary Warnock (b.1924) was commissioned to produce a review of provision for SEN. When published in 1978, the report signalled the foundations for the current philosophy of inclusion whereby children identified with SEN should be able to access education within a mainstream school. This led to a system of 'statementing' children in order for them to gain entitlement to special educational support, resulting in the Statement of SEN\*<sup>2</sup> (Warnock & Norwich, 2010). As historically contextualised by Lamb (2019), the Statement of SEN has now been superseded by the Education, Health and Care Plan\*<sup>3</sup> (EHCP).

The Warnock Report was influential in giving rise to the Education Act 1981, which attempted to address the issue of inclusion. In response to the subsequent Education Act 1996, the Secretary of State issued a Code of Practice on SEN. However, as Statements of SEN became embedded, Baroness Warnock re-assessed the situation and principles adopted by schools. She felt strongly that Statements of SEN had lost their purpose due to the numbers of

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\*<sup>2</sup> The Statement of SEN sought to outline the support and resources for children aged up to 16 years old where their needs were identified as being above and beyond that which a school could ordinarily cater for.

\*<sup>3</sup> Education, Health and Care Plans extended the remit to encompass 0 to 25 years old, and were introduced as a joined-up approach across services. Parental/carer input forms part of this statutory requirement alongside the voice of the child / young person.

children stated, and the emphasis placed on resources rather than the needs of the child (Warnock, 2005). Subsequently, Warnock called for a re-think regarding SEN, statementing, and inclusion. Yet, the effects of the Warnock Report are still being felt now (for example) through this current topic on supporting autistic children attending PRUs, with ongoing debates on how to include them in (rather than exclude them from) mainstream secondary school (Humphrey, 2008; Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson & Scott, 2013).

### **1.5 Inclusion defined within the context of exclusion**

As argued by Hogg, Fielding and Darley (2005), there is an overlap in our understanding of inclusion and exclusion, with the need for more appreciation of the wider societal constructs involved. Therefore, as a way of helping to define inclusion, we need to consider what is *not* inclusive. Exclusion from mainstream education is the most severe action a school can take in this regard (DfE, 2017; Munn, Cullen and Lloyd, 2000). This signals the decision that a child is temporarily or permanently no longer included within the school. It has also been claimed that exclusion from mainstream education represents exclusion from broader society (Macrae, Maguire & Milbourne, 2003; McLoughlin, 2009).

Inclusion is often used as a generalised term to suggest equality and access across fields such as politics, health and public policy. Here, there exists a commitment to prioritise a message of inclusion for all. Some, however, argue that inclusion has become clichéd (Sikes, Lawson & Parker, 2007); and evolved into a buzz-word (Cooper, 2004; Evans & Lunt, 2002) used loosely across policy and practice with an emphasis on rhetoric (Sugrue, 2015). Humphrey (2008) and Guldberg (2010) argued for the need to move the narrative on from the generalised notion of inclusion, and instead, towards the types of practices that should be involved in making inclusion work. Pellicano, Bölte and Stahmer (2018, p.386) echo this sentiment: “...*making progress toward inclusion in practice is urgent and must not be delayed by a theoretical argument about the definition of inclusion*”.

### **1.6 Inclusive Practice**

Inclusive practice can be driven by various elements. This includes its direct link with the promotion of a positive school ethos (Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013) that all staff buy into and share (Kane et al., 2009). In doing so, promoting a learning environment inclusive for autistic children (Lindsay et al., 2013) should

be supported by an inclusive transitional process based on individual needs (Schall, Wehman & McDonough, 2012). Key to this inclusive practice is the learner-educator interpersonal relationship (Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016) coupled with the use of teaching and learning strategies addressing the specific needs of each unique autistic child through differentiation. Hence, inclusive practice is argued to be an umbrella term under which educators holistically capture and cater for the learner's individual needs.

### **1.7 Support and the role of educators**

Within the current study, the term educator is defined in relation to any adult's close working with a child in an educational context. A range of adults fit under this umbrella term; for example - Class Teacher, Teaching Assistant (TA), learning mentor, as well as pastoral staff. Other adults working closely with children might include sessional workers such as sports coaches, or staff working for a charity. Jordan (2013) acknowledged challenges that educators might face when supporting autistic children. The author suggested that when interacting with autistic children, consideration should be made for their personality, personal attributes and variances in the difficulties they experience.

Educators need to provide a learning environment that is inclusive for autistic children. However, educators also need to be mindful of how to support each autistic child according to their unique needs. This might include resources used, sensory stimuli, attention to the learning environment, and developing an interpersonal relationship that helps motivate the learner (Lindsay et al., 2013). This individualised approach can be considered as an essential role for educators. By getting to know an autistic child, educators can become aware of their individual strengths and needs, and how this can be applied in teaching and learning. Therefore, the rationale for gaining the perspectives of educators is due to their close-working with autistic children within PRU settings.

Another justification is the opportunity to add to research through a breadth of educators' perspectives that cover a range of experiences, stances and roles. Very limited evidence exists from the perspective of educators on supporting autistic children excluded from secondary school and attending a PRU. The supportive role of educators also relates to a combination of strategies for teaching, use of resources, interpersonal relationships, or the way in which the impact of the learning environment is actively considered. Another key

understanding of this role is based on the support educators themselves need so that they, in turn, can support autistic children effectively. Self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006) is regarded as an essential element if an individual is to have the belief and confidence in their own ability. For educators, this is crucial for ensuring their effectiveness in supporting autistic children attending PRU settings. Support for educators can therefore involve training, communication, organisational needs, and other factors impacting on an educators' ability to provide support. This might also include additional means for an educator to be supported through supervision, systemic work, and other approaches, as particularly provided by an Educational Psychologist (EP).

### **1.8 The Relevance of Mainstream Secondary School**

Mainstream secondary schools cater for children between the ages of 11 to 16 years. Without being autism-specific, the journey through adolescence and towards adulthood can at times be daunting for any child during this: “...*time of significant change in multiple life domains*” (Crockett & Crouter, 1995, p.3). Jaworska and MacQueen (2015, p.291) describe adolescence in its broadest sense as referring to: “...*the period marking the transition from childhood to adulthood.*” There are also biological factors related to puberty impacting at this time (Curtis, 2015). These considerations reinforce the rationale as to why this particular age-group is the focus for the current study. Secondary school-aged autistic children are facing a multitude of challenges at this developmental stage of their life. This is separate from the challenges they are already facing in their primary needs.

In shaping any child's future outlook through person-centred individualised approaches (Thompson, Bölte, Falkmer & Girdler, 2018), experiences at this secondary phase of their education are crucial for adolescence going towards adulthood. Generally, secondary schools are facing increased pressures impacting on the entire school population. Such challenges can relate to elements such as an impending cycle of inspections, budgeting, resourcing, and a constant expectation from Senior Leadership regarding high levels of teaching and learning. Along with expectations regarding school rules and Behaviour Policies, league tables signal a drive for guaranteeing levels of attainment that match or exceed local/national expectations, (Gaertner, Wurster & Pant, 2014; Hardman

& Levačić, 2005). This is the type of pressurised secondary mainstream school environment within which autistic children are often expected to cope.

Another factor that contributes to the rationale for focusing on secondary school-aged autistic children related to the varied and individualised nature of their needs. Such needs can be manifested in their social communication/interaction and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests (and activities); as per the diagnostic criteria (DSM-5) mentioned earlier in section 1.3 (APA, 2013). Furthermore, with evidence showing autistic children being excluded from mainstream secondary in disproportionate numbers and frequently educated at PRUs (DfE, January 2016; DfE, September 2017), this serves to highlight how (without adequate support in place) a range of autistic children can find these pressures more challenging.

### **1.9 Exclusion from mainstream secondary and precursors for autistic children**

Autistic children can be adversely affected by challenges they face within mainstream secondary school environments (Brede et al., 2017). For gaining a picture of this impact, the contrast between primary and secondary is considered. The consistency in class teacher, peers, routines, and the classroom environment experienced at primary school (Dean, 2013; Gipps, Hargreaves & McCallum, 2015) is in marked-contrast to what Moore (2006) and Wing (2006) described as the bustling, noisy and seemingly chaotic environment of mainstream secondary school. Based on their needs (e.g., sensory, physical, emotional, social, and wellbeing) this type of environment presents particular challenges for children diagnosed with autism. For example, Mandy et al. (2016) identify the significant ecological impact of transition upon autistic children.

Guldberg (2010) warns that failure to gain understanding of the needs of autistic children results in barriers; thus, significantly increasing the risk of exclusion from mainstream. Teachers therefore need to be knowledgeable about autism, but also have an understanding of the individual needs of an autistic child (Humphrey & Lewis 2008). Failure to do so can lead to externalising behaviours (or verbal comments) being misunderstood by the class teacher as a deliberate challenge to their authority (Ashburner, Ziviani & Rodger, 2010; Roberts & Simpson, 2016). Where externalised behaviour is not presented, Scherff et al. (2014) identified challenges regarding support; particularly where the

internalising of thoughts and feelings can mean difficulties in identifying needs and consequences for mental wellbeing. With regards to autism understanding, authors such as Humphrey and Lewis (2008) and Dillon et al. (2016) identified the relationship between an autistic child and educator as being a crucial element for supporting inclusive practice. Where this relationship is either non-existent or at risk of breaking down, the consequences can lead to exclusion.

### **1.10 Forms of exclusion**

Government expectations are that exclusion, and especially permanent exclusion, should be used as a last-resort (DfE, 2017). Exclusion from school is such a severe act that the headteacher is the only person granted the power by law to take this extreme measure (Ferguson & Webber, 2014). There are differing types of exclusion. For external exclusions, a child is not allowed on school premises. This might be a fixed-term exclusion, after which the child returns to school, or a permanent exclusion meaning the child will no longer be educated at that school. In any given academic year, the maximum number of external exclusions allowed is 45 days (DfE, 2017). However, not all schools are transparent in recording and declaring their school exclusions. This is of particular concern, since schools are not legally required to declare rates of temporary internal exclusions (discussed next). This is where authors such as Power and Taylor (2018) question the actual picture of exclusion. Internal exclusion is the type of sanction where a student is isolated from lessons and from the general school population. This might last for the whole of the school day or for a number of days. This would normally be recorded on a child's confidential school record alongside other forms of exclusions such as being sent out of lessons, being kept in at lunchtimes, and detentions. Power and Taylor (2018) stress that all of the latter measures should be seen as forms of exclusion.

A common, but often controversial, approach is when a managed-move might be suggested or enforced by a headteacher (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2013). A managed-move is an arrangement between educational settings for a child to move from one setting to another. Bagley (2013) questions the idea of a managed-move as being a supportive and inclusive approach, and instead argues that this process can be another form of exclusion from school. In emphasising both the rationale and urgency of the current topic, it is understood that exclusion from a PRU is also possible. In such cases, Pirrie (2009) and Pirrie,

Macleod, Cullen and McCluskey (2011) ask 'Where next?' and 'What happens?'. The remit of this current study does not extend towards any extensive examination of these two questions. However, it is worth acknowledging this type of scenario here with regards to emphasising the extent of autism support necessary at PRU settings. This suggests major shortcomings and highlights why it is so crucial for this under-researched area to be addressed through this current study and beyond.

### **1.11 About Pupil Referral Units**

In the event a child is excluded from mainstream school, an alternative needs to be in place. Alternative Provision (AP) represents specific arrangements made for a child to access education outside the mainstream (Taylor, 2012). There are different types of APs catering for specific educational needs, such as settings specialising in autism support or other areas of SEND. Other such settings cater for children with medical, social, emotional, behavioural needs, or even those who have not actually been excluded from school, but are having difficulty finding an appropriate provision in mainstream (Munn et al., 2000). The generalised setting of a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) is the most common form of AP (McCluskey, Riddell & Weedon, 2015). PRUs were originally established to facilitate education for children not allowed to attend mainstream schools (due to behaviour and conduct-related incidents). This original purpose did not include the use of PRUs for educating children identified with SEN. Yet, although this type of setting was never designed specifically with autism in mind, autistic children excluded from mainstream secondary school, do end up in PRUs (Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017).

The 1996 Education Act led to PRUs being established. The term 'Pupil Referral Unit' had already been formally introduced in the Department for Education circular number 11/94 (Hill, 1997). Reference was made to the status still used today: Education Otherwise Than at School (EOTAS). Prior to that, Lord Elton had been commissioned by Her Majesty's government to produce a report into the prevailing issue of schools unable to cater for the needs of what were referred to as disruptive children (Elton, 1989). At the time of The Elton Report, there were no provisions or contingencies to facilitate children no longer attending mainstream school. Incidentally, the name itself derived from the process of 'referring' children to 'off-site units' where support teams provided specialist help.

To emphasise the nature of the setting, Michael and Frederickson (2013) argue that PRUs are not only for the permanently excluded. In addition to temporary exclusion, children can be attending the provision owing to a range of backgrounds, reasons and needs. This varied composition of children might also include those who lack an educational setting appropriate for their needs. Looked-after-children (LAC), who might be subjected to relocation from one Local Authority to another, might also attend a PRU. This type of educational setting may even include children who are at risk of permanent exclusion from mainstream secondary school, and where specific arrangements are put into place for them to be educated on a split-site. This emphasises the challenging environment into which autistic children are placed, and contributes to the reason for this focus.

Furthermore, there is an ever-present ongoing debate on PRUs, their purpose, relevance and effectiveness. For example, current attention on defining the role of PRUs alongside their mainstream school counterparts has been given a raised profile through the national coverage of the recently published Timpson Review of School Exclusion (DfE, May 2019). Commissioned by the Department for Education, the Timpson Review considered practises in school exclusions for England, and why these have risen. The review includes 30 recommendations to the government for addressing exclusions. The Timpson Review was released amidst the narrative of strongly worded views on PRUs, gang culture, and calls for this specific type of AP to be shut down (Longfield, 2019; Lydall, 2019). Incidentally, with relevance to the current study, EPs are mentioned up to eight times in the Timpson Review. It is interesting to see EPs mentioned within the context of good-practice, case studies, developing skilled practitioners, and models of working together (including with local partners).

### **1.12 Alternative pathways for secondary school-aged autistic children**

Not all autistic children who have been excluded from school attend a PRU. For example, where exclusions are approaching the point of the earlier-mentioned 45-day limit, the headteacher might implement a managed-move (Vincent, Harris, Thomson & Toalster, 2007). Despite concerns surrounding its use (and questions raised regarding inclusion), a managed-move might be considered beneficial for some children (Abdelnoor & Richey, 2007). For instance, a particular specialist setting might provide an increased level of

support, and could be less challenging regarding the environment, systems, and social interaction. As another alternative, secondary schools are also adopting the strategy of a reduced timetable for any student who is struggling. This often includes having a later start and an earlier finish to their school day, and might also involve only focusing on certain lessons.

For the earlier-mentioned pathway of being educated on a split-site, this might also punctuate a lack of consistency and place more pressure on an autistic child due to the weekly switching from one learning environment to the other. Some mainstream secondary schools have established bases within their premises to accommodate students who regularly receive fixed term exclusions and are at risk of being permanently excluded. As another pathway, autistic children excluded from mainstream school may be supported within a specially designed 'Inclusive Learning Hub' (Brede et al., 2017). This hub might be seen as an alternative to the generalised PRU setting, and its main purpose is to act as a transitional pathway to support autistic children towards their re-integration into mainstream education (as also identified by Thomas, 2015).

### **1.13 Collaborative approaches to support through Educational Psychology**

Joined-up working sees a forum where all parties are equal, whether referring to the autistic child, family members, or professionals (e.g., school staff or outside professionals). Rather than arriving as the expert psychologist, EPs assume the position of facilitator and play an important role in bringing professionals and services together (Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009). This can lead to a longer-term relationship towards what Haney (2012) described as educators partnering with families and others to enhance our understanding of autism. Other forms of joined-up working might involve a multi-agency or multi-disciplinary approach where the educator is supported by involvement from surrounding practitioners and services from outside the PRU organisation. Such implications for EP practice add to the overall rationale underpinning the aims of this current study.

### **1.14 Eco-systemic relevance to my own practice as a Trainee EP**

My role as researcher for the current study has capitalised on past experiences as a mainstream secondary school teacher, and then as an educator in a PRU. Although not having experience in supporting autistic children at the PRU setting, I did benefit from understanding the impact of exclusion. The PRU

was also an environment in which I first learned about the eclipsing role of the EP. Through this, I realised the numerous individuals surrounding any one child; let alone the past and current complexities that might be surrounding their lives outside the PRU. This approach to support echoes my own experiences whilst practising as a Trainee EP, where I had numerous experiences of facilitating collaborative forums. This should be seen in combination with my involvement at organisational, group and individual levels whilst on different placements. Hence, this current research draws some parallels regarding my experiences in witnessing the combination of autistic children struggling at mainstream secondary, their exclusion, attendance at PRUs, and educators themselves struggling in their attempts to apply inclusive practices within a challenging environment. When considering the various levels and context-based influences, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Eco-systemic Model (see Figure 1) provides the ideal framework for explaining these factors at play.

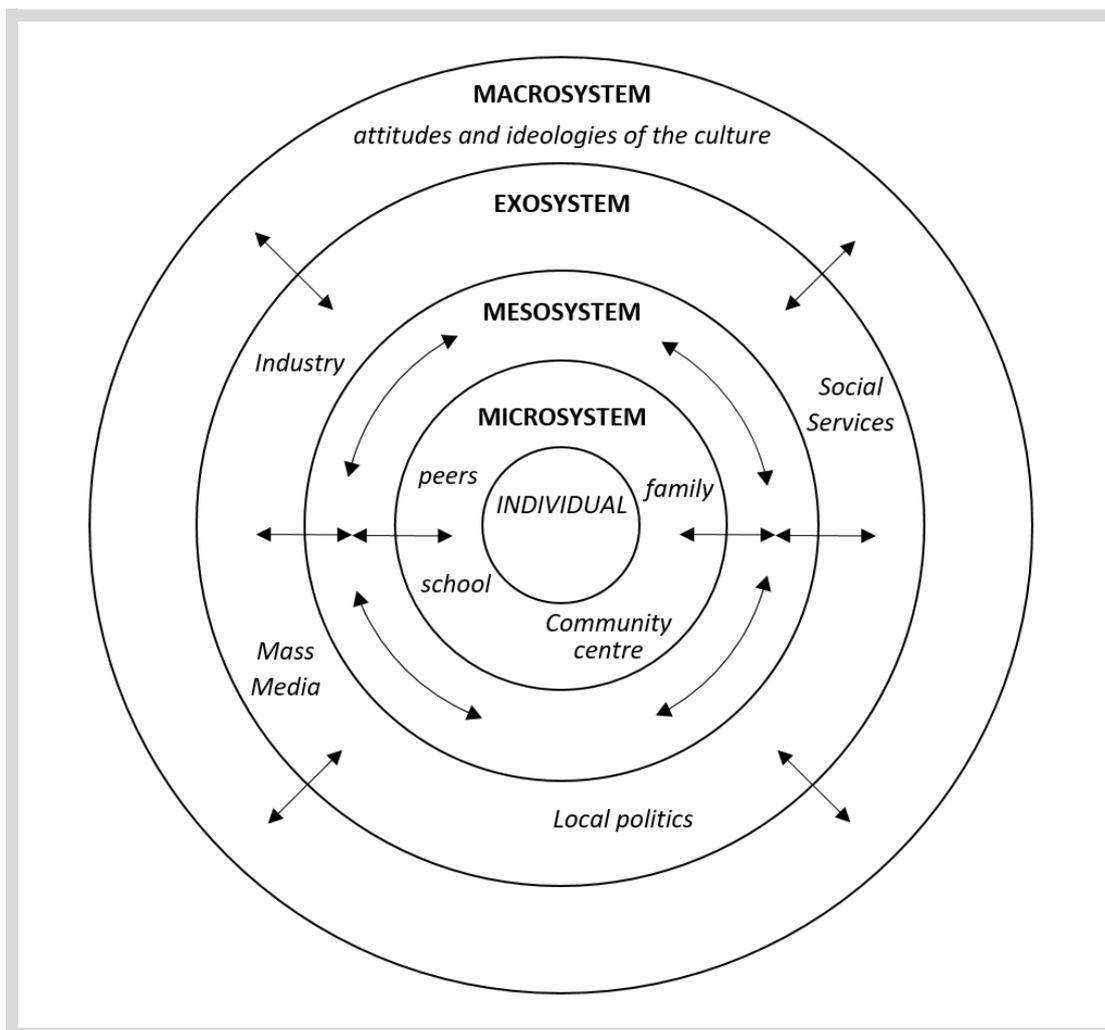


Figure 1: *Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Eco-systemic Model*

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that acknowledging the impact of the surrounding contexts can contribute to our understanding of the individual and their needs. Bronfenbrenner described the multiple layers of influence surrounding a setting as constituting of ever-widening contexts, and referred to these as ecological systems. Therefore, the depth of my experiences on my various placements has helped to underscore the relevance of this particular eco-systemic approach. The influence of the learning environment, family, community, the mass media, legislation, and ideologies of culture all interact to impact on the individual - with the autistic child being at the centre of this model.

In terms of positionality, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Eco-systemic Model may be regarded as sitting comfortably within the social constructionist position underpinning this current study; as outlined in section 3.2 (*'Philosophical stance of the current study'*). In keeping with this position, a connection can be identified between: autistic children (in terms of needs and support); educators' perspectives (and constructs) on support; the social constructionist stance (e.g., impact of experiences and influences); this ecosystemic model (with the individual being surrounded by interacting layers of contexts); and, the way in which the PRU setting is represented as an active part of the eco-system. Thus, all elements complement each other to help form the positionality of this current study.

# Chapter Two

## Literature Review

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### 2.1 Chapter Overview

For a topic of ongoing relevance, and despite the wealth of available autism research in other areas, very little literature exists representing educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children attending PRUs following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school. This review of literature aims to draw on available sources of research that can underpin this topic for informing current understanding and practice. To achieve this, it is important that areas surrounding the topic are addressed to provide a broader understanding.

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### 2.2 A note on including both autism and non-autism specific literature

Where non-autism specific literature is included in this chapter, this is in keeping with the nature of the current topic. For example, despite PRUs not being autism specialist settings, there are key underlying generic features that can be argued as being beneficial to autistic children regardless of the educational setting. Such features include relationships, organisational considerations, environment, and resources that are (or should be) in place.

### 2.3 Inclusion through inclusive practice

McGillicuddy and O'Donnell (2014) conducted a qualitative study to explore teachers' perceptions of inclusive mainstream education for autistic children in the Republic of Ireland. This featured eight mainstream post-primary\*<sup>4</sup> school teachers, with data gathered using semi-structured interviews. Researchers found the implicit model of inclusion used by teachers to be more consistent with the idea of integration rather than being based on inclusive education. This is to say, autistic children were expected to conform to the mainstream environment, rather than the learning environment or teaching practices being adapted to cater for *their* specific needs.

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\*<sup>4</sup> Post-primary education refers to pupils between the ages of 12 to 17 years old.

For this notion of inclusion, the emphasis should be placed on inclusive practice; the mechanisms and processes making inclusion a reality for each individual autistic child. Within McGillicuddy and O'Donnell's study, there seems to be a contrast between the perceptions of teachers. For example, whilst perceiving that elements of post-primary settings were beneficial for autistic children, there was also acknowledgement that transition to this setting can be particularly difficult for them. However, to add to the complexity surrounding transition, there are times when changing from one setting to another might be beneficial for autistic children. For example (albeit exclusion-related), Sproston et al. (2017), whose study is reviewed later, showed the challenge of *change* for autistic pupils existing alongside benefits such as renewed opportunities to establish positive interpersonal relationships (which the autistic girls had not experienced in their prior setting). Hence, McGillicuddy and O'Donnell acknowledged the need for a multi-faceted approach when supporting autistic children. As identified by Segall and Campbell (2012), educators (such as classroom teachers) are recognised as having a key role in promoting inclusive practices for supporting autistic children within their educational environment.

In another study, Hayes, Casey, Williamson, Black and Winsor (2013) examined whether there were any correlations between educators' own perceptions of their preparedness to teach autistic children and their actual capacity to apply inclusive practice. The study adopted a quantitative design featuring an online survey that was distributed to participants. The 50-item survey was designed by the researchers with the purpose of assessing the overall readiness of educators to teach autistic children in an inclusive classroom. Included were items exploring: participants' understanding of inclusion; their familiarity with particular teaching and learning methods related to autism; and their understanding of autism. The sample featured 204 educators who taught in public and private schools located in an urban south-eastern district of the United States of America. Included were those from different racial backgrounds and with experience of teaching at pre-school, elementary, middle or high school educational settings.

On the key points from their results, a significant positive correlation was found, with teachers who had previously gained training and professional development in autism showing higher levels of knowledge in terms of teaching

methods and characteristics of autism. However, with another result, Hayes et al. (2013) added a note of caution. The authors reported no significant correlation between an educator's academic/professional development and the extent to which they were knowledgeable on the practices necessary for making their teaching inclusive for autistic children. They concluded that this particular finding emphasised the need for increased training, and that focus should be placed on ensuring that autism knowledge is applied practically and inclusively.

A strength of this study is the importance of promoting the understanding that, regardless of the educational setting, the ability of educators to include autistic children within the classroom (Lindsay et al., 2013) is dependent on their effectiveness in applying knowledge of autism in an inclusive manner. This is particularly relevant to the current topic in that educators at a PRU need to be aware of the skills, knowledge and preparedness essential for supporting autistic children. Hayes et al. (2013) further explained that any high level of autism knowledge was not being applied by educators, despite the educational setting being promoted as inclusive. To this end, it could be argued that this represented a superficial and surface-level approach to autism support where autistic children might well be included (in-person) within the mainstream classroom and alongside their peers. Yet, still not being beneficiaries of inclusive practice.

One limitation of Hayes et al.'s study relates to its design. For example, a mixed-methods design might have provided richer insights into the topic (Venkatesh, Brown & Bala, 2013). Specifically, perspectives could have been gained to help explain the above disconnect between knowledge, professional attainment, experience, and the failure to embrace (or convincingly apply) inclusive practice. Further, this could have helped gain an understanding of educators' readiness through gaining their views on teaching approaches. Also to be gained could have been an insight into how the classroom environment, resources, and approaches to teaching can be modified to reflect inclusive practice. The identified disconnect between knowledge and the ability to apply inclusive autism practices is an important aspect of the message from Hayes et al.'s (2013) findings, and the priority in addressing this is perhaps indicated through their own (above) note of caution within their findings.

## 2.4 The impact of transition

Transition is described as being related to the process of change (Hoy, Parsons & Kovshoff, 2018). Where an educational setting is concerned, this change can be experienced at varying levels and in differing forms (discussed later in this section). Examples might include the change from one educational setting to another, commencing a new academic year, moving from one lesson to the next, or changing activities during a lesson. Transition occurs throughout an individual's lifetime (Blossfeld & Von Maurice, 2011). Hence, examining educational experiences (and cognitive functioning) is essential for helping us to understand the impact of transition on autistic children (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Pellicano et al., 2017). However, before going on to review evidence on this aspect of autism support, this section will commence by setting the context and helping us to define transition according to existing evidence. To assist us, Sterling-Turner and Jordan (2007) argued that regardless of age or ability, or whether this is a structured or unstructured change, transition is an inevitable part of life for everyone. Described as being one of the most challenging periods in the educational life of a learner, transition can carry implications in terms of mental health and an overall sense of wellbeing (Zeedyk et al., 2003).

Mandy et al. (2016) further emphasise the broadened impact of transition in ecological terms with the understanding of major shifts in an autistic learner's life; thus, presenting a combination of academic, social, emotional, and organisational challenges. Rous and Hallam (2012) promoted Kagan's (1992) understanding of transition as defined under two types of change, horizontal and vertical; otherwise referred to as micro- and macro-transitions, respectively (Roncaglia, 2013). Alongside broader periods of macro-transitions (such as changing from one year group to another, transitioning from mainstream primary to secondary school, or returning after a school holiday), there are smaller, but equally challenging, phases of transition occurring over fixed periods of time.

In a paper on practical and theoretical understandings of both phases of transition, Roncaglia (2013) reports how micro-transitions can become a significant source of distress and anxiety for autistic children. Extensive evidence shows that children and adolescents diagnosed with autism face an increased risk of anxiety difficulties and anxiety disorder diagnoses (Van Steensel, Bögels & Perrin, 2011). Highlighted were the types of challenges presented on a day-to-

day, hourly, or even moment-by-moment basis. For example, micro-transitions are experienced at the end of a lesson, at the start of lunchtime, and when changing from one activity/project to another. Moving from one place to another, shifting from whole-class to group work (and then to independent work), or experiencing a change of teacher or teacher/key adult; these all signify the multiple (and often overlapping) phases of change that autistic children can be faced with in just a single day. Transition can also be particularly difficult for autistic children due to (for example) social, interpersonal, cognitive, emotional and sensory needs (Lequia, Wilkerson, Kim & Lyons, 2015). Considering developmental stages, key phases of transition for autistic children include: progression from early years settings to primary school (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010), primary to secondary school (Makin, Hill & Pellicano, 2017), transition to college (Hewitt, 2011), and transition to adulthood (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009).

For transition from early years, Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) conducted a study focusing on teachers' views. Participants were invited to complete a survey on effective pre-school transition strategies for children diagnosed with autism. The Elements for Transition to Kindergarten (ETK) interview (Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer & Todd, 2004) formed the basis for data collection in Denkyirah and Agbeke's study. Their resulting 10-item survey was open-ended. Regarding support for pre-schoolers (in preparation for transition) this allowed participants to respond according to the importance they placed on any one item. Teachers of pre-schoolers were selected from across two countries (Ghana, n=65; and USA, n=210) and the survey was piloted separately in each country.

The findings from this study identified commonalities and differences across the countries. Issues that both groups identified as being most important for transition support included sharing of information with the family, making home-visits, helping the family to find resources, and the timing of planning. When comparing data from the two countries, there were some contrasting findings. For differences, whereas teachers from the USA cohort attributed the highest level of importance to 'Assistive technology use' and 'Parent training', the Ghana cohort saw these as being of relatively lower importance. With assistive technology use being the lowest percentage of all responses, what is not clear is the reason for this. One explanation might be a reluctance to use technology (such as tablets/smart phones) with very young children. This is particularly when

considering current ongoing concerns about screen-time being related to addictive features and the negative impact on a child's cognitive, physical and social development (Livingstone, Marsh, Plowman, Ottovordemgentschenfelde & Fletcher-Watson, 2014; Neumann, 2015).

Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) do not provide any comparative information of socio-economic or demographic factors for the two countries. This would have helped with further interpreting the findings. On a similar point, it would have been helpful to understand more about (and to be able to compare) eco-systemic factors related to each country and their educational contexts. For example, this could have included: government policy, funding across education, teacher-training, autism-related awareness/practice, and, the impact of culture and beliefs across the contexts for these two contrasting countries. Indeed, during their discussion section of the study, Denkyirah and Agbeke do talk about the socio-cultural differences between the two countries having a bearing on the result. However, a more broadened eco-systemic discussion capturing the above-mentioned demographical aspects (and other factors) would have been valuable. This study might also be seen as a missed opportunity for engaging in explorations and comparisons of autism practice and transition; hence, providing more in-depth investigations regarding such an early phase of transition. Interestingly, for the current PRU-based study, the relevance of pre-school and early years transition provides us with an added picture regarding the shape of autism support stretching further back to an earlier developmental stage.

Existing evidence shows a link between transition and executive function being acknowledged from the perspective of autism (Jahromi, Bryce & Swanson, 2013; Pellicano, 2012; Saggars, 2016). It is therefore reasonable to argue that the current focus on the impact of transitions relates to the impact on preparedness and the ability to cope with (or function effectively) as a result of change. As Meltzer (2018) explains, executive function is an umbrella-term referring to a range of cognitive skills essential for day-to-day functioning such as planning, mental flexibility, inhibitory control and working memory. With existing challenges regarding social and communication difficulties, repetitive behaviours, and sensory needs, autistic children are at increased risk of struggling to cope when faced with transition. For their executive function, these needs are further compounded when there is a lack of adequate, individualised support leading up

to, during, and beyond phases of transition. Without this type of support, there are consequences for emotional needs (Tobin et al., 2012); thus, the added precursors leading to the risk of exclusion from school.

Pellicano et al.'s (2017) work looked at the extent to which executive function predicts school readiness in both autistic and typical children. Pellicano and colleagues were interested in examining whether individual differences in autistic children's executive function was associated with their readiness to learn in the school environment. Their cross-sectional study featured two groups of pre-school children (autistic, n=30; typical, n=30), who were matched on ability and age. Through a range of measures covering executive function and school readiness. It was found that, compared to their typical counterparts, autistic children showed less-developed executive function skills and lower levels of school readiness. However, for both autistic and non-autistic children, Pellicano et al. found individual differences in their executive function skills were uniquely related when considering school readiness. This was specifically the case for working memory and inhibitory control. A strength of this paper is that it allows us to gain some understanding on considering what could contribute to later difficulties at, for example, mainstream secondary school.

This is consistent with previous and recent evidence declaring early executive function as predicting adaptive behaviour and outcomes in later phases, and particularly in early adulthood (Kenny, Cribb & Pellicano, 2019; Miller, Nevado-Montenegro & Hinshaw, 2012). The relevance of executive function is therefore reinforced in relation to transition and autism understanding. When considering the impact of transition, another value of Pellicano et al.'s (2017) paper is that their comparison of autistic and non-autistic children has allowed us to understand that autistic children require additional support for their executive function-related needs. Pellicano et al. were clear in their findings that despite executive function being crucial for all learners, autistic children found transition to be particularly problematic, and were less ready for school.

## **2.5 Significance of primary to mainstream secondary school transition**

Makin et al. (2017) focused on how the process of transitioning from primary to secondary school can be particularly challenging for autistic children. The authors were keen to add to what they recognised as limited understanding surrounding child-, school- and system-level factors involved in this transition.

Their mixed-methods study featured 15 autistic children recruited from a densely populated Local Authority in the south-east of England. Interviews were conducted on two occasions over a four-month period: (1) in their final term at mainstream primary, and (2) during their first term in Year 7 at mainstream secondary. The mixture of quantitative and qualitative instruments represented a strength of this study, and provided the opportunity to triangulate data. The authors used measures of verbal ability, autism symptomatology, sensory responsiveness and anxiety. They looked at whether any of these could predict school transition success, with interviews complimenting this process. The approach was valuable for eliciting the voice of each autistic child or young person.

Key headline findings from Makin et al. related to reported negative transition experiences, and included the need for addressing specific needs, recognising the negative impact of the secondary school environment, and loss of a familiar relationship with primary class teacher. Where parents expressed concerns over mainstream secondary schools being unable (or reluctant) to “*tailor provision to their child’s specific needs*” (Makin et al., 2017, p.12), this helped to shape the finding regarding the importance of addressing the specific needs of autistic children. The impact on autistic children resulting from the daunting size of the secondary school environment highlighted the difficulties they faced in trying to acclimatise to their new learning environment, and the related demands.

Where the loss of a familiar relationship was highlighted, this is consistent with autism research where the safety, security, and predictability associated with a key adult is an essential feature of support for autistic children (Pianta, Hamre & Allen, 2012). This finding resonates with the current research in that (whether as a mentor, TA, class teacher, or any other) an educator is most often a key-person in the life of an autistic child. Furthermore, by focusing on modifications of a setting before, during and after the transition of an autistic child, Makin et al. (2017) provided important information on the broader impacts of transition. Therefore, consistent with the rationale behind the current study, Makin et al. promote transition as an ongoing process, rather than a static phase.

The importance that Makin et al. placed on relationship, context, and tailored-support links with Hebron’s (2018) work on school-connectedness and

autism. For example, where an educational setting is welcoming and accommodating, this supports the process of transition by promoting a sense of belonging for autistic children in recognising that their needs are being understood and acted upon. Within the context of this current study, this idea of school-connectedness is underpinned by a supportive PRU environment where an autistic child can feel accepted and trusted by others. Educators have a central role in maintaining the mechanisms of this school-connectedness. This relates to another of Makin et al.'s (2017) findings, on the idea of improving the fit between the autistic child and their new context (discussed later), and moulding the educational environment. When considering the overall methods adopted by Makin et al. for facilitating their findings, Malina, Nørreklit and Selto (2011) highlight the danger of disjointed outcomes from mixed-methods research where there could be the risk of the resulting qualitative and quantitative data being presented as separate entities. Makin et al. (2017) do, however, avoid this danger via the richness of their qualitative results, which complement and explain the quantitative results. The research was able to tap directly into perspectives on transition experiences from the voices of children, parents and teachers.

A possible limitation of Makin et al.'s work relates to the number of autistic girls ( $n=2$ ) compared to autistic boys ( $n=12$ ) in their sample. With the previous chapter of this thesis highlighting the ratio of boys to girls diagnosed with autism as three to one (Loomes et al., 2017), the sample could have been more representative of this current ratio. Challenges related to recruitment in autism research are understandable. Yet, this highlights the extent to which the voice of autistic girls remains under-represented across research. Furthermore, five of the child participants were identified as having a dual-diagnosis of autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). At first sight, this might raise a question regarding the sample and criteria regarding autism. However, two points add to the strength of this study. Firstly, Makin et al. (2017) were explicit about dual diagnosis, and secondly, as Simonoff et al. (2008) show, 70% of autistic children have additional diagnoses. As such, it would have been unrealistic to expect Makin et al. (2017) to guarantee recruiting autistic children without any additional diagnoses.

Mandy et al. (2016) focused on an intervention for supporting the primary to secondary school transitional experiences for autistic children ( $n=37$ ). The

intervention STEP-ASD (Systemic Transition in Education Programme for Autism Spectrum Disorder) was designed to reduce the emotional and behavioural challenges autistic children can face when transitioning from primary to secondary school. Echoing elements of the current study, this support is sought through modifying the secondary school environment not only before, but also during and after, transitioning from primary school. The purpose is to improve the fit (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Sproston et al., 2017) between autistic children and their new educational context. For this to happen, the mechanism of change relates to an autistic child's ability (when support is in place) to engage and to access their new educational context.

Mandy et al.'s research design featured an experimental group receiving STEP-ASD (n=17) and a control group who received standard transition support (n=20). Outcomes were measured before and after transitioning to secondary school. The experimental group showed a reduction in behavioural and emotional difficulties; as measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). This indicated benefits of the transition intervention for reducing anxiety and related emotional responses. As with this current study, Mandy et al. (2016) linked the systemic approach of STEP-ASD directly to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic model. Thus, with both Mandy et al. (2016) and the current study, there is a strong acknowledgement regarding the relevance of the context, its emotional impact, and consideration of how the learning environment relates to the eco-system within which it is inevitably based.

## **2.6 Exclusion from mainstream school**

Only a handful of studies have examined school exclusion experiences of autistic children. Brede et al. (2017) conducted a study where they interviewed nine autistic children excluded from mainstream school. All children were, at the time, attending an 'Inclusive Learning Hub' - a provision specially designed for re-integrating autistic children back into mainstream education. Brede and colleagues were interested in examining views on their experiences of exclusion, and re-integration into school. Parents and teachers of the children were also interviewed.

For this group of autistic children, Brede et al. were particularly keen to identify and understand key factors surrounding the experience of exclusion from school and the subsequent process of re-integration. They also sought to

understand this within the context of a group of autistic children whose needs were particularly complex. In this sense, the term complex can be understood as referring to the range of areas of needs defined through autism diagnosis (APA, 2013), additional/multiple diagnoses (e.g., demand avoidant behaviour), and the premise that every autistic child is an individual with their own set of strengths as well needs (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). The findings showed that previous school experiences were predominantly negative. For example, it was felt that needs were not met, and approaches used by staff were inappropriate for addressing the difficulties experienced. There was also the feeling that this contributed to a decline in behaviour and mental wellbeing; leading to exclusion from school. Brede et al. (2017) found four key themes related to successful re-integration into school: significant adjustments being made to the physical environment; the need for strong staff-student relationships; being understood regarding their individual specific needs; and, genuine efforts being made to improve their wellbeing.

Alongside the strength of Brede et al.'s research in eliciting multiple perspectives, other interviews could have contributed to an increased picture of factors. For example, interviewing key staff from the original school excluded from in combination with staff from the receiving/re-integration school could have been beneficial for adding to existing voices. However, even though this could have significantly increased the scope of the research, it was likely not feasible - especially if the children attended several schools. Nevertheless, one particular theme, 'Gradual decline in school engagement', provided a specific picture of the impact of difficulties. A common message across autism research is the sudden impact of change and the overall immediacy of difficulties. It is therefore valuable to see Brede et al. providing a picture of how difficult experiences can build up over time.

As another example of the few studies within this area, Sproston et al. (2017) conducted a study on exclusion from mainstream secondary school, featuring the perspectives of eight autistic girls and their parents. Part of their rationale for focusing on autistic girls related to long-held (and unfounded) assumptions that autism predominantly affected males. Their rationale was also driven by the concern that autistic girls are being consistently overlooked within research. This is to the extent that the authors identify that a lack of support within the increasingly pressurised secondary school environment presents a risk to the

wellbeing of autistic girls. A semi-structured interview was used to collect their views, with data analysed using thematic analysis. With existing literature showing similar challenges for autistic boys (Brede et al., 2017), Sproston et al. (2017) stressed that themes and sub-themes (e.g., the environment, staff understanding, and breakdowns in relationships) were not exclusive to autistic girls.

Regarding the first theme of 'Inappropriate school environments', Sproston et al. discussed sensory needs and the way in which elements of the context were not modified to cater for these challenges; thus, leading to emotional impact. Also indicated was the social-emotional impact of being placed with peers, without any due consideration. With this theme also encompassing many general pressures experienced in mainstream classrooms, Sproston et al. were consistent with existing research when highlighting the unmet or unsupported demands of the mainstream school environment; and resulting consequences for autistic children (Brede et al., 2017).

For their second theme, 'Relationships within the school', Sproston et al. (2017) identified perspectives towards the interpersonal complexities and demands facing autistic girls. Difficulties not being addressed ranged from interactions with staff and peers, as well as the need for appropriate and effective communication. There is agreement across research regarding the crucial and over-arching role of teachers and other educators on factors such as forming a key relationship, a sense of security, interpersonal skills, attachment, and advocating for the voice of the child or young person (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Gray, Galton & McLaughlin, 2011; Witmer, 2005). This relates to the position of educators in promoting positive connections, rapport, trust, safety, familiarity, and other elements combining to make an autistic child feel supported. When speaking of these 'Relationships within the school', Sproston et al. (2017) could be alluding to the type of trusting relationships with the staff, or with a key-adult knowledgeable in autism (Dann, 2011; Robledo & Donnellan, 2008). The rationale for the current study echoes with this in terms of the role of educators, and the impact of their relationship with an autistic child attending a PRU.

Sproston et al.'s (2017) third and final theme on 'staff responses' relates to two areas commonly raised across the topic of education within autism research, and that are central to the current study; lack of understanding and lack

of support. Lindsay et al. (2013) help to contextualise this finding from Sproston et al.'s (2017) by seeing *understanding/support* as a key challenge if educators truly are to include autistic children within mainstream classrooms. For Sproston et al. (2017), this was not only about having a general understanding of autism. Rather, this was about school staff not being able to take-on-board and understand the specific needs of autistic girls, and consequently, failing to provide the right type of support. Consistent with the promotion of every autistic child being unique, failure to do so resulted in the inappropriate responses that Sproston et al. identified; thus, contributing to school precursors to (and the eventual consequence of) exclusion from school. The battles between parents and schools that Sproston et al. identify echoes with existing research in terms of known challenges to inclusion that exist; challenges owing to staff not understanding individual needs and lacking understanding of providing specific autism support.

A limitation of Sproston et al.'s study is that teachers were not involved. Perhaps this could be regarded as a key omission when considering that inter-relationships with a key-adult (such as teacher) were cited as presenting prior challenges. Another possible limitation is the sample size (n=8 autistic girls and their parents), and it could be argued that an increased richness of data may have been gained with an increased number of participants. However, it should be appreciated that this is an extremely difficult sample to recruit, and in any case, the sum of eight autistic girls and their parents represents a fair size for a study using thematic analysis. Furthermore, despite the findings being valuable for informing, for example, EP practice, there is a note of caution. With such a small sample size, responses from participants should not be regarded as representing wider populations of autistic girls and their parents. It should also not be assumed that the resulting data can be extrapolated to boys, yet it is notable that the findings do bear similarities with studies on the mainstream school experiences of autistic boys (e.g., Brede et al., 2017). This could be telling us that there are some commonalities across genders in areas such as relationship with a key adult, individual needs or feeling secure.

Sproston et al.'s (2017) study highlights the need for increased perspectives, and does raise questions regarding subtle differences between autistic girls and boys. For example, girls in the study reported that staff were

often unable to understand their needs. Sproston et al. acknowledged that crisis in autistic boys might be more easily identified by staff because of their more overtly externalised presentations (Lai, Lombardo, Auyeung, Chakrabarti & Baron-Cohen, 2015; May, Cornish & Rinehart, 2014). Furthermore, externalising is consistent with evidence on non-autistic boys too (Meltzer, Gatward, Goodman & Ford, 2003). Dworzynski, Ronald, Bolton and Happé (2012) found that despite presenting similar levels of autistic traits, girls were less likely to receive a diagnosis due to the apparent absence of behavioural difficulties.

On the issue of ending up at PRUs, Sproston et al. (2017) were clear in highlighting the inappropriateness of this particular setting for autistic children. However, in reflecting the rationale for this current study, the authors did acknowledge how PRU-based support can be effective at individual, one-to-one, and systemic levels. For example, many of the girls found aspects of the PRU to be advantageous to them (e.g., the broader curriculum, reduced pressure, opportunities for being listened to). Furthermore, Sproston et al. helped to challenge the negative picture that can be attributed to PRUs (Longfield, 2019; Lydall, 2019). Specifically, Sproston et al. promoted the acknowledgement of PRUs being smaller and more personalised environments featuring opportunities for a high staff-to-student ratio (as also raised by Hart, 2013). In addition to the small group learning contexts, one to one opportunities indicated the value of adult support; where relationship-building is key. Sproston et al. (2017) added that whilst autistic girls were *“pleased that PRUs were flexible to their needs”* (p.5), this contrasted with their feelings of *“adaptations not being accommodated in mainstream”* (p.5).

One of Sproston et al.’s overall recommendations was that, whilst PRUs should not be viewed as the default option for autistic pupils excluded from school, mainstream schools should aim to incorporate aspects of the PRU environment into their mainstream settings. To emphasise the value of Sproston et al., their findings (such as the importance of staff relationships and the benefits of PRUs having smaller classroom environments) were recognised in the recent DfE commissioned review of literature on school exclusion, and the ongoing and *“disproportionate exclusion of certain groups of pupils”* (Graham, White, Edwards, Potter & Street, 2019, p.15). By providing comparisons between PRU and mainstream secondary school experiences within the context of autism,

Sproston et al.'s (2017) research adds to the current understanding of autism support, and the role of educators.

## **2.7 Promoting support through partnership working**

Guldborg (2010) focused on some of the core principles required for working in partnership. The author stressed that if autistic children are to be supported effectively, there are preconditions which need to be implemented. For this, 'best-practice' is explained as reflecting the systems, strategies and resources that need to be thoughtfully embedded and already in place prior to the arrival of an autistic child at the educational setting. Towards this goal, educators need to have current knowledge of autism, and what this would mean in terms of the systems in place, strategies, resourcing. Guldborg (2010) recognised that this should be achieved through partnerships; with joint-working between practitioners, other professionals, and parents. For this reason, it can be argued that working in partnership is an underlying feature of the support that educators need from within their educational setting, alongside the involvement of professionals and outside-agencies.

As indicated at the start of this chapter (see section 2.2), non-autism specific literature is included in this review. This reflects how certain aspects of support for autistic children relate to generic approaches, structures, and systems. Such literature reflects the eco-systemic underpinnings of the current research (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A study conducted by Milbourne, Macrae and Maguire (2003) gained perceptions on the effectiveness of multi-agency partnerships in challenging social exclusion. One outcome highlighted "*the value-added benefits of multi-agency work*" as evidence of how agencies can learn from each other (Milbourne et al., 2003, p.31). Gaskell and Leadbetter (2009) described the counter-effects on those professionals working collaboratively, and how EPs reported an increased feeling of professional identity when working within a multi-agency team. Hence, working in partnership should be considered within an infrastructure that accommodates communication. Whilst keeping in mind that communication approaches are integral to multi-agency working (Palikara, Castro, Gaona & Eirinaki, 2018), the ability of educators to support the needs of autistic children should be based on this communication in terms of mechanisms, strategies and resources.

Over the past years, recent reforms introduced to the education system have had direct relevance to children diagnosed with autism (Children and Families Act 2014; SEND Code of Practice 2015). With the introduction of the EHCP replacing the Statement of SEN, this signalled the current statutory provision embedded within law. The Local Authority has a legal duty to provide a Plan for specific children and young people identified under SEND, as selected by the LA panel. Once implemented, there are expected outcomes that need to be maintained. Interestingly, when overviewing a combination of the previous Statement of SEN and subsequent EHCPs since 2010, the Department for Education has reported an increase by 3% where autism is identified as the primary need (Whitaker, 2014).

In addition to eliciting the voices of children and young people alongside significant input from parents (Palikara et al., 2018), one of the key expected functions of the EHCP process is that this should foster a collaborative way of working across services and stakeholders (Castro & Palikara, 2017). At the core of this process is the expectation of multi-agency working towards the production of the EHCP. However, Boesley and Crane (2018) present findings which are critical of this notion of collaborative working. In qualitative interviews with 16 SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators), they report that instead of seeing education, health and care working together (as stipulated by the reforms), there is over-representation of stakeholders from education.

For Boesley and Crane (2018), SENCOs are valuable for adding to research understanding since they are normally the main source for managing, communicating and liaising with regards to the school and outside services. The SENCO position also allows them to recognise all those professionals, services and practitioners surrounding the child or young person and their family. Hence, with other research being able to concentrate on the wider stakeholders encompassing education, health and care, Boesley and Crane's (2018) singular choice of SENCOs for this research should not be seen as a limitation, but rather as promoting a forensic approach to partnership working.

The joined-up approach between education, health and care can be defined by the proactive involvement of individuals and services where collaboration is the key. Although Daniels et al. (2007) recognised this as an understanding of partnership, they argued from an alternative perspective. On

this, working in partnership needs to be further defined as an on-going process where children and young people are supported in a pathway away from social exclusion. This principle of a joined-up approach helps to reinforce the rationale behind the current research. As such, an educator should not be seen as working in isolation, but instead, surrounded by infrastructures from within and outside the setting. Thus, infrastructures that represent people working together.

On considering the importance of working in partnership, class teachers, TAs, and learning mentors alike should not be seen in isolation as they work with autistic children. Instead, whether related to training, resources or strategies, this is about the broader mechanism of support surrounding educators. Building on the idea of joined-up working, consultation can be argued as an ideal forum within which educators can work in partnership with autistic children and their families. Therefore, as a result of their involvement at differing levels, EPs are ideally placed to facilitate this joined-up working, in addition to opportunities for directly supporting educators.

## **2.8 Research questions and aims**

The following research questions and aims are in response to a combination of this review of literature and the rationale within the previous chapter.

### **Main Research Question:**

What are educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units, following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school?

### **Sub-research questions:**

Sub-RQ1: What are educators' views on the primary needs of autistic children at a PRU?

Sub-RQ2: What are educators' views on good-practice for supporting autistic children at a PRU?

Sub-RQ3: What are educators' views on the support they require in order to work effectively with autistic children in a PRU?

Sub-RQ4: How do educators work with the autistic child, their family, staff, professionals, or others to address specific needs?

**Aims of the Research:**

Despite concerns, and the existence of other (more specialist) settings, PRUs are frequently used for educating autistic children following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school (DfE, January 2016; DfE, September 2017). Worryingly, whether this is permanent or fixed-period, for every 10 autistic children, one of them will be excluded from school (DfE, July 2018). Considering the frequency with which autistic children are excluded from mainstream secondary schools and educated at PRUs, the current study seeks to examine support from two angles: supporting autistic children, and support for educators. Therefore, from the above research questions, the specific aims are:

1. To examine educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children attending PRUs;
2. To gain an understanding of types of support needed for educators to work most effectively with autistic children in PRU settings; and,
3. To identify implications for EP practice regarding PRUs and the over-arching role of EP support.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

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#### 3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted in the present research. It details the design, materials, participants, sampling, data collection, analysis, ethical considerations and understanding of the current study within the context of the researcher. To emphasise its influence on the design and the overall methodological approach, this chapter commences by setting the context of the philosophical stance that underpinned study design.

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#### 3.2 Philosophical stance of the current study

It has been argued that researchers should explicitly state the philosophical framework(s) adopted throughout the planning, design, procedures, findings, and outcomes of their study (Carter & Little, 2007; Cunningham, 2014). Trochim (2006) further explains that how the world is perceived and understood is based on assumptions made by the researcher. Furthermore, key areas (such as the shape of the methodological approach) are informed by philosophical assumptions underpinning the research. These assumptions act as a framework when findings are interpreted. Accordingly, the social constructionism approach (Burr, 2015; Harper, 2011) is the philosophical assumption adopted in this research. It should be noted that other stances such as positivism (Schauer, 2013) and critical realism (Fletcher, 2017) were reflected on, but considered as inappropriate for this current study.

Therefore, the reason why social constructionism is appropriate for the current study relates to its definition. This social constructionist stance acknowledges the role played by cultural, social and historical contexts, and their part in shaping human knowledge with regards to meaning and joint constructs. In reference to the range of educators participating in the current study and the range of perspectives expressed on the topic, the belief held by social constructionists is that diversity in interpretations and meanings should be acknowledged. The social constructionist framework adopted by the researcher

allowed for the exploration of differing perspectives as expressed by the range of educators.

One rationale for adopting the social constructionist standpoint is that the framework acknowledges the views of the individual as being subject to multiple factors. Furthermore, in terms of their experiences and realities expressed, the exploration and capturing of such subjectivities from educators resonates with the aims and research questions central to this research. To further confirm harmony with this philosophical standpoint, the researcher acknowledges another feature promoted by social constructionism: that unique interpretations and understandings of the world can be held by each individual. For instance, where educators might have similar experiences of supporting autistic children within a PRU setting, their perspectives could represent differing views based on their career routes, experiences, personal convictions, and social/political stances. Importantly, social constructionism would suggest that perspectives not shared across various participants are not simply discarded. Instead, they are regarded as valid in their contribution to the broader picture of a study.

Alongside the above philosophical assumptions, my own reflections (in terms of the impact of my own perspectives, experiences, convictions and constructions) are all deemed important (see end of this chapter, section 3.12 - *Reflexivity*). It should, however, be noted that when considering the social constructionist stance of this thesis, a compromise was arrived at in terms of using the language (of writing) that is perhaps more familiar from a positivist study. For example, it has been necessary to apply some distance between the researcher and the narrative of this thesis. The use of the first-person pronoun (*'I'*) in the *Reflexivity* allows the reader to be momentarily guided away from the more neutral presentation of this thesis.

In the absence of any possible first-person influence, this neutral presentation permits the reader to engage in such a way that their own positional stance can be allowed for (or accommodated) as they read, inquisitively, through this thesis. Where the researcher switches to the more subjective voicing, this is conveniently (and appropriately) located in sections 1.14 (*Eco-systemic relevance to my own practice as a Trainee EP*) and at the end of this thesis (6.4) in my *'Final reflections on this study'* (not forgetting the voices of the participants in Chapter Four, next). Therefore, the reader is allowed to navigate in such a way

that accommodates their own stances, the positions suggested by participants, and the researcher's own social constructionist stance; as is permitted by the absence of the first person pronoun.

### **3.3 Design**

The current study adopted a qualitative approach for gaining depth and richness of data. The research was designed to gain educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children at PRUs following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school. In so doing, the research aims were: (1) to examine educators' perspectives on support; (2) to gain understanding of types of support; and (3) identify implications for EP practice. The sample comprised educators with experience of supporting autistic children attending a PRU setting, and the semi-structured interview measure allowed for flexibility in gaining perspectives. Thematic Analysis enabled data to be examined, leading to themes being identified by the researcher. With the design underpinned by the research questions, the following section outlines the procedure within which this study was accommodated.

### **3.4 Procedure overview - Logistics and research timetable**

Table 1 provides an overview of the logistics involved with the research. Note that there were overlaps in elements such as the commencement of participant interviews whilst recruitment was ongoing, and the process of coding data throughout and beyond the transcription phase.

**Table 1: Logistics - key actions across Phases.**

Phase	Element	Timing
<b>Phase One:</b> <i>Pre-ethical approval</i>	Applied for data protection number.	June 2018
	Submitted ethics application including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed Ethics Form</li> <li>• Information Sheet</li> <li>• Consent Form</li> <li>• Interview Protocol</li> </ul>	August 2018
	UCL Data Protection Number received	30 <sup>th</sup> August 2018
<b>Phase Two:</b> <i>Pilot Phase</i>	Following ethical approval:	early September 2018 (overlapping tasks)
	Conducted Pilot interviews.	
	Amended interview script and questions - submitted to supervisors for final feedback.	
	Completed final draft of Interview Schedule. Ready for interviews.	
<b>Phase Three:</b> <i>Interviews</i>	Recruitment of participants.	mid-September onwards
	Commenced participant interviews.	
	Continued invites, including "Snowball" recruitment.	
<b>Phase Four:</b> <i>Post-interview</i>	Transcribed data as-and-when collected and overlapped with recruitment and ongoing interviews.	mid-September through November
	Member-Checking for selected participants	December 2018 through early - February 2019
	Adjustments to identified data/coding, as necessary.	
	Continued reviewing of data, and familiarising.	

### 3.5 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The criteria for participation was that volunteers needed to be educators providing support to autistic children of secondary school age attending a PRU following exclusion from mainstream secondary school (whether permanent, fixed-period or any other bespoke arrangement). Since the focus of this study was on educators, there were no pre-conditions placed on the specifics of autism diagnosis for the children they supported. To draw on a wealth of perspectives, there was no limitation placed on the length or breadth of experience, with past, recent or current experience included.

The specific focus on the PRU meant that educators with experiences other than at generalised PRUs (such as specialist units, bespoke or other types of APs) were excluded from participating. Due to the nature of this particular type of provision, with outside services, agencies, organisations, practitioners, and those others providing support, involvement of educators from both within and outside a PRU setting were equally important to this current study. The inclusion and exclusion criteria therefore helped to define the method of sampling,

approaches for recruitment, and the resulting participants (see section 3.8 - *Sampling, recruitment and participants*).

### **3.6 Tool of apparatus - Semi-structured interview measure**

As a flexible means of data collection, the semi-structured interview is a measure commonly used in qualitative research. Its adaptability is facilitated by the researcher being able to use the interview questions as a guide for eliciting the voice of participants (Rabionet, 2011). Further flexibility is provided with the opportunity to ask probing questions or to prompt deeper and more in-depth responses from the participant. Added to this, the measure reflects the philosophical stance underpinning the current methodology, through the ability to elicit perspectives on the current topic (as guided by the knowledge and experience that influences the world-views of the participating educators).

For the process of design and development, the current measure was guided by the research questions. However, great care was taken so that the interview items were not explicitly influenced by the RQs (see Appendix Five - *Interview Protocol*). Any leading questions were avoided, along with wording that might be interpreted as threatening researcher bias. For example, *Item 5* asks: '*What do you feel stands out as the main needs of the autistic children you have worked with at a PRU?*' Participants were not influenced by any indication of needs related to (for instance) autism diagnosis, but instead were provided with the space to respond according to their experiences and view points. Other examples include *Item 7* and follow-up (7.1), phrased as follows: 7. '*What do you feel are examples of good practice when working with autistic children attending a PRU?*' 7.1. '*How do you feel that this good practice should be promoted?*' Participants were, therefore, not led or influenced in terms of what makes good-practice, and the follow-up allowed for more reflection and encouraged depth in their responses.

This was an important consideration, particularly since failing to ensure such objectivity would have impacted upon the trustworthiness of the current research. Further rigour was maintained throughout the design process with feedback from research supervisors. Quality assurance of this interview measure was maintained through its use in the pilot study, and the resulting amendments that led to the final version. The semi-structured interview protocol (featured in

*Appendix Five*) was designed to be flexible to avoid clinically progressing through the interview questions.

The interview protocol was divided into three parts. First, the researcher reiterated key ethical considerations regarding the study (e.g., right to withdraw from the study), and re-checked that the participant was happy for the interview to be audio recorded. Second, the interview questions themselves were presented. This comprised primary questions, plus any necessary follow-up and probing questions. Finally, the closing statements highlighted 'next-steps' for the current research, re-assurance of confidentiality, special thanks, and checking-in with the participant regarding any possibility of further recruitment through 'snowballing' was detailed.

### **3.7 Pilot**

To examine the effectiveness of the interview protocol and to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, piloting was conducted. This involved two participants who had experience in supporting autistic children at a PRU taking part in an interview. The purpose was to allow the researcher to gauge elements including: the timings, effectiveness of questions, order of questions, any items unnecessarily repeated, and other particular modifications required. As a result of the pilot study, specific amendments were identified: amalgamating questions seen as too similar; deleting questions deemed unnecessary; adjusting the position of certain questions; and re-wording questions for clarity. Other key messages arising from the pilot study related to the timings and the flow of the questions. Examples of these amendments are provided in the Appendices section (see *Appendix Four - Post-pilot semi-structured interview amendments*).

Owing to adjustments such as those identified, participants from the pilot study served the valuable purpose of helping to refine the measure. However, the pilot participants were not included in the dataset. The reason for this was to allow the perspectives of the 16 participants from the final sample to be equally sought through the use of the single (refined) semi-structured interview measure (see *Appendix Five - Interview Protocol*). Another valuable outcome was a reminder of the flexible nature of the semi-structured interview. On this, the researcher needed to be mindful that the level and direction of prompting should be influenced by each participant and any particular perspectives that might warrant additional probing. Additional learning was the need to appreciate that

the duration of each interview should be led by each participant. A further benefit of conducting the pilot study related to the specific topic and the practice of ensuring that each participant kept autistic children as the central focus. Overall, the pilot study resulted in minor adjustments to the interview protocol without the need for major restructuring. However, before arriving at the final version seen in Appendix Five, there was a further process of refinement with feedback gained from research supervisors. These steps added to the rigour and quality assurance underpinning this methodology.

### **3.8 Sampling, recruitment and participants**

Purposive and opportunity sampling were used in this research to maximise the reach. Whereas the former sees participants selected according to population characteristics matching the objectives of the study, the latter draws the sample from whoever is available at the time of the study (provided they fit the inclusion criteria). There were further opportunities for adding to the sample through snowball sampling, where existing participants recommended potential participants who fitted the criteria.

Potential participants were targeted and invited to partake based on their direct involvement with autistic children at a PRU. To gain a broad range of perspectives, the study did not focus on one PRU, but drew from educators representing a range of PRUs across London. Five approaches were used for recruitment: (1) researching and making direct contact with PRUs; (2) PRUs targeted via link-persons; (3) contacting organisations with educator-links to PRUs; (4) direct contact with types of individuals often supporting autistic children at PRUs (e.g., mentors, sports coaches); and (5) networking opportunities (e.g., autism conferences). In all cases, the process of recruitment started with an initial email contact, leading to a follow-up telephone call.

As shown in Table 2, the total PRUs contacted (34) is higher than the actual number of London Local Authorities covered by this current research (24). The reason for this relates to the way in which PRUs are structured organisationally. Some PRUs form part of a federation of educational settings; others are split into separate sites according to particular Key Stages, with a separate headteacher managing each PRU; and others are split according to the type of focus for the provision, for example, medical-based, Virtual PRUs, and

PRUs operating with an Outreach Team. This element added to efforts and challenges faced when investigating and identifying PRUs and contacts.

**Table 2:** Participant recruitment sources contacted

<b>Contacted</b>	<b>Total</b>
Potential individual educators contacted directly	21
Contact with PRU sought via Link-EP or TEP	16
Organisations contacted	14
PRU contacted directly	34
Number of London Local Authorities covered	24
<b>Total sources contacted</b>	<b>109</b>

It is likely that the reach of the recruitment process extended beyond these 109 sources. For example, for PRUs responding with interest, the recruitment email was disseminated internally by the PRU to staff and the individuals and organisations contacted were asked to circulate the information. Although this means it was not possible to ascertain the total number of potential participants reached, this process shows the reach of the current study, and perseverance of the researcher in promoting it. The final sample comprised 16 educators covering a range of roles. As can be seen in Table 3, there was a breadth of educators represented in terms of the range of educator roles, numbers of educators from within (n=8) and outside (n=8) PRU settings, and whether support was featured within one PRU or across different PRU settings. It should be noted that this representation of educators as being either external or internal to the PRU merely served the purpose of ensuring a range of participants who brought varied experiences to the interviews. The resulting themes (see later - *Thematic Analysis*, 3.10) were identified from educators both within and outside PRU settings. However, due to the consistency observed in their views and perspectives, within-group analyses were not felt to be necessary.

**Table 3:** Summary of Participants

Participant [codes]	educator	PRU staff or external	11 to 16 years Key Stage	single or various case involvement(s)	one PRU or across PRUs
[participant.01]	Boxing Coach	external	KS 3 & 4	various	across PRUs
[ptc.02]	SENCo	staff	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.03]	Art Psychotherapist	staff	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.04]	Assistant Headteacher	staff	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.05]	Teaching Assistant	staff	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.06]	Assistant Headteacher	staff	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.07]	Teaching Assistant	external	KS 3 & 4	various	across PRUs
[ptc.08]	Teaching Assistant	staff	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.09]	Educational Psychologist	external	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.10]	Class Teacher	staff	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.11]	Mentor	external	KS 3 & 4	various	across PRUs
[ptc.12]	Educational Psychologist	external	KS 3 & 4	various	one PRU
[ptc.13]	Mentor	external	KS 3 & 4	various	across PRUs
[ptc.14]	External Provider	external	KS 4 to Post-16	various	across PRUs
[ptc.15]	Educational Psychologist	external	KS 3	single	one PRU
[ptc.16]	Class Teacher	staff	KS 3	single	one PRU

The assigned codes in the first column match the order of recruitment and the specific educator-role. These codes relate to the labels for the quotes used in the following chapter. Due to the common presence of educators such as boxing and other sports coaches, along with TAs, mentors and EPs at PRUs, the identification of participants is minimised (also see section 3.11 - *Ethical Considerations*). Participants comprised educators with current or previous involvement in supporting autistic children educated at a PRU. Additionally, whether one-off or ongoing, this sample of educators represented prior or current experience working with at least one autistic child. In keeping with aspects of the ethical values at the core of this current study (where none of the participants should be identifiable), there are *overall* sample characteristics that can be outlined here.

For example, although all participants met the inclusion criteria (see Section 3.5) of supporting secondary school-aged autistic children at a PRU following exclusion from mainstream, three of the participants had no prior experience of supporting autistic children in any setting or support-based

scenario. The remaining 13 participants had experiences ranging from primary school, secondary school, college, PRUs, projects, one-to-one support and pastoral support. Regardless of their PRU background and experiences, all participants indicated a passion for autism, and the need for supporting autistic children attending a PRU. For the eight participants with experience (while being based at a PRU), at the time of the data gathering, three were reflecting on previous experiences, and five were still working within a PRU as part of the staff or Senior Leadership Team. Regarding the other half of the sample (those from outside a PRU setting), seven had specific roles involving supporting autistic children attending a PRU.

Incidentally, details were not collected regarding the autistic children who formed part of the focus of this current study, and no assumptions were made regarding the details of their autism diagnosis. As such, the focus remained on educators covering a range of perspectives on support. So far as the sample characteristics are concerned, EPs stood out in the sense that they represented differing levels and experiences of support for autistic children attending PRUs following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school. For example, as well as providing direct one-to-one support for autistic children, there was also the opportunity to build relationships. Another characteristic of EPs was the ability to work at group, organisational and local authority levels. In effect, EPs added to the sample characteristics by being educators themselves, yet, also by having the role of providing support for educators.

### **3.9 Data collection approach**

Interviews were conducted via telephone, ranging from 12 minutes to 92 minutes (mean = 55 mins). Variations in interview duration did not however detract from the quality of data generated by participants; with perspectives from the participant with the shortest interview still being represented across all four main themes. Furthermore, considering the combination of (1) the social constructionist stance adopted by the researcher, (2) the flexibility of the semi-structured interview measure used, and (3) the identification of patterns and themes using Thematic Analysis, then, regardless of the duration of the interview, what mattered most was the richness of perspectives gained. This same richness was the case for the perspectives of every participating educator.

Cachia and Millward (2011) examined comparisons between face-to-face and telephone interviews and found the telephone medium to be particularly complementary with the semi-structured interview measure. Further, they claimed that rich textual transcripts result from the telephone medium; data that can then be analysed using various qualitative methods. For instance, in Thematic Analysis, the emphasis is placed on what is said with regards to the participant's views on the topic, rather than how it is said (i.e., non-verbal aspects of communication, punctuations of voice). Cachia and Millward argued that the lack of visual clues leads the researcher to be more active in allowing the participant to express their views. Another identified benefit of the telephone medium is the researcher's increased ability to notice more clearly any subtle changes in tone of voice. Tausig and Freeman (1988) argue that such slight tonalities denoting sarcasm or anger might be missed during a face-to-face interview, where researcher may easily become fixated on visual aspects such as body language and facial gestures. They added that this concentration on the auditory senses encourages the researcher to probe for more depth of data.

Such benefits were reflected throughout data collection for the present study, and the resulting richness of collected data helped to confirm the value of the telephone medium for the semi-structured interviews. The telephone interview approach was particularly suited to this study on two further counts. Firstly, the ability to accommodate the participant without the added pressure of room-booking and having to facilitate the researcher's attendance at the venue was helpful. Secondly, the researcher was able to maximise a wider number of PRU settings and sources of educators across London; thus, avoiding any impact on valuable time for participants and researcher. Added to this was the avoidance of costs by not needing to travel to participants. Whilst acknowledging the benefits of telephone interviews, it was also worth reflecting that the absence of a face-to-face interview might have meant a possible lack of rapport. However, such potential disadvantages did not surface due to the researcher's constant awareness and ability to engage. Instances of this awareness included listening out for any nuances, extended pauses or tone of voice, and keeping in mind the wellbeing of each participant.

### 3.10 Analysis of data using Thematic Analysis

The tool chosen for analysis of collected data was Thematic Analysis. Prior to choosing this, other methodologies were considered. This is in keeping with the processes of quality assurance underpinning this methodology, and also forms part of the researcher's justification in adopting this particular qualitative approach. The rationale behind Thematic Analysis as being the most appropriate choice for this research related to the research question: "What are educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units, following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school?". With a range of participants from differing backgrounds, experiences and standpoints on the given topic, Thematic Analysis facilitated the breadth of data presented. The key feature here is the goal to draw out themes from a mass of data that can present a broad canvas combining similar, diverse and often conflicting perspectives. The value of these themes rests in the ability to draw out meaning and key messages that help to inform the particular area of research. Thematic Analysis caters not only for commonalities or shared perspectives, but also for differences. These differences, in the form of subjective standpoints, are equally important in the shaping of research outcomes, whether related to educator support, EP practice, or inclusive practice.

Thematic Analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used in the current study. At the initial stage of data handling, the inductive approach was used. This supported a '*bottom-up*' approach, as promoted by Frith and Gleeson (2004). As such, no attempts were made by the researcher to fit data to any assumptions, and there was no pre-empted coding. On completion of coding, once themes and sub-themes were established, definitions were guided by use of a semantic approach. That is, there was an absence of any theorising beyond what participants had expressed. Further, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.80) argument that thematic analysis should not be seen as a passive process of themes emerging, the current study promotes the active process of the researcher identifying themes. In adding to this ongoing process of examination and re-examination of data, the process of member-checking promoted the trustworthiness of the study. Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell and Walter (2016) promote trustworthiness and member-checking within the same context. Trustworthiness of a qualitative study relates to a combination of its credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability.

Within this scope, member-checking is regarded as the technique used to examining the accuracy and credibility of data generated. This is particularly important since it relates directly to the core of a study; the participants and data in the form of their perspectives. Originally, as part of their interview session, each participant had already been informed of the possibility of this checking of data. Selected participants were invited to review their data for accuracy. This involved two participants who were happy to further support the research in this way. In both cases, the amendments made were very minor, and did not fundamentally alter the meaning of what they expressed. Inter-rater reliability is the process whereby the same data are independently coded, with researchers then comparing codes for agreement or differences. This was conducted as an integral part of the current research, with coding being firstly completed by the researcher. Specific transcripts were then separately coded by independent sources, before comparisons and modifications were made. Reviews of these data involved two research supervisors and three selected Trainee EP colleagues. The process can be seen as an essential element of quality assurance and trustworthiness.

During the planning and design of the current study, the researcher was mindful to consider analysis of data through other alternatives such as Content Analysis, Grounded Theory, Narrative Analysis and also Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Speaking in very general terms, a key feature of Content Analysis is the identification and examine patterns across data systematic manner. Grounded Theory is a systematic approach whereby theories are constructed following the methodical collection and analysis of data. Narrative Analysis is also referred to as Narrative Inquiry, and draws upon a broad range of text- or image-based sources of data. These artefacts are referred to as units of analysis for researching and understanding how individuals create a sense of meaning to their lives. IPA, on the other hand, has an idiographic focus, meaning that a complete, in-depth understanding is being sought. For example, by focusing on a particular individual (within a given context) the IPA approach seeks to make sense of a specific phenomenon from the stance of that person's lived experiences. On reflection, it could be argued that if adjustments were made to the parameters and the rationale for this current study, then, any of the above-mentioned tools for analysis could possibly be adopted for this current study. However, given the value of examining a breadth of data where patterns or themes can be identified, analysed and reported (and the flexibility of interpreting various

aspects of a research topic), the use of Thematic Analysis for this current study is confirmed and justified.

### **3.11 Ethical considerations**

Ethical codes, as guided by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014; 2018), were followed in this research. As part of the process of informed consent, potential participants were invited to take part in the current study. The Information Sheet (which included the Consent Form) described the aims of the study. Other essential information (e.g., how the study would be conducted, ethical assurances) helped to inform the potential participant prior to making a decision about whether to take part. The information included the contact details of the researcher and supervisory team in the event that the participant might wish to ask any questions regarding the research at any point before, during or after data collection.

Following the gaining of informed consent, all participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to give an explanation. This was clearly stated on both the Information Sheet and the Consent Form, with this assurance also being given verbally as part of the interview schedule. An ongoing process of the researcher checking-in with the participant helped to ensure that sensitivity to needs was continually demonstrated. Participants were made aware that if there were to be any indication of anxiety on their part during the interview, then the researcher would pause the interview with the option to terminate the session. In any event, interviews ran successfully for all 16 participants.

Maintaining confidentiality has been, and will continue to be, integral throughout the study. For upholding this protection further, pseudonymisation was used, replacing any identifiable elements with artificial identifiers or pseudonyms. This also involved assigning numerical codes to each of the 16 participants. Hard copies of data (e.g., used for annotation during the data collection process) were coded without reference to the identity of the person. All reference to participants in this report were pseudonymised, to reduce the risk of identification. Further, confidentiality was ensured with any digital information stored and locked on a password-protected computer. Any paper-based hard copies have been stored inside a key-locked filing cabinet. Access to these data is only available to the research team. Recommendations from the UK's Data

Protection Act and the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) have been followed (Cornock, 2018). Confidentiality was maintained throughout data collection, with no direct reference to any child. As an added measure, where there might have been the use of a child's name by any participant as part of their responses, this was removed on all occasions.

### **3.12 Reflexivity - the current research within the context of my role**

This final section of the Methodology chapter draws together all the above materials, tools, methods and processes under the umbrella of my own past experiences, my existing knowledge, constructs, and other factors the reader may need to be aware of when considering the current research. Mortari (2015) stresses the crucial role of reflexivity by describing the depth and the integral role this plays in signalling to the reader that the researcher is a competent practitioner. Mortari (2015) seeks to add value to the process of reflexivity by identifying its particular role in qualitative research; the role of legitimising and validating procedures such as those involved in the current research.

Berger (2015) helps to further outline the researcher role by addressing the relationship between the researcher and their own study not only in terms of experience, but also social position, political stance, and professional beliefs. In qualitative research, Berger (2015) sees reflexivity as being of major strategic importance in maintaining quality control. This is of paramount importance for the reader in terms of their understanding and awareness of the impact of my own characteristics. Berger identifies reflexivity under three possible positions taken by the researcher: (1) the researcher who shares the experiences of the participants; (2) researcher starting as an outsider, then moving to an insider position during the course of the research; and, (3) a researcher with no personal experience or familiarity with the topic of research.

I feel that my position is a combination of (1) and (2). This is since I have had the experience of (1) working at a PRU and supporting a range of children within this type of setting. However, I also identify myself under (2) since, as an educator, I did not have the experience of supporting any autistic children: my experiences related to Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and those with a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Due to the nature of PRUs, there can be ongoing changes across their organisational, educational and political landscape. However, I do feel that the absence of

experience in supporting autistic children at a PRU has allowed me to have a valuable degree or level of objectivity as a researcher.

I also have experience as a mainstream secondary school teacher and Head of Department. However, when considering my past experiences in mainstream, I see myself as an outsider researcher; similar to my starting point outside of PRUs. This links back to the Literature Review (Chapter Two), where the pressurised and extremely challenging mainstream secondary environment is highlighted; not only for students, but also for staff. The pressure of Ofsted was also a factor during my time as a secondary school teacher. However, for me, today's mainstream secondary school environment is to some extent unrecognisable due to the competition for results, tight systems and structures for regulating behaviour, and perhaps the lack of space for being an individual. Within this environment, autistic children can face numerous challenges; thus, providing the added drive regarding my position and stance as the researcher for this current study.

A final factor that the reader needs to be aware of relates to my experiences as a Trainee EP. I have experienced numerous scenarios in relation to consultation, individual casework, and in writing Psychological Advice<sup>\*5</sup> as part of the statutory requirement during the assessment phase of the EHCP process. Specifically, during my mainstream secondary school involvements, these scenarios include autistic children who have been: excluded from mainstream and placed in a PRU; temporarily excluded, with the PRU being used as part of a managed move; or, internally excluded within the secondary school, with the threat from the headteacher of one final chance being given prior to permanent exclusion. Such scenarios, do resonate directly and also indirectly with this current research, and my role as researcher. Whilst keeping this in mind, I feel that it is important to make clear to the reader that I come from a stance of promoting inclusive practice for autistic children and young people. This position represents my interest in this particular topic, and my motivation to hear the perspectives of educators on supporting autistic children at PRUs following their exclusion from mainstream secondary. Parallel to my own stance, this is also a

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\*<sup>5</sup> Psychological Advice: the statutory assessment written and submitted by an Educational Psychologist as part of a Local Authority's legal requirement when completing the Needs Assessment for an EHCP. This is stipulated by the Children and Families Act 2014, and guided by the 2015 Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years.

topic of current importance reflected within UK education, local government (in terms of local authority role and accountability), and also given the attention to PRU settings highlighted by the Timpson Review of School Exclusion (DfE, May 2019) and resulting media interest.

# Chapter Four

## Results and Findings

### 4.1 Chapter Overview

Results of the study are presented next, which comprise the themes (and associated sub-themes) that were identified through Thematic Analysis. The chapter is divided according to the four resulting themes, and the selected illustrative data extracts demonstrate the range, relevance and richness of educators' perspectives.

### 4.2 The four themes

Figure 2 presents the four themes, along with their sub-themes, as identified from interview data. Appendix Seven (*Thematic Maps*) provides snapshots of the process of Thematic Analysis involved (as informed by Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Theme One	<i>Understanding the needs of PRU-based autistic children</i>	Acknowledging the challenges that PRU-based autistic children previously experienced in mainstream secondary
		Supporting PRU-based autistic children through both macro- and micro-transitions
		Establishing a valued one-to-one relationship between the educator and autistic child
Theme Two	<i>The enabling environment of the PRU</i>	Acknowledging the impact of environmental barriers on autistic children's wellbeing and academic progress
		Importance of being consistent within and outside the PRU environment
		Enabling the PRU environment through joint-working featuring internal and external stakeholders
Theme Three	<i>Effectiveness of support through systems and structures</i>	Enabling through the positive ethos of an autism-friendly inclusive environment
		Perspectives on promoting effective communication within and beyond the PRU setting
		PRU facilitating varying forums for support
Theme Four	<i>Preparing autistic children and adolescents for adulthood through the PRU provision</i>	Impact of adopting the more supportive primary school model
		The need for an inclusive curriculum
		Acknowledging that a lack of support has future consequences
		Supporting the journey to adulthood through the PRU curriculum pathway
		Cementing partnerships for Key Stage 4 into Post-16 and beyond

Figure 2: Overview of the four themes with their sub-themes

### 4.3 Theme One: Understanding the needs of PRU-based autistic children

For Theme One, educators identified that gaining an understanding of needs was a prerequisite for supporting autistic children at PRUs. For this underlying understanding to occur, there needed to be an acknowledgment of prior challenges, awareness of transition experiences, and commitment to the power of interpersonal relationships. This idea of understanding the needs of PRU-based autistic children links together the three resulting sub-themes, namely: (1) Acknowledging the challenges that PRU-based autistic children previously experienced in mainstream secondary; (2) Supporting PRU-based autistic children through both macro- and micro-transitions; and (3) Establishing a valued one-to-one relationship between the educator and autistic child.

#### 4.3.1 Sub-theme: Acknowledging the challenges that PRU-based autistic children previously experienced in mainstream secondary

Educators acknowledged the difficulties autistic children had experienced at mainstream secondary prior to being excluded, and discussed the initial difficulties they often encountered when joining secondary school:

*“When they start at secondary, that’s when difficulties surface because autistic children find it difficult to deal with all the change, all the social scenarios, and things like that in a secondary school.”*

[ptc.02]

Educators also described various challenges autistic children would have endured whilst at mainstream secondary school. Various aspects were identified including difficulties with the sensory environment, scale of the environment, and having to navigate themselves around the building:

*“There’s the noise. The hustle-and-bustle. If a room’s changed, they’re asking - ‘Why has it changed?’ - Then there’s the constant level of anxiety they have to endure.”* [ptc.10]

*“Those large class groups in secondary mainstream, that’s what our autistic young people have come from. They didn’t manage that well, and ended up lost in that large environment.”* [ptc.06]

Emotional consequences of such experiences were reported to be felt by autistic children:

*“I think it’s traumatic enough for any child to be booted out, to be rejected from mainstream school” [ptc.03]*

*“Our autistic children have essentially been kicked out of secondary school because there’s something about that particular mainstream environment that stops them thriving.” [ptc.05]*

Educators outlined their feelings as to why autistic children can end up being excluded from mainstream secondary and attending a PRU, including pressure to conform:

*“Mainstream secondary is about conforming. You come in at a certain time in the morning, follow your timetable, go to lessons, and you have to follow fixed routines and rules. But, for autistic individuals, that’s massive.” [ptc.10]*

Staff lacking the knowledge and understanding to support autistic children effectively in mainstream secondary environments was also noted:

*“One important concern has to be staff at secondary school not having knowledge and understanding of him and his specific autistic needs, and not knowing how to support him in the classroom.” [ptc.16]*

However, the difference that could be made through listening and interacting positively was emphasised, with examples of good practice also mentioned:

*“When I go into secondary schools, and see some teachers listening and interacting positively with autistic children, those teachers are showing a better understanding of autism.” [ptc.13]*

#### **4.3.2 Sub-theme: Supporting PRU-based autistic children through both macro- and micro-transitions**

Educators discussed two aspects of transition. As previously discussed, macro-transitions are broad phases of change such as moving from one educational setting to another, changing from one Key Stage or Year, or returning from a half-term or other school break. Micro-transitions, in contrast, include transitions within the day such as lesson changes, or going from one activity to

another. Educators felt that managing both these transitions when pupils were starting at the PRU took time: *“...they need time to cope with the new environment, new faces, different staff, different children, and different routines”* [ptc.02]. Support accepted as being long-term and generic needed to be explicitly emphasised as part of the transition process for autistic children. Examples included predictability and routines:

*“Good-practice for autism is having that predictability.”* [ptc.16]

*“I think for her transition into the PRU, there were a few levels. On a really basic level, there’s the routines at the PRU. That can definitely have an impact.”* [ptc.15]

To address transition, educators expressed the need for preparation, with plans being actioned and resourced at as early a stage as possible. There was also an emphasis on transition support led by a phased approach:

*“It’s about things being in place. That’s really necessary for integration and for continuity of routines.”* [ptc.05].

*“To ease the transition, students don’t start full-time straight away. Instead, it’s phased. We have a standard 3-week Integration.”* [ptc.06]

Educators spoke about the need for transition planning to start well before an autistic child arrived at the PRU; and this being a gradual process, without any pressure or rushing:

*“Induction is really important to get autistic children through that transition phase. Really crucial. So, giving them the opportunity to visit the PRU. Obviously, you don’t just plonk them in on day-one. You have an admissions meeting with the SENCo and other key individuals - rather than the headteacher and everyone sitting around and reading-them-the-riot-act.”* [ptc.09]

*“What doesn’t work for autistic students is when the transition is too quick. There’s pressure on management and staff, and sometimes management feel you’ve got to get the children in and transition them straight into the PRU on a full timetable.”* [ptc.02]

As examples of good-practice, educators spoke of approaches to transition that were very particular to PRUs they worked in. For example:

*“We had something in place to help with transition to the PRU. It was a separate out-house to the main building. The process was, they started in the out-house, and then had a gradual integration into main PRU.”*  
[ptc.05]

*“Our Staged Model was very particular to the PRU. They’d never start off within the main part of the PRU. And for those like this particular autistic child having attendance difficulties, they’d always start-off working one-to-one until about half-term.”* [ptc.16]

Educators highlight the need for placing the lens on the individual autistic child, and emphasised paying attention to their specific transitional needs. The uniqueness of each autistic child was a key consideration when transition planning:

*“I think transition for autistic children isn’t really about general-working. It’s more about tailoring it to the person. Because, even though they might all be on this spectrum, they’re all different.”* [ptc.03]

*“You can’t define one person with autism. Every autistic person is autistic in different ways. There’s one individual who might have sensory problems, and may not have such poor social skills, and visa-versa.”*  
[ptc.11]

Finally, educators identified the need for Senior Leaders to embrace transitional needs, and that good transition practice should involve various stakeholders, and allow various voices:

*“I’ve had some Seniors respond that they’ve got Ofsted and other pressures on them, and that I’m being pedantic when proposing a Transition Space for our new autistic students facing these challenges. They just don’t seem to understand.”* [ptc.10]

*“Good-transition-practice is about working with other professionals, working closely with the parents, and having an individualised approach. Also, I think it’s important to have student-voice as well as parent-voice represented as part of that transition.”* [ptc.02]

### 4.3.3 Sub-theme: Establishing a valued one-to-one relationship between the educator and autistic child

Educators explained how the start and initial phases of a relationship were crucial, and how attitudes or preconceptions carried by educators could influence the nature of a subsequent relationship:

*“It’s hard to get started with an autistic child. They’re unsure. They don’t know who I am. So, I have to build a relationship with them first.”*  
[ptc.03]

Educators warned about the attitude that the adult might bring, even before first engaging with an autistic child, and the importance of being open-minded:

*“As far as I’m concerned, I’m not seeing autism and judging them.”*  
[ptc.01]

*“You have to go from a point of understanding. If you go from a point of judgement, like - ‘Well, I don’t think they’re autistic, they’re just misbehaving’ - Then, you’re always gonna have barriers.”* [ptc.10]

Rapport-building and drawing upon interests were identified as essential for establishing one-to-one relationships:

*“I build a rapport, and they’ll get to know that I’m on their side, and that I’m there for them.”* [ptc.08]

*“If you’re gonna be effective as an educator with an autistic individual, first thing, you really need to engage your mind in their interest.”*  
[ptc.11]

However, educators acknowledged that relationship-building can be challenging where autistic children feel they have been let down in the past:

*“It’s really difficult for our autistic young people. They find it difficult to build a relationships with new faces, and building trust, because, quite often they’ve been let down in mainstream - and, they don’t expect people to go the full-way with them. So, they often don’t give staff a chance.”*  
[ptc.06]

For establishing this relationship, participants emphasised the importance of trust (gaining and maintaining), and mutual respect:

*“I work on our relationship first. I make sure that they trust me in every capacity, and from there, I don't abuse their trust.” [ptc.08]*

*“I'm going to treat him with respect, establish respect between us, and be humble with him.” [ptc.01]*

Educators spoke about listening to autistic young people's needs in response to their often unheard voices. In fostering a personal approach, they described how this could lead to a sense of empowerment:

*“Really listening to him. Having a variety of strategies. Working out what works best for him - that's really good-practice” [ptc.04]*

*“It's empowerment and showing that you're listening. Because, what I find with autistic children is - they've often gone unheard.” [ptc.14]*

It was emphasised that educators should be proactive by not only listening to autistic children, but by actioning their words and their needs. And that ultimately, educators should be learning from the autistic children they are supporting:

*“We, as educators, allow autistic children and young people to be empowered to share their experiences and journeys with us and with their peers. So, it's not just listening, but hearing and responding to them” [ptc.08]*

*“Apart from formalised CPD, it's being ready and willing to listen to autistic children, and learn from them.” [ptc.02]*

*“Actually, I'd say that autistic children themselves are my biggest educators.” [ptc.05]*

#### **4.4 Theme Two: The enabling environment of the PRU**

The underlying message within this second theme was the promotion of a PRU environment that is proactively inclusive for autistic children. In this sense, *proactive* relates to the way in which measures need to be already in place and established for supporting autistic children once they arrive at a PRU. This would avoid the type of after-thought that restricts inclusive practice. Another sense of this proactivity in support related to the heterogeneity promoted in autism understanding (Kanne et al., 2011) whereby the individuality of each autistic child needed to be acknowledged; as opposed to a positional stance where uniformity

might be assumed. With this in mind, educators' perspectives on the enabling environment presented the notion that preparedness and response to needs were very much about collaborating with autistic children in order to develop an environment that was unique to them; and one that complemented their individualised needs.

What links the resulting sub-themes together is the awareness from educators that enabling the PRU environment is not only about the 'what', but also about the 'how'. *What* are the main challenges impacting on autistic children at a PRU? and; *How* can autistic children be inspired to feel supported and included within an environment that is not actually autism-specific? Theme Two consists of four subthemes: (1) Acknowledging the impact of environmental barriers on autistic children's wellbeing and academic progress; (2) Importance of being consistent within and outside the PRU environment; (3) Enabling the PRU environment through joint-working featuring internal and external stakeholders; and (4) Enabling through the positive ethos of an autism-friendly inclusive environment.

#### **4.4.1 Sub-theme: Acknowledging the impact of environmental barriers on autistic children's wellbeing and academic progress**

Educators acknowledged how the physical PRU environment could be challenging for autistic children, particularly in terms of its social context:

*"As a PRU, we've got the same building, but the numbers have increased. So, the social dynamics of the have changed."* [ptc.13]

The sensory environment was thought to be challenging for autistic children at times:

*"The PRU environment can be quite loud and chaotic."* [ptc.15]

*"I think for autistic children, a PRU is, like, sensory overload for them. It can be quite echo-y. Doors banging, children screaming, shouting."* [ptc.03]

Educators expressed how classroom-based practices and social aspects of the environment could impact on the mental health of an autistic child, particularly regarding anxiety:

*“Autistic student can become very anxious if a lesson runs even a minute or two over the time, and then there’s the issue of the end of one lesson actually being the start-time for the next lesson in another part of the PRU. For an autistic student in a PRU, that can induce anxiety.” [ptc.02]*

*“When they’re feeling under pressure in the classroom that can lead to anxiety as well.” [ptc.14]*

*“For an autistic young person who is quite anxious socially, it can be a real challenge.” [ptc.15]*

In response to emotional and mental health needs, it was felt that having an ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) would be valuable support. However, they added that this provision would only be effective if protected in terms of commitment to time and space:

*“I think they should all have an ELSA. But, ELSA shouldn’t just be for period a week, or just the morning. And, for ELSA you need a protected private safe space.” [ptc.05]*

The need for an ethos of good-practice regarding adaptations to the environment was highlighted:

*“I think good-practice for any educator working with autistic children in any context means ensuring an environmental-wide supportive environment.” [ptc.09]*

Participants also placed particular emphasis on modifying the environment rather than trying to change the autistic child:

*“Why are we trying so hard to recreate what’s failed them in the past, and to make them fit in? We must modify the environment.” [ptc.10]*

*“I hate it that some of our autistic children are being branded as badly behaved, and it’s really not that. It’s being in an environment that they’re finding hard to cope with. The environment needs to be adapted to better-suit them. I don’t think it’s ever the autistic child’s fault.” [ptc.08]*

Educators added what they felt were recognised academic advantages when comparing the PRU physical environment to mainstream secondary:

*“The good thing about working in the PRU compared to mainstream secondary is that PRUs are a lot smaller. In my PRU, the TAs and teachers knew all the kids.” [ptc.07]*

*“We generally don’t have more than around 8 students in each class, so it allowed us to focus teaching and learning on individuals. I think that gives our students a better chance to progress compared to the big learning environments in mainstream secondary.” [ptc.04]*

#### **4.4.2 Sub-theme: Importance of being consistent within and outside the PRU environment**

A range of factors were acknowledged as helping to support autistic children at PRUs, including time, places, faces, and everyday practice:

*“I think being consistent works well with autistic children. Having that regular time, regular day, same room, ‘...when you see ‘Sally’ [pseudonym], this is what happens...’ So, the same kind of routines.” [ptc.03]*

*“Being clear and consistent. Who are their classmates? Who are their teachers? They need to have a concrete idea about what their timetable looks like.” [ptc.12]*

Educators highlighted that without consistency, there were consequences on autistic children’s wellbeing:

*“Not having the consistency causes anxiety. Different staff. Differing ways of working. This causes anxiety.” [ptc.05]*

*“So, it’s consistency. Trying to help her manage the anxiety.” [ptc.15]*

Change was identified as a key area where consistency provides support, and there was a particular emphasis from educators regarding forewarning and being explicit in preparing autistic children:

*“Predictability and consistency. So, when there’s going to be change, then, always a lot of notice - pre-warning of change.” [ptc.06]*

*“Consistency is a major thing. There’s those things we all know are good-practice, like, making autistic children aware of changes beforehand.” [ptc.05]*

The following two quotes illustrate two aspects of consistency: students knowing where they stand (with staff keeping that really consistent), and keeping a clear divide between work and play:

*“One important good-practice is ‘boundaries’. From-the-get-go, being consistent with your boundaries. It’s really important that an autistic young person knows where they stand with you.” [ptc.06]*

*“I do crack jokes to make him laugh, but, I’m never outside of serious when we’re doing lesson work. So, I think he really appreciate boundaries.” [ptc.08]*

Educators expressed how consistency also relates to having regular staff (familiar faces), and how this is an important aspect of supporting autistic children at a PRU:

*“I guess, the more they saw my face, the more they got used to me.” [ptc.01]*

*“As much as possible, you should have predictability of routines. It’s difficult working in a PRU when staff call-in sick, and you’ve got to use Supply Staff. So, that does happen often. But, where possible, we do try to have a consistent face per classroom. Someone who knows the routines.” [ptc.06]*

Educators also provided a sense of the character and the skills needed by staff for adopting this consistency:

*“It’s about having a clear policy that is consistent. And that staff are consistent in the execution and delivery of that policy.” [ptc.05]*

*“It was important for us as staff to be on-the-same-page. And, I guess that’s going back to being synchronised in your approach, because, when people were approaching him from different styles, he found that hard.” [ptc.16]*

Educators emphasised how consistency should be promoted at home, rather than being faced with a home-school divide:

*“I guess it’s about children knowing that there’s consistency across home and school, because a lot of the time it was school-versus-home.” [ptc.13]*

#### **4.4.3 Sub-theme: Enabling the PRU environment through joint-working featuring internal and external stakeholders**

Educators discussed benefits of joint-working, and how a lack of collaboration could impact on support for autistic children:

*“I think it’s the teamwork. You have to take care of staff wellbeing.”*  
[ptc.16]

*“There was no collaboration between staff to help support autistic students.”* [ptc.13]

However, the basis of joint-working was linked with the need to understand autistic children. An emphasis was on Senior Leadership involvement and building such relationships:

*“We saw her as one of us, and not really part of Senior Management. Maybe it was part of her approach to make us feel supported, and to build a relationship with us.”* [ptc.16]

Educators recognised the benefits of including parents as part of the process of supporting autistic children at a PRU. This type of inclusive practice was also seen as integral to joint-working:

*“It’s not just the autistic young people you’re working with and supporting, it’s also their families”* [ptc.15]

*“We had parents’ evenings, our Christmas concert, and the Summer Barbecue. So, I suppose those were ways of trying to keep the working relationship between home and PRU. Plus, I suppose it had a bit of a community element.”* [ptc.05]

Involvement of parents or carers was indicated as being integral to problem-solving specifically:

*“For concerns about an autistic young person, we’d have a multi-professional Team-Around-the-Child meeting including the parent or carer and the autistic young person. It was about using problem-solving approaches, and trying to be as flexible possible.”* [ptc.12]

Educators discussed how this joined-up approach and extension to different disciplines helped support different aspects of an autistic child's needs. For example, physical, psychological and communicative:

*"I'm talking about holistic support with people from different disciplines. Occupational Therapy, Educational Psychology, access to Speech and Language Therapy, and others. The type of support in which, holistically, the whole picture is put in place for supporting autistic children. So, everybody's singing-from-the-same-hymn-sheet to provide support."* [ptc.10]

*"We had a multi-disciplinary team. It was me, two other EPs who worked in different parts of the PRU, the Clinical Psychologist from CAMHS, and the Speech and Language Therapist. So, I'd take things back to the team."* [ptc.15]

*"It's very much about looking at all the partners who might be able to contribute to meeting the needs of this autistic young person, and trying to have a multi-professional approach."* [ptc.12]

Educators also reported that they valued sharing information as part of joint-working, and that this contributed to enabling a supportive PRU environment:

*"We do certainly share information, ideas, strategies and ways forward about the children we're working with."* [ptc.09]

*"We had professionals in the PRU, like, Occupational Therapists and Educational Psychologists, which was good, because, they knew in detail about the child. So, we would share that information."* [ptc.07]

*"There's collaboration and sharing between Social Worker, Educational Psychologist, CAMHS, and whichever other agencies are involved. And, if Social Services experience problems engaging with the family, I can facilitate TAC or TAF meetings here at the PRU."* [ptc.06]

Educators spoke of the involvement of organisations such as Social Services, police, and YOS (Youth Offending Service), highlighting the vulnerability of autistic children:

*“We work with Social Workers and YOS, because, some of our autistic young people have got into trouble with the police. They have a YOS worker who also comes into the PRU. I think that some of our autistic young people are very vulnerable and easily influenced by their peers and misled into criminal activity.” [ptc.02]*

Educators also emphasised the value of approaches where support from outside agencies was provided by professionals based within PRUs on a weekly basis, with the Link-EP allocating one day per week:

*“At the PRU, we have a Multi-Disciplinary Room that I share with the Speech and Language Therapist, the Family Therapist, the Safeguarding Officer, and the Clinical Psychologist. So, we work together in there.” [ptc.09]*

*“For those people giving me the support from the multi-disciplinary team, we’d all been working with this same young person for a long time, and were really invested in her and her family. - and wanted her to do well.” [ptc.15]*

Overall, it was felt that autistic children should be at the centre of any joint-working:

*“It’s about liaising with the family, joint-communication, and just supporting each other. Just keeping the joint-thinking, because, it isn’t easy, but, always having that focus of the autistic child.” [ptc.03]*

*“I think working together is about using all our different skills and experiences, but always having the main aim - which is the autistic child.” [ptc.02]*

#### **4.4.4 Sub-theme: Enabling through the positive ethos of an autism-friendly inclusive environment**

Educators spoke of how an ethos of positivity can be integrated across different aspects of the environment, resulting in PRU-wide approaches:

*“Busting some of those myths about autism creates a shift-in-thinking. And, I think that also said something about the ethos, because, we ended up having an autism-friendly behaviour policy - and we saw how that created changes.” [ptc.05]*

*“I think an autism-friendly environment is somewhere they are less likely to have a sensory overload. Maybe a quiet room. Maybe less people around them.” [ptc.10]*

*“It’s really about having a general PRU-wide ethos, and promoting autism-understanding.” [ptc.09]*

Along with the need for this ethos to come from the top, educators expressed the need to be reflective and active in practising a positive ethos:

*“One of the things that keeps me going is the ethos of the PRU. The headteacher is very visible, and also very passionate. If I didn’t get that from the headteacher, then, based on the challenges here at the PRU, I wouldn’t have been able to keep myself going here for so long.” [ptc.06]*

*“It’s about people coming together, and if they’re more positive, that’s when I know I’ve made a difference.” [ptc.11]*

There were many examples provided of how this positivity could be concretely promoted. For example, through use of:

*“...a ‘Positive Comments Book’ which, weekly, we get the staff to write positive comments about each other that they’ve seen throughout the week; and then we read these out.” [ptc.06]*

Educators further discussed how praise and reward was most effective when practised across all staff. This type of positive reinforcement was beneficial to autistic children when received from various adults:

*“We have to focus on their positive behaviour as well, and ensure that we give them praise.” [ptc.14]*

*“We’ve got some really good members of staff here and at Key Stage 4. So, I think a lot of what impacts on him is the positive-praise that staff give him.” [ptc.03]*

*“The thing that gets the best responses, and works really well, is a reward system. I like to work with tick-charts. They’re constantly being rewarded. Every tick is a step closer to the big reward.” [ptc.08]*

Specific individuals were identified for their ability to empower others by enabling a positive ethos on autism. This included bringing in an autistic advocate or utilising key staff with autism awareness:

*“If staff are just not getting the message about autism, you bring in an autistic advocate. It’s about having an autistic adult talk to staff to help them understand what it means to be living with the diagnosis of autism. That’s a really important part of the PRU’s ethos.” [ptc.10]*

*“Key staff with autism awareness can model good-practice through positive body language or calm tone of voice. Being directional by actually being non-directional. So, avoiding dictating to autistic children.” [ptc.09]*

Educators spoke about an aspect of ethos whereby the whole population of staff, management, and students were immersed in the same approach. It was felt that an ethos of reflective practice should be embedded throughout PRUs:

*“Just like the staff do in their Reflective Team, students are reflecting as a group, and listening to each other. So, it’s constantly revisiting that group ethos. And that reflective practice runs throughout the PRU.” [ptc.06]*

#### **4.5 Theme Three: Effectiveness of support through systems and structures**

Theme Three is about the mechanisms of support that surround autistic children and educators at PRU settings. There was an emphasis on expressing perspectives regarding what elements needed to be in place for autism support to be truly functional at a PRU setting. This is about lines of communication, forums that elicit support, embracing pre-secondary school fundamentals, and the curriculum accommodating individual needs. Hence, the four sub-themes were: (1) Perspectives on promoting effective communication within and beyond the PRU setting; (2) PRU facilitating varying forums for support; (3) Impact of adopting the more supportive primary school model; and (4) The need for an inclusive curriculum.

#### 4.5.1 Sub-theme: Perspectives on promoting effective communication within and beyond the PRU setting

Communication was acknowledged as being a key element required for the efficient operation of a PRU. This sub-theme highlights perspectives expressed on factors such as what accounts for good-practice, plus internal and external considerations:

*“When I approach a PRU, the first thing I do is make a nice environment for communication. You have to get the right message across.”*  
[ptc.01]

Regularity of communication was regarded as indicating good-practice, with the importance of continuous conversations being promoted:

*“Good-practice is having regular conversations. We had regular systems, so, something like appraisal was always a good way of working.”* [ptc.05]

*“We have termly reviews, and we’re actually meeting this morning to feedback on progress, and thinking of Next-Steps. So, it’s a continuous conversation.”* [ptc.04]

*“Because of the size of a PRU, we could have daily reports, and, it was all quantitative - on a scale of 1-to-5.”* [ptc.13]

Good-practice through communication was thought to be shaped through the principle of all staff being informed, with a particular emphasis on everyone having the same shared understanding:

*“Communication between staff is really good-practice. So, if they’re changing classes, you need to let the next staff know what’s going on.”*  
[ptc.07]

*“It’s about communication, and all staff being from-the-same-page for each autistic child.”* [ptc.03]

The need for effective communication at an internal level across the whole PRU was identified. However, it was also expressed that staff needed to understand the purpose of decisions made:

*“If there was better communication between the Senior Management, and the Class Teachers, and Teaching Assistants - then I guess, for those on the working-ground, I think that would be better. Because,*

*sometimes changes would be made, but, staff weren't that happy about it."* [ptc.07]

'Staff Team' was used when educators described a unit of PRU staff separate from management level. Tensions were sometimes noted between these groups:

*"I think it's about mutual respect. Because, we are the ones on the ground, facing the challenges, and if we as the Staff Team are saying - '...these things are happening, and we would like something to be done about it, we've noticed that this works, and we we'd like to give it a try...' ...if we're saying this, and Senior Leadership are not willing to listen, take things on board, or just try those things, then, that's really frustrating."* [ptc.05]

A process of communication was identified by educators, which involved interaction between differing levels of PRU staff:

*"Middle Management discussions with those staff on-the-ground would then shape the conversations between ourselves and Senior Leadership. This meant we could communicate staff concerns and have constructive conversations at Senior Leadership level."* [ptc.05]

Beyond these internal layers of communication, educators identified the importance of communication between home and PRU, and provided an indication of the value of such systems:

*"You need really good communication between home and PRU, because, there might be things going on at home which would impact at the PRU - and visa-versa. So, good home-school liaison is critical. And, obviously, involvement of the autistic young person."* [ptc.12]

*"I'd like more clear and concise communication between PRUs and parents. As TAs, we should be allowed to maintain communication, because, that's the only communication parents are getting, and parents are actually putting their full faith in the PRU."* [ptc.08]

This was not just about the process of communicating with home. Instead, "relationship" was emphasised, with autistic young people at the centre:

*"It's about relationships with autistic young people and with home. Having really good home-school communication, because, originally we'd have*

*been calling parents and saying their child's absconded or been excluded - all for negative reasons. And, I had a headteacher who was fantastic, and actually, we started to communicate the positives with parents."*  
[ptc.05]

To assist in building and maintaining this relationship through communication, constant contact with home was emphasised. It was felt this should be maintained regardless of the nature of the information; and was promoted as a means of counteracting a culture of negative communication from PRU to home:

*"With parents, it was about keeping those channels of communication open regardless of whether 'Peter' [pseudonym] had good days, bad days, or neutral days, so that when you needed parents to respond, they wouldn't automatically think - '...they're just calling me because he's been excluded again. I'm not gonna answer that...' - That's how we maintained communication with parents. And, because that was via daily text messages, it was really convenient for them, because, they didn't need to actually talk to anyone."* [ptc.05]

Using a specifically produced (and individualised) means of communication was viewed positively, and allowed educators to look more deeply at strengths and challenges that were specific to the autistic child:

*"The first thing I do is to get a book between me and the parents. So, as soon I engage with an autistic child, I'm writing about an initial engagement that morning, our first conversation, and, keeping that communication with home. I call it a day-book."* [ptc.08]

Educators also identified the value of communication between the PRU and outside agencies. They added that a lack of these type of connections resulted in disjointed practice:

*"I knew he was on medication, and that there was a medical team involved, but, we never had any communications from them. I just think we were all too disjointed."* [ptc.16]

*"If we're concerned about an autistic young person who's under Social Care, I'll drop the Social Worker an email or phonecall. So, it's that constant communication with these outside agencies."* [ptc.06]

Another form of communication was identified where professionals and outside agencies were actually based within PRU settings. This allowed for direct face-to-face communication with all levels of staff:

*“When we establish things as professionals, we sometimes communicate through assemblies, but, mainly at staff debriefing. So, at the end of every day, all staff get together, and they have a debrief where they talk about the day’s events, and if anything’s occurred with the children.” [ptc.09]*

#### **4.5.2 Sub-theme: PRU facilitating varying forums for support**

Educators spoke of different forums at one-to-one, group, whole-PRU, and external levels. Here, forums were identified as systems, places and opportunities where support encompassed practical, emotional and psychological needs of staff (whether individually, as groups, or collectively as whole-PRU staff). For example:

*“We had systems in place for different levels of forums. So, we had supervision, and that was one of the best things for us.” [ptc.05]*

*“I have regular Line-Management meetings.” [ptc.04]*

Reflection was thought to be a key aspect here, particularly within the supportive forum of a team:

*“Staff have Group Supervision, and that includes how we support our autistic children - reflecting on ‘the why’, with constant questioning?” [ptc.10]*

*“I’m not quite sure how much PRU staff get in the way of supervision or support, but, that would definitely be beneficial. Maybe, having something like a Reflective Team approach, where you have an outside-professional coming in. Because, even though staff have the skills and knowledge, it’s also about giving them the opportunity to reflect.” [ptc.12]*

*“The sessions were set up like Solution Circles or Reflective Teams. We had them once every half-term on a Friday. We found that really supportive, because, you sometimes feel like you’re not being heard, and it’s a hard job.” [ptc.05]*

Educators recognised positive outcomes from the practice of reflection, and that this by-product could be demonstrated through informal opportunities for expressing thoughts and feelings:

*“As part of the staff team, good-practice is when you’re able to have regular conversations, anywhere and any-time” [ptc.13]*

*“Since having reflective practice, we’ve become closer as a staff team. And, also, just having a little rant in the office with each other to get something out, it does helps.” [ptc.03]*

Participants explained that the Staff Team recognised the value of having their own forum, and this was seen as being most beneficial as a safe space for expressing concerns and frustrations, particularly in the absence of management:

*“There’s no agenda, so, the purpose of the session is for staff to say what’s on their mind, and for the staff team to help each other out. So, as long as you’re being respectable, and not calling anybody out by name, anything goes.” [ptc.06]*

*“Essentially, us educators, like TAs, Class Teachers, Mentors, et cetera, we’re actually the ones on-the-ground, and those meetings created a safe-place for being really open and honest.” [ptc.05]*

However, it was also highlighted that the ‘larger’ staff team was not always supportive, in which case a smaller, breakaway forum of colleagues was suggested as being a stronger source of support:

*“To be honest, all the support I received was from my colleagues in our small team really - mainly those I worked closely with. They were my main source of support.” [ptc.16]*

Educators emphasised the need to focus on staff wellbeing, but within the type of forum where projected feelings could be contained:

*“You have to take care of staff-wellbeing. If we didn’t have that forum to support each other, I’m not sure how I’d have managed. It was really as much about us looking after each other as it was about dealing with all the difficulties faced.” [ptc.16]*

*“Every day was like a massive emotional rollercoaster, so, I think it’s having proper channels of support for your own psychological and emotional wellbeing.” [ptc.05]*

Within this context of containment, EPs were particularly well-placed for facilitating specific forums within a PRU:

*“The Link Educational Psychologist runs Group Supervision and Reflective Practice here at the PRU, and that’s really valued.” [ptc.03]*

*“What really makes a difference is that we also get one-to-one supervision from our Educational Psychologist termly.” [ptc.05]*

*“As the Link EP, I’d often facilitate the consultation. There’d be a structure to the session. Maybe, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy or a problem-solving approach, and looking at strengths and needs.” [ptc.12]*

*“The idea was that they’d set up a system where, as well as individual sessions, there’d be a supportive group-sharing forum - which I facilitated in Group Supervision.” [ptc.15]*

Beyond group forums, whole-PRU scenarios were identified as part of common practice, as a means of helping staff to be supported by being prepared; and in some cases, simply forewarned:

*“In the morning it was a quick 15-minute debrief which was really about handing out timetables, staff absences, notes. Everybody knew where they had to be. I think it was about staff preparedness, so everybody knew what they were going to face.” [ptc.05]*

Debrief was described as a valuable forum for an EP to share with whole-PRU staff:

*“Debrief is a good place for getting your message across. So, if I’ve been working with an autistic child, they often want to know - ‘What do you think about this child’s needs? What are the best ways forward?’ So, Staff Briefing is usually the best place for that sharing.” [ptc.09]*

Educators spoke of specific forums where autistic children could have their voices heard, and be understood. A benefit identified was the ability to empower them through this type of supportive forum:

*“We put on workshops and did a lot in getting people to understanding more about autism. Getting the police in, and having a more positive community experience. It gave our autistic students a forum for asking them questions, and for telling the police why they hadn’t trusted them.”* [ptc.14]

*“Giving our autistic young people the forum to say what they felt, and tell others, like the police, what life is like for them - that was really empowering for them. So, as well as getting-it-off-their-chest, I think it helped the police to be more aware of autism.”* [ptc.13]

Finally, EP participants gave an indication of autism support, and how EPs were reported to be involved in forums at differing levels:

*“I represent our EP Service on various autism steering group forums for the Local Authority. Most of my work consists of autistic children, where they’ve been excluded from mainstream Secondary School where I’m the Link-EP - and I’ve followed them through into the PRU.”* [ptc.12]

#### **4.5.3 Sub-theme: Impact of adopting the more supportive primary school model**

For this sub-theme, educators described the value in revisiting principles of support that autistic children had experienced earlier in Key Stages 1 and 2 (primary school), where it was felt that they were coping with education:

*“She didn’t really have any problems at primary school, and things were going really well. It was at secondary that things seemed to be really thrown up in the air.”* [ptc.15]

Educators spoke about purposeful use of approaches mirroring an autistic child’s experiences in primary school. In particular, having a fixed classroom and familiar faces:

*“Although it was a secondary PRU, we ended up shifting to a primary school model with students staying in the same classroom all day, and teachers going to students - as opposed to students travelling around the building. And, I think this helped lessen the anxiety felt by our autistic students.”* [ptc.05]

*“They find it difficult to cope working with a number of teachers, as opposed to their one-teacher primary school approach.” [ptc.02]*

*“He’s in a classroom where they don’t change or move around the PRU. They stay in one classroom, with the same member of staff and same children. That’s working really well for him.” [ptc.03]*

Having a familiar space within PRU settings was identified as helping to reinforce the primary school model. Educators spoke of relationships and identity, and this approach was regarded as contributing directly to a sense of belonging and connection:

*“If children are based in their own room, and the work in there belongs to them, then levels of identity, respect, familiarity, and school-connectedness can increase because of this primary school model.” [ptc.16]*

*“Because of the nature of primary schools having one teacher and one set of children, the children are more accepting of each other. Also, teachers get to know their pupils really well. That’s why we use elements of that kind of primary school type of support in the PRU.” [ptc.02]*

*“In primary school, they had a core group of children they were with, even from as far back as Reception class.” [ptc.13]*

*“There was the same TA who stayed with each group, and that allowed for relationships to build. Also, I felt that created an identity for the group.” [ptc.05]*

Educators identified smaller class sizes as beneficial to autistic children:

*“It was the smaller-group environment that definitely helped; he found relationships with others difficult.” [ptc.16]*

*“You have to manage the group as well. When it’s a small group, you can concentrate on each of them, and try different things.” [ptc.01]*

*“When I’m supporting a small group, there’s opportunities for neurotypical children and autistic children to mix really well.” [ptc.08]*

Further to this, educators noted that past experiences of working in mainstream primary allowed them to draw upon principles for supporting autistic children at a PRU:

*“Staff also need to realise that when they’re having a meltdown, they just need space and time to calm down. I found this worked a lot in primary schools.” [ptc.13]*

*“And there’s another thing I learned from my primary school experience: When you’re using a structured timetable approach, you start with a visual timetable and then move them over to hand written timetable where you ask them to write the times in themselves. And, I’m not sure, but, I think this action of them writing it somehow lessens that anxiety, and, maybe it’s got something to do with them experiencing, embedding, and preparing themselves.” [ptc.02]*

#### **4.5.4 Sub-theme: The need for an inclusive curriculum**

When speaking about the value of having an inclusive curriculum for autistic children, educators identified what they viewed as *not* being an inclusive curriculum:

*“If an autistic young person has failed in mainstream secondary, what difference would it make if we’re just supplying that same curriculum at the PRU?” [ptc.06]*

*“The timings, the layout of the day, all of that is still based on the neurotypical type. It’s not based on autistic children. In some cultures you have a lot of shift-schools. So, that would work absolutely spot-on for autistic children, because, you have some children that their body clock isn’t ready till the afternoon.” [ptc.10]*

There was also a sense of concern where the curriculum was viewed as lacking flexibility, with this seen as an attempt to nullify (and normalise) the needs of autistic children:

*“A lot of our systems are not there to support autistic children. They’re there to make them cope. So, they’re being expected to normalise themselves to normal neurotypical systems.” [ptc.10]*

*“In the PRU, I feel like we’re trying to normalise autistic students with the curriculum. There’s the academic subjects, and so on. But, we need to remember that they come to the PRU with a set of very individual needs. So, when we place these pressures on them, it’s stressful for them.*

*And it makes them feel like they're back in mainstream secondary, and struggling, like before they got excluded."* [ptc.02]

There was a sense that such curriculum flexibility should be guided by individual needs of autistic children, featuring differentiation and provision of resources:

*"What some educational places do when teaching autistic children is they base it off the curriculum system when it should be based on the individual autistic child. So, you're basically having an autistic individual within a neurotypical system which is not actually suitable for the way their brain processes stuff."* [ptc.11]

*"The challenge is for educators to be able to understand the needs of autistic children, and then differentiate the PRU curriculum, and provide special resources so they can access learning."* [ptc.09]

Educators identified that drawing on interests was a central way of tapping into the strengths and needs of autistic children. This was accepted as a recognised approach to help shape the curriculum. However, it was stressed that the curriculum could only be regarded as creative if there was sufficient flexibility, allowing it to be tailored to suit the individual autistic child:

*"I think an example of best good-practice was the creative curriculum. We used that quite a lot. So, we often did Interest-Audits of children, and just taught the curriculum in line with their interests. This type of curriculum works really well for autistic children at PRUs."* [ptc.05]

*"I really feel strongly that autistic young people need to have a curriculum that's specifically tailored to suit them, and to meet their individual educational needs. But, it must also be guided on their interests"* [ptc.12]

Further to this, educators reported that the curriculum needed to be sufficiently flexible to also include elements of a therapeutic and outdoor curriculum, for example:

*"The teaching side of things has never been my passion, it's more so the inclusion side of it, and the mentoring. I currently oversee the therapeutic curriculums. So, that side of things has always interested me."* [ptc.06]

*“This organisation we use, they have an outdoor provision. It’s somewhere in the country - in the woods. There’s lots of outdoor activities, rock climbing, building tents, building boats, building things with each other, sawing and chopping trees. The kind of multi-sensory active curriculum that really helps with these challenges for autistic children at a PRU.” [ptc.09]*

#### **4.6 Theme Four: Preparing autistic children and adolescents for adulthood through the PRU provision**

As an indication of what this theme is about, it was very interesting and valuable to hear educators’ perspectives on support not being isolated to this current phase of an autistic child’s life. Instead, educators were very keen to stress that supporting autistic children at a PRU is also about preparing them for their future: a future where exclusion is actively challenged by inclusive practice. What links the resulting sub-themes together is a message of the PRU provision serving a unique and indispensable role in preparing autistic children and adolescents for adulthood. The three sub-themes are: (1) Acknowledging that a lack of support has future consequences; (2) Supporting the journey to adulthood through the PRU curriculum pathway; and (3) Cementing partnerships for Key Stage 4 into Post-16 and beyond.

##### **4.6.1 Sub-theme: Acknowledging that a lack of support has future consequences**

Educators expressed their feelings about the consequences of a lack of support for autistic children, and what their future could look like without support being provided:

*“Autistic children are just dumped into PRUs and left there with all these other children until they finish school-age. They’re basically just turned into a statistic.” [ptc.13]*

*“I’ve got loads of autistic adult friends, and they’ll tell you how it is, because, autistic children do become autistic adults, and society seems to forget that.” [ptc.10]*

*“Autistic young people are placed in PRUs with others who’ve been excluded from secondary school for gang activity, drug use, and loads of different things. And, that’s the problem. Then, when you become*

*an adult, you're struggling in society, and you get institutionalised."*  
[ptc.08]

Wider consequences of exclusion were highlighted, and educators explained how it is not only about being excluded from school, but also that there are much broader implications:

*"The thing with exclusion is, essentially, you've been rejected wherever you've been before. There was something about ending up in a place with other children who had labels".* [ptc.05]

*"If you go from one uncaring place to another one, you just start thinking - 'Nobody cares about me'".* [ptc.08]

Concerns were raised about the mental health-related needs of pupils (extending into adulthood):

*"Maybe, had they got the right support at the right time, they wouldn't have needed medication."* [ptc.10]

*"I've heard horror stories. Autistic adults are put into mental health institutions"* [ptc.08]

*"I've come across so many autistic children who have more than one diagnosis, yes, comorbidity. But, actually, I think the mental health difficulties are because autistic children just don't get the support they so badly need."* [ptc.02]

Educators shared fears that parents had expressed to them regarding future prospects. They acknowledged that parents too needed to be supported in ensuring that expectations for their child's outcomes were not negative:

*"I ask parents about their autistic child's future, and it becomes a difficult conversation, and I can see tears rolling down their face, and they're saying - '...hang on a minute, what do you mean? They're not gonna get a job, are they. Who's gonna employ them?...' But, I insist this with parents because I know autistic children who've shown really challenging behaviour, but, end up going to work experience one day-a-week, and are really successful and doing really well on placement. It's about challenging those expectations, because, we know they can be successful, and, we have to support them."* [ptc.10]

*“One strategy to use with parents is ‘independence’; trying to make them know their child is an individual. Just because they’ve been told their child is autistic doesn’t mean they’re disabled for life. They can still do things. They can still learn.” [ptc.16]*

Concern was expressed regarding poor outcomes for autistic students (e.g., if attending college on certain days of the week as part of the PRU curriculum, or moving on to a college following their time at a PRU). Inclusivity was questioned, where poor outcomes and future consequences might result from colleges not allowing flexibility for specific individual needs and all students are instead judged by the same stringent expectations:

*“I’ve seen college behaviour policies that state ‘zero-tolerance’, and I think - ‘...That can’t be an inclusive college...’, but, if it’s hard for our autistic students, the message you’re giving as a college is - ‘...that’s too bad. Go find somewhere else...’ And, for me, that just isn’t good-practice.” [ptc.05]*

Regarding poor outcomes for autistic children, educators suggested the impact of their own lack of preparedness. They expressed how this led to the limited level of support they could provide for autistic children at PRUs:

*“It was a bit of a shock, because, I felt like I’d been thrown into the deep-end. I didn’t know what to expect.” [ptc.07]*

*“I had the hardest job in the world. I was thrown in at the deep-end - supporting a child diagnosed with both autism and ADHD.” [ptc.08]*

There was the feeling that the attitude (or the overall commitment of an educator) was directly related to the outcomes of autistic children:

*“We need people who genuinely care and want to teach, not forced to do it. If not, they shouldn’t be teaching autistic children. Simple-as-that.” [ptc.10]*

#### **4.6.2 Sub-theme: Supporting the journey to adulthood through the PRU curriculum pathway**

Educators identified pathways featuring various curriculum-based choices (e.g., transition to college, preparing for the workplace, promoting autonomy through life-skills) where the focus was person-centred. There was an emphasis on preparation in the sense of starting this journey early:

*“It’s about preparing them for college, adulthood, and the real-world. But, we actually start those processes early with the Careers Advice Service. So, there’s a good plan in place already by about February of Year 10 leading to post-Year 11.” [ptc.04]*

*“I try to help staff to focus on a very person-centred approach, and find out about that specific individual, because, there’s no one-size-that-fits-all. Autistic children come in all-shapes-and-sizes.” [ptc.12]*

Educators identified ‘variety’ as being key to supporting autistic students in preparation for their journey, with a programme of enrichment activities playing an integral part:

*“We have different vocational offers. So, we don’t just offer them the GCSE curriculum.” [ptc.06]*

*“For the curriculum, we have external programmes like working with horses, agriculture, or fixing bikes. And, these can be very beneficial for our autistic young people leading to work experience.” [ptc.02]*

*“It was all about cross-curricular links with external provisions. Enrichment was part of their curriculum, two afternoons a-week.” [ptc.05]*

*“For Year 10s and 11s, part of their Enrichment was going to college. But, for apprenticeship, when I was at the PRU, they didn’t have the big hype like now.” [ptc.10]*

Transition to college was expressed as another important phase of change regarding the design of the curriculum and Post-16 elements. Educators clarified this by providing examples of what this support might look like. Good-practice involved focusing on the world-of-work and essential skills, a staggered approach to the week, practical in-person support, and involving parents:

*“Transition to college. Well, that’s another major challenge where a lot of support is needed. New environment, new faces, different routines, and then there’s the world-of-work.” [ptc.02]*

*“Transition support isn’t about going straight into college or work experience five days a week and ‘x’ hours a day. It’s broken up for those Post-16 pathways; starting say four days-a-week at the PRU, and the one-day-a-week at college.” [ptc.06]*

*“We need to physically support our autistic young people going through their transition to that other setting, or to college. So, going to meetings with them. And, it’s also important for parents to see that support as well, and that’s so they can support transition from home. Collectively, that’s good-practice.” [ptc.10]*

Educators indicate how PRU Post-16 curriculums could provide support in preparation for the workplace environment, and identified areas of focus that included support with social interaction skills and clarity on the purpose (and value) of post-16 opportunities:

*“For the workplace, their main needs would definitely include appropriate social behaviour, social cues, and understanding the way a workplace environment actually works.” [ptc.14]*

*“Regardless of whether it’s college, training, work experience or whatever - you need to make it clear to them why they’re going to that new setting or workplace environment. Next, it’s making the transition from one environment to another as effortless as possible.” [ptc.08]*

*“Autistic individuals need the experience of employment or work experience so they learn how to interact in the workplace environment, because, the workplace is very different for autistic individual compared to neurotypical.” [ptc.11]*

Educators discussed barriers, and how employers might be influenced by stereotypical views of autism and the workforce. Challenging these types of attitudes was seen as a priority. Also expressed was the need for wider debates across society towards a time when it will be standard for autistic people to be more widely represented within the workplace:

*“In your local supermarket, how many autistic people do you see working there in the community? Hardly any. I think society has something to do with that. Employers need to be on board more so we see more autistic people as part of society. Then, it would become the norm that autistic children can aspire to.” [ptc.13]*

Successful work-experience was seen as important here:

*“I think the success at work experience was about this autistic young person having responsibility, enjoying the hard work, and always having*

*tasks to do. For him, it was about not being at the PRU, in the classroom, every single day of the week, and not being constrained to the four-walls. But, the other thing about work experience is that it needs to be meaningful.” [ptc.10]*

Alongside preparation for college and the workplace, autonomy was regarded as being essential for autistic young people going into adulthood:

*“I’d say, social skills, self-care, money management - it’s good-practice that they learn all these at around PRU teens, secondary age.” [ptc.11]*

*“It’s about skill-giving and strategies to use independently in the absence of adults, because, I think it’s essentially about preparing autistic young people for adulthood and the real-world. Because, that’s our role as educators - isn’t it?” [ptc.05]*

Part of this support is about supporting their voice; even if this means accompanying them to an interview:

*“What’s really important is that autistic students have their voice heard. So, for one of our students, I went to a couple of interviews with him, and so did our Advocate.” [ptc.02]*

Educators made a link made between autonomy and person-centred planning. Here, rather than options and outcomes being imposed upon them, the curriculum pathway was driven by the needs, interests and aspirations of the autistic young person:

*“I suppose it comes back to person-centred planning. It’s not just seeing the education, but, seeing the wider picture, and what’s important to them for their life.” [ptc.15]*

#### **4.6.3 Sub-theme: Cementing partnerships for Key Stage 4 into Post-16 and beyond**

Educators highlighted the need for working in partnership with colleges to address any assumptions regarding autistic children and, in turn, help support transition from PRU to college:

*“I think there’s something about autism where college staff don’t have high hopes for attainment. So, we had to work with colleges on this.”*  
[ptc.05]

*“Eventually, she transitioned to college. But, what I find worrying is that there seems to be this misconception that if an autistic student is considered to be high-functioning, that means they don’t need any support.”* [ptc.02]

Challenges were recognised regarding support for autistic students at a college setting, and there was also the feeling that commitment would need to be shown. From a college’s perspective, this would mean addressing their understanding of autism:

*“Getting them into colleges was really challenging - getting colleges to buy-in, and cater for their needs. And, although autism was a young person’s primary need, if colleges don’t understand autism, then, all they see is a young person with attitude and behaviour difficulties. I just think some Further or Higher Education institutions don’t necessarily care.”*  
[ptc.05]

For tackling these concerns, key questions were identified as part of the partnership-building process between PRU and college settings to ensure appropriate support would be in place:

*“So, finding out the kind of induction or settling-in opportunities have at this new place. What extra-curricular activities have they got to support the young autistic person so they feel part of the college community? Looking at Student Services - What’s there for emotional and practical support? Where do they go when struggling? And, who do they go to? What opportunities are there for relating meaningfully to some of the other students? So, I’d be wanting to find out all this beforehand.”* [ptc.12]

Educators recognised that cementing partnerships would require direct connections between people, and this resulted in key individuals and roles being identified including preparation, groundwork, liaison, contact during curriculum activities, and course-choice:

*“We always had to send our staff there. So, even though our autistic students were at the college, they still had the PRU staff with them there if needed; having that familiar staff they saw and knew. So, I think it’s good-practice between PRU and college to provide our autistic students with that feeling of safety by maintaining that familiarity.” [ptc.05]*

*“We have a Pastoral Care Co-ordinator to help with the college applications. So, it’s seeing what’s out there and linking them up with the right college and course - as based on the autistic their interests and what they want to study. So, for that future setting, it’s for us to visit each other’s settings.” [ptc.06]*

Strong links with external providers were identified and inclusive practices were emphasised:

*“We’d interview the students, and we very much had an inclusive practice - treating everyone the same. So, in the initial stages, we’d aim to see why they’d not done very well at mainstream school, and, what their motivations were. It was about finding their motivations about training and apprenticeship route.” [ptc.14]*

Educators also outlined that, to be effective, the key person at the college needed to be able to have knowledge and understanding of autism, and effective interpersonal skills grounded in principles of attunement:

*“They need a key person. Someone who’s had some training in autism. Someone who’s an attuned adult, thoughtful, sensitive, reflective, and able to do some really good thinking if an autistic young person experiences difficulties managing college life. Essentially, someone with good interpersonal skills and knowledge of autism would be ideal.” [ptc.12]*

Educators further emphasised the need for a person-centred approach along with clear processes and responsibilities between PRU and college. They highlighted how support for an autistic young person was central:

*“For the college, it’s about them being realistic, and what they can provide, and making agreements and also arrangements around that. And, it was about Link-Workers. So, every student would have a key-person.” [ptc.05]*

*“I’m aware that with some PRUs, a college might work with them by having person-centred reviews. In principle, it’s like provision ‘A’ working with provision ‘B’ trying to smooth out the transition for that autistic young person going from ‘A’ to ‘B’. So, the way it works is that staff from the new setting meet with staff from the old setting. And, this happens from around a term before the summer.” [ptc.16]*

*“It’s good liaising and good communicating. What needs to be done now and in the future? And, how does that match their current needs? So, it’s quite a lot of intensive work, and, it’s about partnership-working. But, if you don’t do that, autistic young people just get lost in the college system.” [ptc.03]*

Finally, educators identified PRUs needing to reach out directly to employers to build positive partnerships:

*“It’s about work experience and working with employers, because, there were certain employers who were more positive about hiring and employing an autistic student, so, we had more involvement with that process of partnership-building as well.” [ptc.14]*

## Chapter Five

### Discussion

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#### 5.1 Chapter Overview

This penultimate chapter discusses the results of the current study within the context of existing literature. Strengths and limitations of the research are also discussed. Implications will be considered for educators and particularly EPs, focusing on the unique role that EPs perform in this area. This chapter provides the opportunity to identify the importance of eco-systemic approaches in response to educators' perspectives on supporting autistic pupils. The main discussion is guided by the four Sub-Research Questions, and the chapter commences with a summary of the results.

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#### 5.2 Summary of results

Educators' perspectives were represented under four themes, which identified support in terms of needs, environment, systems and structures, along with preparation for adulthood:

- Theme One: Understanding the needs of PRU-based autistic children.
- Theme Two: The enabling environment of the PRU.
- Theme Three: Effectiveness of support through systems and structures.
- Theme Four: Preparing autistic children and adolescents for adulthood through the PRU provision.

Perspectives within **Theme One** indicated the understanding of needs as vital for establishing effective support, along with a specific attitude or frame-of-mind needed for educators supporting autistic children at a PRU. It was felt that support needed to be shaped around a premise of specific strengths alongside specific challenges. These findings were in line with existing literature on autism education, which discusses the need for a better understanding of children's individual needs (Jordan & Jones, 2012; Pellicano et al., 2018). More broadly, when comparing PRUs to mainstream secondary schools, certain benefits were suggested regarding the scale of buildings, staff-students ratio, and smaller classrooms at PRUs. This was consistent with Sproston et al. (2017) who, whilst

emphasising that PRUs are not the right environment or educational setting for autistic children, still acknowledged certain benefits.

In helping to identify this disposition, the three corresponding sub-themes showed that educators' perspectives covered prior challenges, transitions and interpersonal relationships. Educators acknowledged the challenges that PRU-based autistic children previously experienced in mainstream secondary. They were mindful that this was also about support that considered the impact of change in the form of macro- and micro-transitions. And, educators took the opportunity to explore key aspects of this theme on understanding needs when they identified the value of establishing a one-to-one relationship with an autistic child.

**Theme Two** considered how elements of PRU environments could be identified or modified to become supportive and enabling for autistic children. Educators acknowledged the impact of the environmental barriers on wellbeing and academic progress for autistic children. They also identified the importance of being consistent not only within, but also outside the PRU environment. Added to this idea of enabling the PRU environment through internal and external considerations was the principle of joint-working. And, in a fourth feature of this theme, there was the sense of enabling PRU environments through the positive ethos of an autism-friendly inclusive environment.

Within the context of the PRU environment, educators promoted ecosystemic explanations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): they emphasised the importance of an individual's development, learning and wellbeing being influenced by the surrounding environmental context (Lindsay et al., 2013; Makin et al., 2017). There was also acknowledgment of a broader impact of physical, sensory and various other factors impacting on interactions and the overall learning experiences for autistic children. Educators' perspectives aimed to move thinking away from a within-child narrative, where a child is seen as a problem (Gilling, 2012). In agreement with existing research such as Humphrey (2008), educators promoted the idea of modifying the environment. Educators questioned and challenged the use of mainstream secondary school practices, where there is often the expectation that autistic children should 'fit in'.

**Theme Three** brought together perspectives regarding the mechanisms through which PRUs function via various systems and structures. Educators

discussed how, without these mechanisms in place, PRUs would not only fail to be supportive for autistic children, but they would also fail to function as educational settings. This theme and its four sub-themes proposed that support was influenced by the extent to which systems and structures are (or, are not) in place. Communication was identified as being an integral component of PRU systems and structures, and this was about effectiveness of communication in terms of what worked and what did not work. Another element of systems and structures concerned how PRUs had (or could have had) supportive forums in place. The idea of systems and structures being influenced by a primary school model indicated educators' perspectives on adopting existing principles of support. From another element of systems and structures, educators recognised the need to be inclusive for autistic children, and how this was (or could have been) facilitated by an inclusive curriculum.

**Theme Four**, on preparation for adulthood, showed educators' awareness of broader surrounding issues and the need for a long-term outlook when considering the support provided at PRUs. With the combined focus on a lack of support having future consequences, the need for supporting the journey to adulthood and cementing of partnerships was represented. Perspectives on identifying and responding to stigma through pre-emptive support were captured. The focus was on future outcomes for PRU-based autistic children excluded from mainstream secondary school, where long-term outcomes could be dependent on the current support provided. Preparing autistic children and adolescents for adulthood was not only about outcomes, but also about identifying and tackling stigma related to societal views on autism, and challenging assumptions made about autistic people. For example, the prospect of success in the workplace where autistic adults can be supported in attaining and maintaining successful employment (Scott, Falkmer, Girdler & Falkmer, 2015). Support was also recognised within the contexts of the curriculum (ensuring this genuinely prepared the young people for life after the PRU) and partnerships (emphasising the need to work collaboratively, within and beyond the PRU).

### **5.3 Discussion of results**

The Main Research Question at the core of this current study enquired: What are educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units, following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school? Findings, in

relation to the four Sub-Research Questions addressing aspects of this broader question, are presented next.

### 5.3.1 Sub-Research Question 1

**What are educators' views on the primary needs of autistic children at a PRU?**

Educators spoke of primary needs in many ways, such as understanding difficulties experienced, enabling the PRU environment (with regards to the systems and structures of the PRU), and the need to be effective in preparing young people for adulthood. Educators were not only expressing what they felt were primary needs, they were also keen to identify what autism support should 'look like'. The current findings suggested that addressing individual needs was about tailor-fitting the PRU environment to support their autistic pupils by, for example, promoting a flexible and creative curriculum to reflect the diversity of their students. Another key aspect of addressing primary needs related to developmental phases and how *future* outcomes (moving towards adulthood) could have been supported by addressing the *current* needs of autistic children.

**Theme One** and all three of its sub-themes directly addressed this first Sub-Research Question of primary needs. Educators expressed views on how the principles of mainstream secondary school made it a challenging environment for autistic children. The mention of the impact of the environment alongside challenges with interpersonal relationships and transition, for example, echoed existing work (Makin et al., 2017; McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014). This was also aligned with existing research on the challenges autistic children can experience in mainstream schools in the lead up to exclusion (Power & Taylor, 2018). Existing literature recognises numerous precursors to exclusion, including breakdowns in relationships (adult-learner relationships as well as peer-peer relationships), lack of emotional support (Sproston et al., 2017), the challenging nature of secondary mainstream environments, staff lacking an understanding of individual needs (Brede et al., 2017), and teachers lacking knowledge of autism (Ravet, 2011).

In the current research, educators added to this existing evidence when they presented a picture of primary needs post-exclusion. This provided an

understanding of both the consequences of exclusion and how this can be turned around, with autistic children being able to experience inclusion within a PRU setting. However, this does also suggest that mainstream schools could learn from elements of PRU inclusive practices, as a means of providing the kind of support that may prevent autistic children from being excluded from mainstream secondary school in the first place. Educators further addressed primary needs when they recognised the impact of change. Consistent with existing literature, educators in the current study identified challenges related to transition from mainstream secondary to PRU environments (Fortuna, 2014). Similar to Makin et al. (2017), the current findings highlighted the complex and multi-faceted nature of this crucial phase in an autistic child's life. Educators' perspectives resonated with the idea of a '*major ecological shift*' (Mandy et al., 2016, p.6) when they considered challenges associated with transition.

For autistic children, recognised elements of this significant 'change' can become precursors to exclusion from mainstream secondary (Lequia et al., 2015; Schall et al., 2012). Unfamiliarity, break in routines, lack of preparedness, losing a sense of security and other factors place significant demands on the emotional, organisational, social and intellectual capacities of children on the autism spectrum. Educators added to explanations of transition when they expressed views on environment-based consequences for autistic children, and how this disruption to daily routines and expectations could lead to challenges in emotional needs. For this reason, executive function difficulties, which are characteristic of autistic young people (Kenny et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2017), provide an explanation of challenges associated with the impact of 'change'.

What makes this aspect of the current data novel is the PRU-based focus of educators' perspectives on an age-group of autistic children who not only experienced exclusion, but also faced a major developmental phase in their life along with the associated transitional stages. Educators recognised the various macro- and micro-transitions involved, and reflected autism-understanding by acknowledging the challenges of larger change alongside smaller units such as lesson change-overs, or going from one activity to another (Cameron, 2013; Roncaglia, 2013). Explanations for such difficulties may be regarded as multi-faceted. For example, as outlined in DSM-5, autism diagnosis partly relates to restrictive and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities

(APA, 2013). Educational settings can often prioritise rigid, structured learning with distinct (and abrupt) changes from one activity to another.

Another explanation relates to social interaction difficulties characteristic of autism (APA, 2013), yet numerous social scenarios (which are often unexpected) can be encountered within a given day, or even a given hour. In terms of accommodating this social aspect of primary needs, what distinguishes PRUs and the educators' role is the size/scale of this educational setting. This should be considered within the context of comparative pressures for autistic children when considering the sheer numbers within mainstream secondary school populations. Again, this raises questions regarding lessons: *What can be learned from the benefits of the smaller-scale PRU setting?* and, *Can certain aspects of the PRU be replicated within the larger mainstream secondary school setting?* As an example of this, the mainstream building layout could allow for smaller sections, quiet areas (or zones), which are protected from what Wing (2006) describes as the chaotic, noisy and bustling environment of a mainstream secondary school.

The third sub-theme helped to identify why understanding the primary needs of PRU-based autistic children was essential for educators in establishing a valued one-to-one relationship. Educators showed understanding of the necessary mind-set required to support autistic children, and identified trust and listening amongst other essential characteristics. Literature on autism education confirms current educators' concerns regarding the critical need for establishing an autistic child-educator relationship (Lloyd, 2013; Sproston et al., 2017). This is particularly relevant due to the significance educators can have in the educational and emotional life of autistic children at PRU settings. This sub-theme echoed findings from Hart (2013) and Sproston et al. (2017), highlighting how interpersonal aspects of relationship-building can foster inclusive opportunities within PRUs (Farouk, 2014). The sub-themes in Theme One, were connected by one key message that defined primary needs: the individuality of each autistic child. This is consistent with current understanding on the heterogeneity of autism (Georgiades et al., 2013; Hall et al., 2012), and support that is based on each autistic child being unique according to their strengths, characteristics of their personality, and their own set of individualised primary needs.

**Theme Two** highlighted views on primary needs by focusing on the enabling environment of the PRU. Educators acknowledged how experiences for autistic children at mainstream secondary schools seemed to contrast with elements of PRU settings; the latter of which went some way towards becoming inclusive and addressing the primary needs of autistic children (Sproston et al. (2017). Barriers to wellbeing and academic progress were identified, including sensory, physical, emotional and mental wellbeing, along with cognition, learning and social needs. Hence, educators were mindful of primary needs when they acknowledged such environmental barriers (noise, building layout, movement, unexpected/non-initiated social scenarios, and more). They also discussed anxiety resulting from a learning environment not being enabled (see also Brede et al., 2017; Roncaglia, 2013; Wicks, 2014).

Literature often highlights anxiety (White, Oswald, Ollendick & Scahill, 2009) in relation to environmental barriers featuring social interaction, physical layout, sensory needs, and other context-based considerations (Ashburner et al., 2010; Brede et al., 2017). The current findings added to existing evidence by confirming the influence of the surrounding environment on wellbeing, as well as academic progress. However, the difference here was how educators at PRUs identified and promoted supportive measures that helped to enable an environment not designed with autistic pupils in mind. It also links with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic model. For example, the impact of the environment highlights context-based approaches and their influences on emotional wellbeing and cognition.

**Theme Three** referred to educators' views encompassing systems and structures related to primary needs. The sub-theme on the 'inclusive curriculum' supported the idea of such mechanisms of support. This was about an individualised approach to support where primary needs were identified and accommodated within the structure of an inclusive PRU-based curriculum. Specifically, this acknowledged current understanding on the approach of tailoring systems and structures to fit with the primary needs of autistic children, as opposed to expecting autistic children to fit in (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Sproston et al., 2017). This principle for supporting autistic children is consistent with existing evidence on autism and the inclusive curriculum (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Makin et al., 2017).

Where educators spoke about flexibility of the curriculum, an autistic child's interests, or incorporating a creative curriculum, primary needs of autistic children were being placed as paramount. As recognised in previous research (e.g., Sproston et al., 2017; Hart, 2013), PRUs can have some advantage over their mainstream secondary counterparts regarding this curriculum flexibility, and the higher staff-to-student ratio (which allows for creativity). The PRU curriculum can be extended to include enrichment-type activities (in many cases, facilitated at other venues). Such an inclusive curriculum captures philosophy, ethos, inclusive practices, organisational elements, timings, resources, facilities, staffing, and others (McGuckin & Minton, 2014). One difference between mainstream secondary schools and PRUs relates to the ability to have numerous systems of support running consecutively. For every child attending a PRU setting, the curriculum can be adjusted according to primary needs. This could help to define the PRU curriculum, and also presents a challenge for mainstream settings: can secondary schools similarly modify their curriculum to support autistic children and, thus, reduce the risk of exclusion? The focus needs to be on identifying positive elements of the PRU that can be feasibly adopted within the mainstream secondary model.

**Theme Four** linked primary needs with current support and future outcomes. The first sub-theme provided a picture of future consequences where primary needs were not recognised and supported. Howlin et al. (2004; 2009) suggested the prospect of autistic children going on to an adulthood characterised by social isolation, dependence on parental/adult support, poor quality of life, and (to, ironically, mirror their exclusion from mainstream secondary school) being excluded from the workplace. Such prospects emphasise the relevance of the current findings, and the need for ensuring that autistic children are supported at PRUs in the present, to effectively prepare them for their future. The second sub-theme described a journey to adulthood, providing views on how primary needs could be addressed via a specifically designed PRU curriculum pathway. When considering inclusive practice at a personalised level, this particular sub-theme promoted person-centred thinking and planning (Sanderson, Smull & Harvey, 2008).

Person-centred planning has evolved over the years as an approach which places the focus on what is important for the individual in relation to their

own aspirations and outcomes in life. In expressing views on person-centred approaches, educators placed value on the voice of autistic children, their interests, and what is important to them for both now and going forward. This finding was consistent with evidence challenging stereotyping, and that identifies factors for success in the workplace for autistic adults (Scott et al., 2015). PRUs are, therefore, crucial in preparing autistic children for their journey beyond adolescence and towards adulthood. This stresses the importance of a narrative that sees exclusion from mainstream secondary turning into supportive and inclusive practices at a PRU, whilst being inspired by the prospect of positive and inclusive outcomes, whether for college, training or the workplace.

### 5.3.2 Sub-Research Question 2

***What are educators' views on good-practice for supporting autistic children at a PRU?***

Within the context of the current findings, good-practice should be regarded as an umbrella-term of a generic nature, which captures a range of approaches, attitudes, and practical applications related to support. This is consistent with current understanding of autism education being underpinned by good-practice that is identified, shared, implemented and reviewed (Charman et al., 2011; Guldborg, 2019). **Theme One** and its sub-themes identified educators' perspectives on shared principles, approaches, and messages regarded as essential for supporting autistic children at PRUs. For instance, the supportive approach of acknowledging prior challenges experienced in mainstream secondary was felt to be something that needed to be adopted by all educators. Educators also promoted the need to develop trust and rapport when establishing a valued one-to-one relationship with autistic pupils in PRUs.

Under **Theme Two**, good-practice was noted with regards to acknowledging the impact of environmental barriers such as noise, movement, lighting, displays, building layout and numerous social encounters. Educators also recognised that the environment required good-practice to be incorporated for emotional and mental wellbeing support. Where the second sub-theme identified the importance of being consistent within and outside the PRU environment, existing literature shows the good-practice of being consistent

through staffing, ways of working, familiarity, or routines as being beneficial for autistic children in enabling educational environment (Dean, 2013). However, within PRUs, special attention needs to be given to the benefits of being consistent by assigning key-staff, and this is due to the risk of staff-turnover. This relates to how Cage, Bird and Pellicano (2016) highlighted how autistic children within a classroom environment can struggle to cope with unpredictability.

Evidence shows that autism support by modifying the provision can influence approaches to teaching and learning that benefit *all* children within an educational setting, whether autistic or non-autistic (Jones, 2007; Roberts & Simpson, 2016). Regardless of what the learning is (and where it takes place) a key message from this theme was the need to maintain principles of consistency both within the grounds of the PRU and outside (e.g., venues, facilities, outdoor learning). Educators also emphasised how good-practice could be promoted at differing levels from within and outside the PRU (e.g., educators, services, organisations working jointly). Also identified was how an autism-friendly inclusive environment should be characterised by a positive ethos. For the purpose of this current study, ethos can be described as the way in which principles of good-practice flow implicitly and explicitly throughout an organisation and its population (Kane et al., 2009; Shevlin et al., 2013). Where PRU-staff or leadership come from differing perspectives and stances on autism, this suggests the need for an ethos that brings people together for enabling this educational setting. The idea of PRU settings being enabled through a positive ethos echoes existing literature (Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011).

The leadership role is seen as crucial in determining the extent to which this ethos can be embraced (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Yet educators explained how this ethos was not simply about leadership style, implementation of policy, or dependent upon the passion of one isolated educator. Instead, positive ethos was viewed as being dependent on everyone displaying good-practice in PRU-based autism support; thus, reflecting the idea of a positive learning environment identified by Sproston et al. (2017) and the autism-friendly inclusive environment promoted by Goodall (2015). This could be fostered through attention to specific aspects of the learning environment such as lighting, sound, colour, use of space, and resourcing. It should, however, be emphasised that although there are generalised principles that educators felt assisted the learning environment in

becoming autism-friendly, this alone was deemed insufficient. As Humphrey and Lewis (2008) promoted, each autistic child is a unique person with a specific set of needs, and this should be reflected in the specific shaping of an autism-friendly and inclusive environment.

In **Theme Three**, communication was emphasised in relation to good practice, particularly regarding connecting with parents. This was not merely for the sake of sending information home, but identified as an active strategy for supporting autistic children. Perspectives showed how good-practice was about regular conversations; whether this was between staff, Senior Leadership, professionals, outside agencies, services or other combinations. Forums for support were found to provide numerous opportunities for sharing and promoting good-practice at PRUs. Specifically, educators were keen to express the value of group supervision sessions and Reflective Teams facilitated by an EP.

Within this theme, the principle of adopting a 'primary school model' was noted. Principles included: a familiar key adult or teacher, a fixed classroom with recognised surroundings, learning alongside a small group of familiar peers, and the advantage of a small learning environment. It is worth considering that (in general) PRUs might well be able to adopt this approach as they are relatively small educational institutions when compared to their mainstream secondary counterparts. Educators identified this area of good-practice by reflecting on how the difficulties that autistic children experienced at mainstream secondary school contrasted with the safety and comfort felt when attending primary school (Gipps et al., 2015; McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014).

This relates to recognised challenges characterised by organisational demands, including movement from one classroom to another, unexpected and unwarranted social encounters with peers, and having to change from one teacher to another. Despite this acknowledgement, there was an exception. For example, current educators challenged the practice where some PRUs might seek to emulate mainstream secondary school approaches. Educators instead recognised the benefits of primary school-based systems and structures for supporting autistic children. Educators' perspectives reflected literature promoting a sense of belonging, feeling welcomed, and being understood. Such principles helped to promote a sense of identity for autistic children, and encouraged school-connectedness (Hebron, 2018; Whitlock, 2006).

Underlying principles behind this sense of belonging (Rose & Shevlin, 2017) indicated how PRU-based good-practice could be informed by primary school-based systems and structures. It should, therefore, be acknowledged that due to the lack of any equivalent PRU-based autism research, this current finding exposes gaps in existing literature. Such gaps also suggest the need for additional research on secondary mainstream schools and the principles of support that they could adopt in response to the exclusion of autistic children.

In Theme Three, educators also linked PRU systems and structures to individual strengths and needs of autistic children when considering good practice for supporting autistic children at PRUs. Good-practice was understood in relation to shared principles that made the curriculum accessible. This was promoted through inclusive features such as differentiation, resourcing, sensory considerations, and a bespoke approach that was influenced by individualised needs. This principle of good-practice drew on the principle of the flexible curriculum that educators emphasised. This indicates that for good-practice to be judged as effective, the individuality of every autistic child must be at its core.

Within **Theme Four**, educators' views on good-practice encompassed attitudes that challenged assumptions on autism, and that promoted the type of support that should have been in place. Adopting a person-centred approach, educators promoted the good-practice of listening to what autistic children felt was important to them, to help them shape and define their future outcomes (Thompson et al., 2018; White & Rae, 2016). Educators' views also highlighted the importance placed on a curriculum approach that catered for current and future needs. Educators also identified good-practice as cementing the types of partnership-working that promoted support extending beyond an autistic child's time at a PRU.

### 5.3.3 Sub-Research Question 3

***What are educators' views on the support they require in order to work effectively with autistic children in a PRU?***

This third Sub-Research Question focused on the needs of educators. The views identified covered areas such as knowledge, being prepared and self-efficacy. Some educators spoke of being 'thrown in at the deep-end',

lacking preparedness and expressed insufficient knowledge or skills on autism. By identifying the need for the awareness and understanding of autism (along with continually developing their skills) educators were recognising the importance of they themselves being supported.

Under **Theme One**, educators spoke about the need for acknowledging the challenges that PRU-based autistic children previously experienced in mainstream secondary. Being aware of this type of support was seen as vital for avoiding any stigmatising or misunderstanding of autistic children at PRUs. Educators were also conscious of the need to enhance their understanding and knowledge of transition in relation to autism. This included planning in advance, predictability, understanding how to contribute to an individualised, and bespoke approach for autistic children, as acknowledged by existing evidence (Mandy et al., 2016; Sterling-Turner & Jordan, 2007). Under **Theme Two**, educators showed their appreciation for the support they themselves required with regards to working with professionals (such as EPs). Working jointly with parents was another source of support; particularly where there was purposeful collaboration between home and PRU. Furthermore, the process of joint-thinking and problem-solving added to this sense of educators feeling valued and supported as they worked with others.

Within **Theme Three**, educators recognised the need for (and value of) being supported in relation to varying forums for support. For the purpose of this current study, educators' perspectives helped to define the term 'forum' as being a coming together of individuals with the opportunity to share, bond, feel listened to, establish strategies, and to be informed, as well as being empowered. Physically, this was symbolised by a room or meeting space, and there was recognition that this support might take the shape of formal and informal (unofficial or impromptu) forums. This allowed staff to come together as a team within what could often be regarded as a therapeutically supportive forum. For this, EPs were identified as having a key role in facilitating sessions that promoted PRU-based support through forums such as supervision, a Reflective Team and Solution Circles. At group level, a certain connection and shared approach allows current educators to see the value of cohesion, whilst also recognising that they are not alone.

As also recognised by educators in the current study, Leren (2006) argued that forums act as a platforms for empowering autistic children so that their voices and their views can be heard. The reason for highlighting the voice of the autistic child here relates to the understanding that if educators within a forum listen to and understand autistic children, this will in turn support educators by providing them with the understanding of how best to support autistic children at the individual level within a PRU setting. Identified examples included the need for forums where the community, police, and others can hear the voices of autistic children (as per Chown, 2010). Thus, it is acknowledged that, in addition to educators, elements of the public or society would benefit from more autism awareness.

The way in which **Theme Four** addressed Sub-Research Question 3 relates to educators' perspectives on stigma, societal attitudes on autism, expectations at college settings, employers' pre-conceptions, and inconsistencies in staff attitudes (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Hewitt, 2011; Rydzewska, 2012). Educators' understanding of future outcomes (Howlin, Goode, Hutton & Rutter, 2004) should be seen as playing a crucial role in how they currently support autistic children and adolescents with their development into adulthood being kept in mind (Burgess & Gutstein, 2007; Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2013). These pre-emptive approaches to support resonates with Friedman, Warfield and Parish (2013) who agreed that transition into adulthood was very much about supporting autistic children presently. With the PRU curriculum pathway in mind, this was about educators being supported in learning how to challenge assumptions on autism in such a way as to become empowered to promote the type of inclusive practice defined by Pellicano et al. (2018). Inclusive practice will however be dependent on educators' understanding of how to be effective in cementing partnerships that can impact on PRU-based autistic children at Key Stage 4 and beyond.

#### **5.3.4 Sub-Research Question 4**

***How do educators work with the autistic child, their family, staff, professionals, or others to address specific needs?***

This final Sub-Research Question relates to eco-systemic considerations due to varying levels of working in the PRU. Educators recognised this sense of

'working with others' as being extended to the wider staff, parents, professionals, and external services. Under **Theme Two**, educators identified the practicalities and benefits of joint-working, and emphasised how the role of support for autistic children went beyond the reach of the PRU. Educators promoted the message of collaboration, and this was reflected in an inclusive way of working (Blyth & Milner, 2002; McLoughlin, 2009). They emphasised working with autistic children and parents, alongside multi-professional and multidisciplinary approaches to working, plus the involvement of CAMHS, Social Services and YOS workers. This is consistent with current eco-systemic considerations that help to reinforce joined-up working by embodying current legislation (Children and Families Act 2014; SEND Code of Practice 2015).

Interestingly, this eco-systemic consideration was mirrored by educators in the current study when expressing the way in which components from the microsystem interact. This particular aspect of the findings added to the very limited examples of existing literature covering EPs and their key role in joint-working such as multi-agency involvement (Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009; Palikara et al., 2018). However, it is crucial for PRU-practices that the 'joint-working' identified by educators does not become a convenient buzz-word in the way that the term 'inclusion' has been utilised over the decades by politicians, educationalists, and researchers alike (Cooper, 2004; Evans & Lunt, 2002). Therefore, challenges should be acknowledged and acted upon. Bringing people together, having differing goals and perspectives, managing time, decision-making, costs in relation to traded models, and having to buy-in professionals and services; these are all challenges where assumptions on joint-working should not be made. This type of attention to detail and foresight will determine the extent to which autistic children can be supported inclusively at PRUs. Furthermore, the multi-agency approach is a crucial form of working together for addressing the needs of all children; regardless of the educational setting (Walker, 2018).

Under **Theme Three** (*'systems and structures'*), the first two sub-themes on communication and forums helped to further demonstrate how educators worked with others. For communication to be effective, educators spoke of regularity, interaction between various levels, and how this can be used to build relationships; hence, communication was a crucial ingredient for working with others. Perspectives also showed communication as a key element in knitting

and binding the differing levels of the eco-system, where autistic children and educators were indicated at the centre (Figure 4, later in Section 5.4). Educators showed how communication included interactions between staff, with Senior Leadership, through home-PRU liaison, and with professionals from outside agencies. This idea of communication reaching beyond the PRU environment was consistent with existing literature (Kraft, 2017; Palikara et al., 2018). This idea of reaching beyond the PRU setting is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Eco-systemic Model. Therefore, PRUs should not see themselves as isolated entities, but instead as part of a microsystem surrounded by ever-increasing layers; with communication being integral.

In **Theme Four**, educators spoke about challenging societal views on autism as part of this idea of working together. Where parents were facing challenges regarding their expectations and aspirations for their autistic children's future, educators saw this as an opportunity to work together positively by reframing future goals so that they were informed by inclusive outcomes. The principle of cementing partnerships was in line with the eco-systemic approach to supporting autistic children promoted by this current study. Current educators were echoing existing evidence within literature regarding the key role that EPs play concerning their involvement in post-16 transition support (Morris & Atkinson, 2018). However, very little evidence exists addressing the future outcomes of PRU-based autistic children, thus leaving this focus as an unknown and unexamined area of autism support. Figure 3 lists key aspects of this PRU-inspired autism support; where commonalities are inspired by ways of working that can provide a continuous line of support.

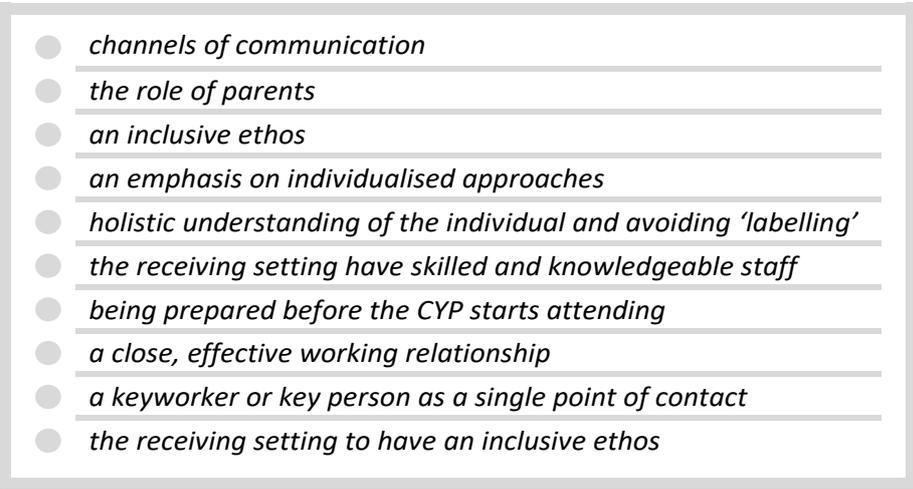
- 
- *channels of communication*
  - *the role of parents*
  - *an inclusive ethos*
  - *an emphasis on individualised approaches*
  - *holistic understanding of the individual and avoiding 'labelling'*
  - *the receiving setting have skilled and knowledgeable staff*
  - *being prepared before the CYP starts attending*
  - *a close, effective working relationship*
  - *a keyworker or key person as a single point of contact*
  - *the receiving setting to have an inclusive ethos*

Figure 3: *Commonalities in support for transitioning beyond PRUs*

This presents the notion that irrespective of the pathway, for example college (White et al., 2017), training (Chiang, Ni and Lee, 2017), work-experience (LeBlanc, Riley, & Goldsmith, 2008), re-integration to mainstream (Lawrence, 2011), or any bespoke arrangement, there are particular commonalities identifiable as unique to PRUs. Such commonalities refers directly to how educators can work with others to cement the types of partnerships that promote support. What makes this finding PRU-specific is how educators identified the unique way in which PRUs can place the focus on next-steps, and be pragmatic in doing so.

#### 5.4 Discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning this study

With consideration to the resulting four themes, Figure 4 presents how elements from educators' perspectives can be linked with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model; as originally presented at the end of Chapter One (see Figure 1).

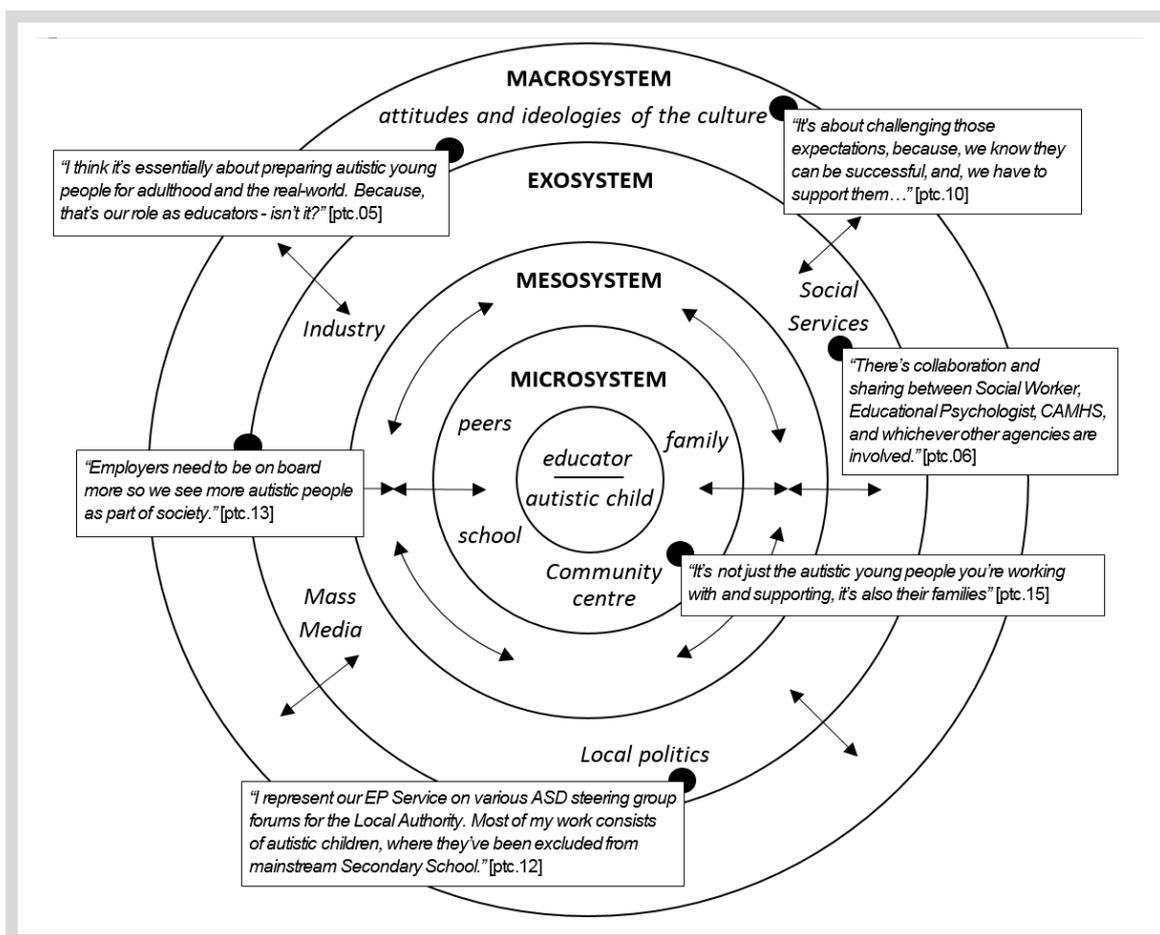


Figure 4: Selected educators' perspectives mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Eco-systemic Model

In this model, the autistic child is at the centre alongside the educator, with both occupying the conceptualised space Bronfenbrenner (1979) would normally reserve for 'the individual'. Justification for this modification relates to the findings of the current study in that, similar to autistic children at a PRU, educators also have unique needs. The mix of educators in this current sample included those who had prior experience and training, and others who had taken it upon themselves to become upskilled. Educators who had initially lacked confidence contrasted with those with a lifelong passion for autism and inclusion. Others had no experience whatsoever; feeling unprepared and thrown into the 'deep-end'. The PRU context adds to the picture of why the needs of this vulnerable group of excluded autistic children are particularly challenging to acknowledge and to support.

With the current findings showing that autistic children and educators both require support, this highlights consequences where there exists a lack of preparedness, or a sense of uncertainty. This stance proposes that both the educator and autistic child are directly and indirectly impacted by their immediate context, and subsequently influenced by the surrounding cascading eco-systemic layers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Whether an eco-systemic approach is used for addressing, for example, issues related to family therapy, business, inclusion, or a culture of bullying in schools, there is the consistent feature of inter-weaving characteristics throughout the context-based layers (Lindblad-Goldberg & Northey, 2013; McGuckin & Minton, 2014; Singal, 2006; Sun, Wu & Yang, 2018). In Figure 4, participant quotes regarding the impact of attitudes, stigma and expectations (macrosystem) on current needs and future consequences are presented. Further influences include government, legislation, and wider society. Sitting within this outer-layer of the eco-system are influences on some of the social constructs identified by participants. Perspectives also indicated interactions with the exosystem where educators spoke of outside organisations and their connections with PRUs (e.g., EPs, work-experience providers, the police, Social Services).

In the current study, educators demonstrated how all of these external elements could have a direct or indirect impact on the PRU environment, educators' ability to support autistic children, and the extent to which individual needs are addressed. This eco-systemic framework helps to identify the

environment, the surrounding contexts, and context-based influences as a commonality throughout the findings. For example, sensory needs, new faces, relationships and social encounters all relate to the environment. These difficulties may well be regarded as being typical for any child regardless of the setting. However, there are added challenges for autistic children when considering the combination of transition to a PRU context, the far-reaching impact of exclusion, the onset of adolescence, and often having to endure negative assumptions related to one's current access to education alongside immediate and future outcomes. Alongside the physical environment is the context of the family and its influence. Hence, the relationship between parents and educators is another consideration within this eco-systemic model, with participants indicating eco-systemic layers with, for example, Social Services. For the PRU setting, it is commonplace to find Social Services involvement with children and their families, whether autistic or non-autistic.

Further relevance of this eco-systemic model and interacting layers is evident where educators spoke of pressures on staff from Senior Leadership, with management themselves responding to the impact of influences across the exosystem and macrosystem. This included ongoing questions regarding the effectiveness of PRUs, Ofsted-related pressures and expectations, government targets, legislation, and a societal culture that impacts on attitudes towards children attending PRUs and their family. The depth of perspectives permitted through the social constructionist stance of this current study (Harper, 2011) allow for this mapping onto Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic model. A key message from this study is that educators should not be expected to support autistic children at PRUs in isolation and without being equipped. Figure 5 shows eco-systemic approaches for supporting autistic children at PRUs being identified from educators' perspectives.

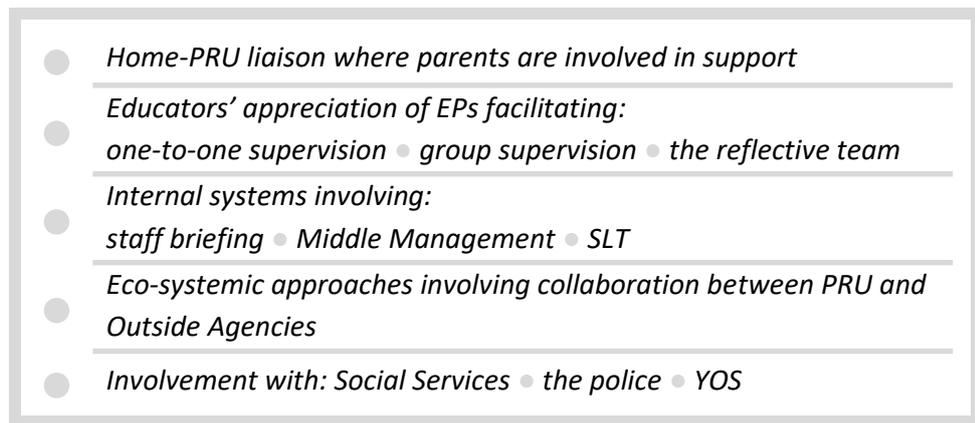


Figure 5: *Elements of support across the ecological system*

Theme Two and Theme Three (on ‘the enabling environment...’ and ‘...systems and structures’, respectively) can be understood fairly directly in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model. For example, in addition to the impact of the context, educators were clear in promoting the message that effective communication is essential for building and maintaining relationships, as well as keeping informed and sharing information. Also promoted were the differing levels in terms of stakeholders involved in communication (e.g., individual educators, the staff team, Middle Management, SLT, parents). Accordingly, *communication* can be regarded as unique in that it runs through and interlinks with overlapping layers of the eco-system.

### **5.5 Implications for PRU educators**

It should be noted that in addition to the implications for EP practice (next - Section 5.6), educators themselves will play a crucial role in addressing the challenges, good practice, and ways forward related to the findings of the current study. With this qualitative research gaining perspectives from a modest sample of 16 educators, this sample should, of course, not be seen as representing experiences of support for autistic children at PRUs on a regional or national basis. However, as identified in the earlier review of literature (Chapter Two), current implications for PRU educators (as reflected by perspectives) are reinforced by existing evidence on supporting autistic children in terms of various core principles including: relationship building (Sproston et al., 2017), transition (Pellicano et al., 2017), tailoring the environment (Makin et al., 2017), promoting inclusive practice for autistic children (Brede et al., 2017), and future outcomes (Kenny et al., 2019). Hence, these implications should certainly be seen as stimulus for further debate; not only in relation to autism, mainstream education,

and exclusion, but also regarding the role of PRUs. Thus, we are witnessing a debate already stimulated (see Chapter One - 1.11) by the UK government commissioned *Timpson Review of School Exclusion* (DfE, May 2019).

The implications of this study for PRU educators covers a broad remit, determined by the varying needs of autistic children. Types of support are dependent on the ability to implement environmental considerations and promote educators' understanding, knowledge and inclusive practices on autism. Due to the individualised needs of autistic children, educators at PRUs should be equipped with core knowledge and understanding of autism. Added to this is the recognised benefit of interpersonal relationships, and educators' ability to establish a bond of trust with autistic children at PRUs. Indeed, research has often highlighted a link between exclusion and the prior breakdown in the adult-child relationship at mainstream secondary school regarding autistic pupils (Sproston et al., 2017). The message here is about being proactive rather than reactive. Whilst PRU settings do appear to confer some benefits to autistic children (as described in the current research and also in Sproston et al.), the goal cannot just be about modifying generalised PRU settings to have a specialist autism element to them. Rather, autistic children should not end up in a PRU, and the priority should be about providing proactive support to prevent exclusion from school in the first place.

Implications for PRU educators include training needs, one-to-one supervision, and the need to be a reflective practitioner. Added to this is the gaining of support from colleagues, SLT, and outside professionals (as well as other services). Since autistic children arriving at a PRU will have likely experienced significant difficulties at mainstream secondary, there are implications for PRU educators and the type of support provided. Personalised planning takes a step-by-step phased approach commencing prior to an autistic child's first day at a PRU. Another element of this support would be to have a key adult at the PRU who provides familiarity. Time and space are also important, and an autistic child should never be rushed or pressurised.

It can be argued that the above points help to support the need for autism training to be a compulsory element for teacher training in the England, as introduced in the UK in 2016. However, there is no evidence indicating how this has been implemented, for example whether as a significant module or a limited

lecture/presentation on autism awareness. There has also not been any monitoring or evaluation of teachers' application of such awareness/support within the classroom. As identified by Hayes et al. (2013), there can be a disconnect between having knowledge of autism and being able to apply this knowledge effectively in practice. Reflecting the core message of inclusive practice driving the rationale of this current study, Hayes et al. (2013) were not concluding on knowledge of autism automatically equating to effective support. Instead, they emphasised educators being knowledgeable on how to implement inclusive practice. Autism knowledge in the form of accumulated information does not always equate to confidence; or indeed, the ability to support autistic children at a PRU setting. This should be an ongoing process, with emphasis on knowing the individual, their interests, and strengths. Understanding of individual needs goes above-and-beyond any general understanding of autism.

Support should be informed by current understanding across research regarding resources, the environment, approaches to teaching, and attitudes that are tailored to fit the needs of autistic children, rather than expecting them to fit in (Makin et al., 2017). This approach is key for ensuring that a cycle of exclusion is broken. By highlighting both needs and skills of educators, this defines their role as being varied with eco-systemic underpinnings. Thus, providing direct support through one-to-one relationships, liaison with parents, and interactions with EPs and Social Workers, amongst others, is essential. Such interactions with the macrosystem show educators addressing current knowledge and understanding, equality, and acknowledging the direct and indirect impact of societal attitudes on autistic children attending PRUs. Such implications reinforce educators as being well-placed in the educational and pastoral life of autistic children attending PRUs.

## **5.6 Implications for EP practice**

When considering the value of gaining educators' perspectives, the following implications for EP practice should be regarded as a catalyst for continued work in what is such a relevant and topical area. Supporting autistic children at PRUs following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school certainly compliments the remit of EP practice. Whilst it is crucial that autistic children are included whilst attending PRUs, it is vital that we bear in mind that they should not be there in the first place. This is the context of exclusion within

which EPs are practising, and where the promotion of inclusive practice is a priority for supporting autistic children. Therefore, implications for EP practice relate to the principle of promoting inclusive practice for autistic children based in an environment that was originally created because of exclusion. Such practice is influenced by the ability of EPs to bring evidence-based research that impacts on the context, the educator-autistic CYP relationship, and also the range of surrounding stakeholders from both within and outside PRU settings. Thus, there are implications for training, supervision, and promoting the types of practices for fostering inclusion for autistic children and bringing the surrounding adults, agencies and services together through joint working. When also considering implications for EPs promoting reflective practice and autonomy amongst educators, their extensive remit is further defined, as outlined within the BPS Educational Psychology standards mapped against the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards of proficiency.

Alongside the BPS, the HCPC is the governing body which sets out the ethical and professional standards by which psychologists and other professionals maintain their practice (HCPC, 2015). Divided into ten strands, the areas of competency are designed for demonstrating autonomy, knowledge, skills, professionalism, and a range of other qualities across an extensive mapping. The reason for raising the issue of competencies in relation to implications for EP practice is that similar qualities have been identified by educators within the current study on supporting autistic children attending PRUs. As demonstrated in Figure 6, examples of this type of commonality between current educator perspectives and standards across the BPS and HCPC mapping include: implications for the EP role within a multi-disciplinary team, the value of EP-facilitated supervision at differing levels, promoting a shared ethos, bringing psychology to consultation, and a supportive inclusive practice involving children, young people and their parents/carers through collaborative working.

Professional Competencies [BPS and HCPC standards]	Educator's perspectives
Be able to contribute effectively to work undertaken as part of a multi-disciplinary team. [HCPC-9.7]	<i>"We had a multi-disciplinary team. It was me, two other EPs who worked in different parts of the PRU, the Clinical Psychologist who was based in CAMHS, and the Speech and Language Therapist. So, I'd take things back to the team."</i> [ptc.15]
Understand psychological models related to the influence of school ethos and culture, educational curricula, communication systems, management and leadership styles on the cognitive, behavioural, emotional and social development of children, adolescents and young adults. [HCPC-13.33]	<i>"But, it's really having a general school-wide ethos at the PRU, promoting understanding of autism."</i> [ptc.09]
Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of models of psychological consultation that are evidence-informed. [BPS-4.1]	<i>"As the Link EP, I'd often facilitate the consultation. There'd be a structure to the session. Maybe, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, or a problem-solving approach, and looking at strengths and needs, reflecting on what's worked well, and then thinking about any possible underlying causes."</i> [ptc.12]
Demonstrate skills to work collaboratively with children, young people and the adults who care, work and plan for them to develop and implement practices and strategies to create and maintain effective and supportive learning environments. [BPS-1.7]	<i>"I think good transition practice is about working with other professionals, working closely with the parents, and having an individualised approach. Also, I think it's important to have student-voice as well as parent-voice represented as part of that transition."</i> [ptc.02]

Figure 6: Mapping educators' perspectives onto competencies in EP practice.

For the first perspective on the multidisciplinary team, this approach was seen as a valuable source of support, with EPs playing a central role. The approach was regarded as unique to the PRU setting, and in direct response to the need for active day-to-day support. Professionals were on the ground and available to implement direct work, alongside longer-term strategies. This not only helped define the role of the EP with regards to the PRU setting, but provided an indication of the extent to which EPs can be viewed as being at the forefront of supporting autistic children and educators alike at PRUs. Figure 6 demonstrates how specific educator perspectives correspond with the BPS and HCPC standards of proficiency. This type of quality assurance underpinning standards in EP practice is a major part of the current researcher's role as a Trainee EP. Therefore, due to the proactive nature of EP training, with work placement running alongside the research commitments, the impact of professional competencies should not be underestimated.

Competencies should henceforth be considered in terms of complementing the constructs and philosophical stance of social constructionism which guides the current research. For this reason, professional competencies

should be seen as integral not only to the role of the psychologist, but also integral to the implications for EP practice in this current topic. In further emphasising the relevance of this current study to Educational Psychology, Figure 7 illustrates how the supportive role of the EP carries implications at a number of levels. At the most direct level, with one to one support, the multi-layered and unique remit of the EP is again highlighted through the dual role of supporting autistic children as well as other educators. This is further reinforced by EP involvement at the other varying levels, and thus emphasises why EPs are crucial to the outcomes and future implementations of this current study.

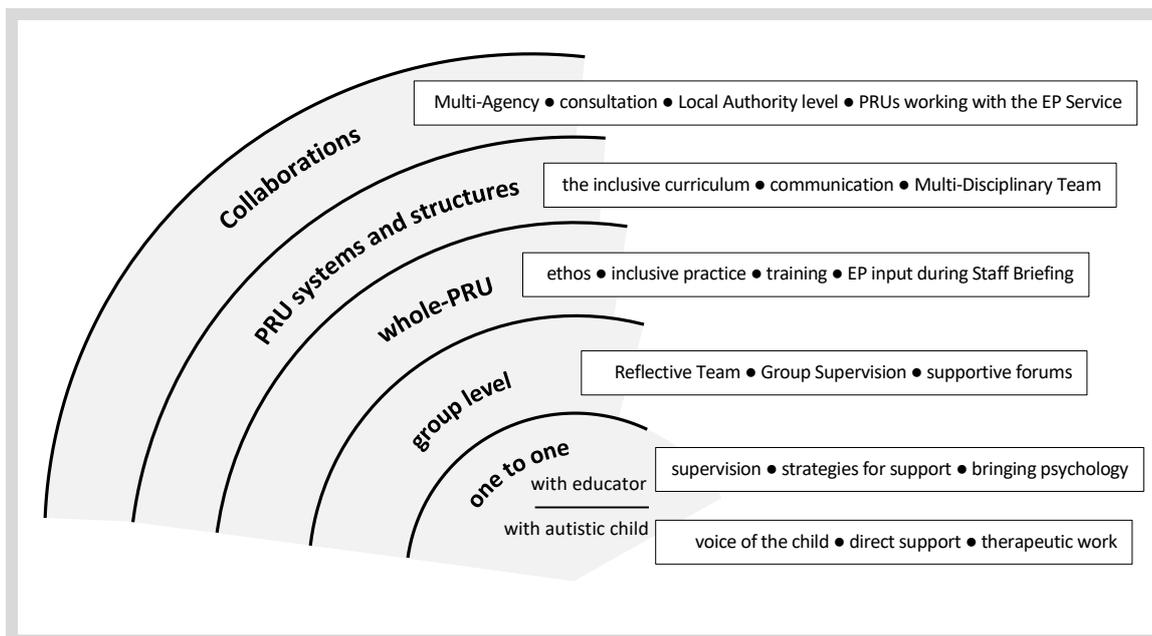


Figure 7: *Implications for EP practice at varying levels of support*

The findings of this current study have shown how EPs can promote knowledge and understanding of autism, whilst maintaining a focus on individual needs as they elicit the voice of the autistic child. This is specific to PRU settings. Every single child comes with their own set of needs, and there is a separate focus with desired outcomes for each individual. This marrying of the results in figure 7 helps to identify how EPs contribute through an eco-systemic framework of support. At every level, EPs are active in PRU-based autism support. For example, from the perspectives of within and beyond the PRU setting, EPs are well-placed due to already existing links and the ability to form new ones with other services, professionals and practitioners across the exosystem. Their supportive role is extended by the way in which EPs have become recognised at Post-16 in terms of collaborative approaches for tapping into this

area related to current and future support (Morris & Atkinson, 2018). However, consultation and approaches to joint-working add further shape to this unique and multi-faceted role (Wagner, 2000). Added to this is the ability to bring together autistic children, parents and educators within a supportive framework.

### **5.7 Suggestions for future research**

Considering a combination of the strengths and limitations of the current study, future research would certainly be welcomed in adding to understanding within such an under-researched area. Considering that recruitment served to be a particular challenge for the current research, with some PRUs not responding to invitation, this should be kept in mind and not deter any future research. Researchers could promote a partnership with a single PRU setting, with the prospect of this leading to a Single Case Study approach. A related example is Brede et al.'s (2017) multi-informant study focusing on autistic children attending an Inclusive Learning Hub. Brede and colleagues (2017) focused on a specially designed setting for the purpose of re-integrating autistic children who had been excluded from mainstream school.

Such focus on a PRU could allow for close inspection in terms of systems, structures, facilities, resources, approaches and strategies for supporting autistic children attending a PRU. In relation to the composition of their student populations, PRUs can be dominated by boys (Pirrie et al., 2011) and children from particular demographics. Although this can be dependent on the local population or region of the UK, as an extension on this current research, educators' perspective could be sought on supporting autistic children from a specific group of the local or national population, demography or background. Likewise, the focus on autistic girls provided by Sproston et al. (2017) could be expanded to contribute to an area which is so under-researched.

### **5.8 Strengths and limitations of the current study**

A strength of this study was the ability to elicit a broad and varied range of perspectives. Rich, in-depth data were generated due to the flexibility of the semi-structured interview measure. Another strength was the small-scale approach. The researcher was able to focus on eliciting and analysing the extent of data generated, with n=16 representing a strong sample size for a qualitative research study. Furthermore, the mix of educators should also be acknowledged. For example, with such a range of roles being reflected, this goes to show the

range and significance of educators within autism support at PRUs, especially considering how many levels and aspects of support were represented in the current research. In particular, being able to recruit EPs added value to this research. For instance, when considering the expanse of the EP role, it was refreshing to learn from the EP themselves about their role in supporting autistic children at PRUs. This was complemented by other educator participants recognising the role of EPs at PRUs in both supporting autistic children and other educators.

This current study did not seek to reflect, nor does it claim to represent, the perspectives of educators in general. Likewise, given the sample size ( $n=16$ ), this research should by no means be seen as representing the wider UK population of PRU educators. Indeed, with the sample being London-based, generalisations should not be made through comparisons with regions of the UK outside of this demography. Despite limitations, there is also the sense that variances in perspectives should be regarded as an acceptable feature of this qualitative research and its philosophical stance; a stance where individualised and subjective views do matter, regardless of the polarisation, commonality or uniqueness of perspectives expressed.

In one sense, it might have been interesting to analyse perspectives by directly comparing different educators' experiences if there were equivalent numbers of TAs, Class Teachers, mentors, and other educator-types. However, the reality of limitations in recruitment and the associated challenges meant that this was not possible. For this reason, it was not the intention of the researcher to make comparisons across different groups of participants. However, the cross-section and diversity of participants does help to reflect the broad-ranging educators represented within and outside PRUs.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion & Recommendations

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#### 6.1 Chapter Overview

This final chapter helps to draw together the current study by underscoring some of the key messages originating from educators' perspectives of supporting autistic children in PRUs. The recommendations provide a selection of key points for action that will allow the findings of this current study to be a proactive source for supporting autistic children excluded from mainstream secondary school, currently attending PRUs.

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#### 6.2 Conclusion

As indicated with the Literature Review (Chapter Two), educators' views are significantly underrepresented in relation to the topic of supporting autistic children at PRUs. One key message to take from the research is that, for educators supporting autistic children at a PRU, it would be unadvisable to only consider the impact of this environment and the related needs of autistic children. Instead, the educators who took part in this research helped to establish a broader understanding that extends across the various eco-systemic layers and interaction, and embraces an approach to support that considers long-term outcomes for autistic children by immediately addressing the now. All four themes identified from the research data (understanding needs, enabling the PRU environment, systems and structures, and preparation for adulthood) help to capture this holistic approach to support where educators play a central role in directly supporting autistic children. In so far as other key messages from this study are concerned, there are particular principles in relation to individual educators, PRUs, and EPs. The significance of these key principles (Figure 8) is based on the way in which good-practice is conceptualised.

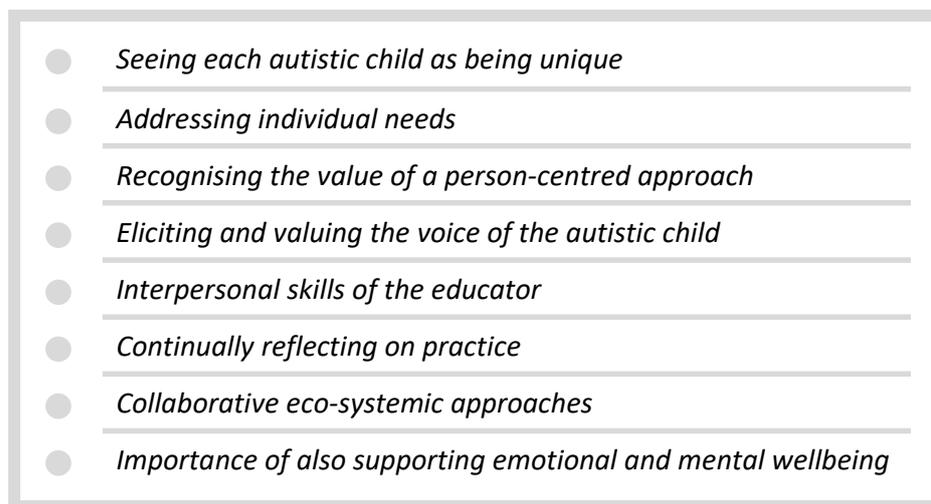
- 
- *Seeing each autistic child as being unique*
  - *Addressing individual needs*
  - *Recognising the value of a person-centred approach*
  - *Eliciting and valuing the voice of the autistic child*
  - *Interpersonal skills of the educator*
  - *Continually reflecting on practice*
  - *Collaborative eco-systemic approaches*
  - *Importance of also supporting emotional and mental wellbeing*

Figure 8: *Key principles of support underpinned by good-practice*

All these principles help to form the foundation of any support, and are key in equipping educators so that they can be effective in supporting autistic children at PRUs following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

With the current study gaining perspectives from a varied group of professionals on an important (yet understudied) topic, the current study should be regarded as a catalyst for further, confirmatory work. Yet a combination of the review of literature, the findings, and the subsequent discussions have led to the formulation of the following list of ten initial recommendations (Figure 9). It should be noted that each item is guided by the voices of the participants at the core of the current study. In terms of the value of these recommendations, attention should be paid due to the breadth of educators (and their perspectives) represented in this study. With such a range of roles and experiences being reflected from both within and outside PRU setting, the immediate relevance of the current research is evident.

Another key value is that the recommendations carry immediate benefits for informing educator support. In supporting autistic children attending PRUs, there are practical applications for educators in terms of the relevance to current everyday inclusive practice. Recommendations that require a joined-up or a more systemic approach are also applicable through further planning and collaboration. As indicated in the current findings, the following recommendations can also be applied through attention to systems and structures. Central to this educator

support is the role of the EP, and the way in which all aspects of these recommendations can be facilitated within the remit of EP practice.

1. *Whole-PRU autism-awareness principles and strategies being shared across all staff, with an emphasis on being informed by, and sharing, good-practice on an ongoing basis.*
2. *Transition programmes are in place that are individualised to reflect the unique needs of each autistic child.*
3. *Key persons such as nominated staff or autistic advocates as part of the inclusive culture of the PRU - as a source of support and guidance on autism for all staff.*
4. *An autism-friendly environment as part of the culture of a PRU that incorporates sensory, physical, social and other factors that are accommodating and supportive for autistic children.*
5. *The promotion of collaborative approaches where PRUs can build and maintain partnerships with key individuals, professionals, charities and services where support for autistic children at a PRU is the central focus.*
6. *The positive ethos of an autism-friendly inclusive environment being underpinned by PRU policies, codes of conduct and principles.*
7. *Clear and efficient channels of communication in place that facilitate working relationships at all levels encompassing one-to-one, parents, community, and all stakeholders surrounding PRU settings.*
8. *Promotion of forums that allow the voices of autistic children to be heard, listened to, and acted upon, thus, empowering them through support.*
9. *Clear mechanisms of support for individual educators whether within PRU staff or from outside.*
10. *Support facilitated by Educational Psychologists which provides individual educators, groups, and whole-staff with supportive evidence-based approaches, as guided by reflective practice.*

Figure 9: *List of recommendations underpinning educator support*

One incorporating feature of this list of recommendations is the benefit to all, including non-autistic children (i.e., regardless of diagnosis or non-diagnosis). This is consistent with current understanding in research literature, where authors such as Jones (2007) identify that strategies designed for supporting autistic children also carry benefits for the wider population of children throughout an

educational setting. Therefore, despite this not being the original intention, it is common to find that many of the measures and strategies in place for supporting autistic children within an educational setting are actually of equal benefit to all children and adults within the place of learning (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009). Hence, the far-reaching impact of educator support has an added significance with benefits reverberating throughout and beyond the PRU setting, with the most important recipient being the autistic child. Finally, this list of recommendations helps to demonstrate how the aims of this study (see end of Chapter Two) have been met. For example, to identify the implications for EP practice that have led to the above recommendations, a rich and varied range of educators' perspectives were elicited and examined. In completing the three aims, understanding was gained on the types of support that are integral for ensuring that autistic children at PRUs are supported effectively in such a way that inclusive practice is seen in action.

#### **6.4 Final reflections on this study**

This thesis has represented a significant part of my life as a Trainee EP. I feel that the scale of this major work has been justified by the enlightenment from participants, with the contributions providing richness of data for such a topical yet neglected focus of research. What added even more impetus relates to my particular experiences on placement. Without fail, I have encountered individual-after-individual, case-after-case, where elements feature autism, exclusion, PRUs, and mainstream secondary school. I have also encountered numerous scenarios where there are differing understandings of what inclusion means, and where the idea of inclusive practice is challenged. This has been the case regardless of my involvement and my subsequent writing of psychological advice for the various Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments, Short Reports, or Records of Consultation that I have produced. Therefore, my role and encounters as a Trainee EP have provided a real connection and relevance regarding this topic, and has confirmed my position as the researcher (as also supported earlier in the philosophical stance and reflexivity outlined earlier in the Methodology).

I feel that by eliciting the voices of such a range of educators, opportunities have been gained for not only adding to understanding in this topic, but also the practical applications. For instance, this current research could be seen as an

impetus leading to practical guidance. This is about guidance that will allow educators to be more and more effective in supporting autistic children who have endured a difficult time at mainstream secondary school and were consequently excluded; ending up at a PRU. However, there can also be argued a pre-emptive value of this current study with regards to the perspectives on challenges at mainstream secondary contributing to (and leading up to) exclusion. This relates to lessons that can be learned regarding autism support that can be implemented at PRUs, and how PRUs and mainstream secondary schools could work together. For example, the current study could contribute to policies and approaches to support at mainstream secondary schools regarding systems, structures, transition, environment-based considerations, and interpersonal relationships. Thus, support could be provided, with the intention of avoiding the risk of autistic children being excluded in the first place. By also promoting support for educators themselves, this study has therefore recognised that in order to support the needs of autistic children, the needs of those providing this support must also be addressed.

Finally, I feel that one message that has resonated throughout this study is that although not designed with autism in mind, autistic children are ending up at PRUs. Leading on from this current study, it is crucially important to strike a balance between the message that autistic children should not be in PRUs, and the reality that the inclusion expected of mainstream educational settings (which dates back to Warnock, 1978) does not always work. Therefore, this current study has not been about advocating for PRUs. Instead, it has been a response to an area of practice where there are stark consequences for limited understanding of autism. This research has been about learning from PRU educators, not only to understand how to support autistic children at PRUs, but also how to promote lessons learned on inclusive practices from the context of PRUs. Hence, promoting inclusive practices that challenge precursors to exclusion, and could be adopted for supporting autistic children in mainstream secondary schools.

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## Appendices Section

- *[1] Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form*
- *[2] Information Sheet*
- *[3] Consent Form*
- *[4] Post-pilot semi-structured interview amendments*
- *[5] Interview Protocol*
- *[6] Excerpt of coded interview transcript*
- *[7] Thematic Maps*

**Appendix One**

**- *Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form***

## Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

**\*Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process**

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified **you must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review.**

If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

For further information see Steps 1 and 2 of our Procedures page at:  
<https://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/procedures.php>

Section 1 Project details		
a.	Project title	<i>Educators' perceptions on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units following exclusion from mainstream secondary schools.</i>
b.	Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678)	Alan Smith - SMI11093781
c.	UCL Data Protection Registration Number	Z6364106/2018/07/23 social research
c.	Supervisor/Personal Tutor	Dr. Karen Majors & Dr. Laura Crane
d.	Department	Psychology and Human Development
e.	Course category (Tick one)	PhD <input type="checkbox"/>
		DEdPsy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
		EdD <input type="checkbox"/>
f.	<b>If applicable</b> , state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.	
g.	Intended research start date	10/07/18
h.	Intended research end date	01/06/19
i.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in	England

<p>If research to be conducted abroad please check <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk">www.fco.gov.uk</a> and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be <b>required</b> before ethical approval can be granted: <a href="http://ioe-net.inst.ioe.ac.uk/about/profservices/international/Pages/default.aspx">http://ioe-net.inst.ioe.ac.uk/about/profservices/international/Pages/default.aspx</a></p>	
j.	Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee? No
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>
	External Committee Name:
	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ⇒ go to Section 2
	Date of Approval:
<p><b>If yes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.</li> <li>– Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Note:</b> Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the <a href="#">National Research Ethics Service (NRES)</a> or <a href="#">Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC)</a>. In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.</p>	

## Section 2 Research methods summary (tick all that apply)

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interviews<br><input type="checkbox"/> Focus groups<br><input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaires<br><input type="checkbox"/> Action research<br><input type="checkbox"/> Observation<br><input type="checkbox"/> Literature review | <input type="checkbox"/> Controlled trial/other intervention study<br><input type="checkbox"/> Use of personal records<br><input type="checkbox"/> Systematic review ⇒ <i>if only method used go to Section 5.</i><br><input type="checkbox"/> Secondary data analysis ⇒ <i>if secondary analysis used go to Section 6.</i><br><input type="checkbox"/> Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups<br><input type="checkbox"/> Other, give details: |
|--|---|

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

### **Rationale & Purpose of the Research:**

For the autistic child, their specific needs can be explained under two areas. Firstly, difficulties in social communication and interaction, and secondly, restrictive repetitive patterns of behaviour. This encompasses repetitive behaviours, fixated interests and unusual sensory behaviours. Therefore, within the mainstream educational context, the child diagnosed with autism faces additional challenges related to their unique set of needs. This is why mainstream secondary school can be a challenging environment within which autistic children can struggle.

Evidence shows that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are 11 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school compared to those children with no SEN (DfE, 2013). Given the difficulties children with autism face in mainstream schools, it is perhaps unsurprising that children with autism are being excluded from secondary school in disproportionate numbers (DfE, 2016; Brede, Remington, Warren & Pellicano, 2016).

21% of autistic children have been excluded from school on at least one occasion. This is a level described as not only significantly higher than other groups, but 20 times higher than the rate of exclusion for those without SEN (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). More recent evidence adds to this concern by highlighting one-in-four children with autism are excluded, or have experienced exclusion, from school during the lifetime of their education (Brede et al., 2016).

When autistic children are excluded from school, they may end up in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). The PRU setting is a more generalised form of an Alternative Provision. Michael and Frederickson (2013) however highlight that this setting is not only for the permanently excluded. In addition to temporary exclusion, children can be attending the provision owing to a range of backgrounds, reasons and needs. For example, the varied composition of children can include those who have not actually been excluded from school, but are awaiting a placement at a mainstream school. This might include those who lack an educational setting which is appropriate for their needs. Looked-after children (LAC), who might be subjected to relocation from one Local Authority to another, can also attend a PRU. This setting may even include children who are at risk of exclusion from mainstream school where the process of a *Managed Move* might be suggested or enforced.

Sproston et al. (2017) warn that PRUs cater for a high number of children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. They add that this exposes autistic children to scenarios which could encourage the types of challenging behaviour which may have led to the original exclusion itself (Kaplan, 1978; Brede et al., 2017). Yet, despite these concerns, and the existence of other more specific specialist settings, a PRU remains the most commonly used provision for autistic children following their exclusion from mainstream education (Lawrence, 2011).

For the autistic child, excluded from school, their predicament could suggest a lack of mechanisms to support educators such as the classroom teacher. Robertson et al. (2003) explain the relevance of this support by claiming that where exclusion of autistic children is prevalent, this is because mainstream teachers do not feel they have sufficient training and support. Regardless of whether this is a permanent or fixed period exclusion (DfES, 2006), Humphrey and Lewis (2008) claim that this deficit in specific support carries consequences for autistic children. These consequences, in turn, impact on the outcomes of autistic children. For this reason, questions are raised regarding the extent to which educators at a PRU feel that they are able to support the needs of autistic children who are excluded from a mainstream secondary school. This then raises questions about how educators themselves are supported.

#### **Aims:**

Due to their direct contact with students, educators play an important role in supporting the needs of autistic children during their time at a PRU. For this reason, educators are well-placed for gaining an understanding of the effectiveness of support surrounding this specific group of children. The aims of this study are:

1. to examine educator's perceptions on supporting autistic children attending a PRU;
2. to gain an understanding of types of support for educators; and,
3. to identify implications for practice.

#### **Research Questions:**

The Main Research Question at the core of this proposed study will be supported by the four Sub-Research Questions. These supporting questions serve two particular purposes. Firstly, to promote a depth of enquiry, and secondly, to help shape the questions for the semi-structured interview (see Appendix 3 - *Interview Protocol*).

**Main Research Question:**

*What are educators' perceptions on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school?*

**Sub-Research Questions:**

*Sub-RQ1:*

*What are educators' views on the specific needs of autistic children at a PRU?*

*Sub-RQ2:*

*What are educators' views on good-practice for supporting and educating autistic children at a PRU?*

*Sub-RQ3:*

*What are educators' views on the support they require in order to work effectively with autistic children?*

*Sub-RQ4:*

*How do educators work with the autistic child, their family, staff, professionals, or others to address the needs specific to the PRU setting?*

**Research Design & Data Collection:**

The proposed research will adopt a qualitative approach, and will allow for gaining the depth and richness of perceptions from participants. The **Semi-structured interview** measure will allow for flexibility in gaining views. For this, researcher is given added flexibility to prompt - as led by the participant. The Interview Schedule itself is designed to accommodate this gathering of data. Rapport-building, primary questions, probing questions, and reflection are all featured within the session (see Appendix 3 - *Interview Protocol*)

In order to both examine the effectiveness of the Interview Schedule and to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, a **Pilot Study** will be conducted. This will involve 1-3 participants, and will allow the researcher to gauge elements such as the timings, effectiveness of questions, and any particular modifications required. In addition to ensuring that the interview protocol is necessarily refined, the pilot will ensure that the research questions are addressed and sufficiently accommodated.

Considering the intended geographical spread of respondents, along with convenience for the participants, interviews will be conducted via telephone - lasting 30 to 40 minutes.

The pilot stage will also be important for refining the questions, timings, and addressing the order, amongst other aspects of the interview protocol.

**Sampling & Participants:**

Participants will be comprised of **educators** with **current** or **previous** involvement in supporting autistic children educated at a PRU; whether this is one-off or ongoing. This encompasses specific members of staff **within** the PRU such as class teachers, Learning Support Assistants, Learning Mentors, or SENCo. Educators from **outside** the PRU organisation may include services or individuals working with the PRU setting to provide activities as part of the curriculum offer. For example, sessional workers, outside agencies, organisations or charities - whether this is within the premises of the AP, or children making weekly visits to a venue.

For the sample size, 10 to 12 participants will be the minimum to allow for a range of perceptions to be sought. Obtaining a larger sample will be dependent on a combination of the duration of each interview and the approach to sampling adopted. On this, the method of sampling will be *Purposive*

*Sampling*, with the addition of *Opportunity Sampling* to maximise the reach. Whereas the former sees participants selected according to those population characteristics matching the objectives of the study, the latter draws the sample from whoever is available at the time of the study - provided they fit the criteria.

Potential participants will be targeted and invited to partake based on their direct involvement with autistic children at a PRU. This involvement might include one-to-one or group activities where an educator is engaged with the autistic child. The study will aim to draw from educators at a range of Pupil Referral Units across different London boroughs, and also outside London. Due to the nature of this type of provision, with involvement of educators from within and outside the setting, there are further opportunities for adding to the sample through *Snowball Sampling*. Also referred to as ‘*Chain-Referral Sampling*’, the researcher might see existing participants recommending potential participants who equally fit the criteria.

**Tool for Analysis, Reporting & Dissemination:**

It is proposed that the results will be examined through **Thematic Analysis** (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At the initial stage of data handling, the inductive approach will be used. This promotes a ‘*bottom-up*’ approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) whereby there are no attempts by the research to fit data to any assumptions or pre-existing coding. Once emerging themes and sub-themes are established, definitions will be guided by use of a semantic approach. That is to say, the absence of any theorising beyond what participants have expressed. The trustworthiness of the study will be promoted by the process of *Member-Checking*. Bearing time-constraints in mind, selected participants will be invited by the researcher to review their data for accuracy. This will also help to encourage the internal validity of the study. Final feedback for participants will be available on completion of the study. Debriefing material will be in clear and accessible language.

**Section 3 Research Participants (tick all that apply)**

<input type="checkbox"/> Early years/pre-school <input type="checkbox"/> Ages 5-11 <input type="checkbox"/> Ages 12-16 <input type="checkbox"/> Young people aged 17-18	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adults <i>please specify below</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown – specify below <input type="checkbox"/> No participants  ***Those invited to participate will be educators such as class teachers, teaching assistants, mentors, and adults.
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**NB:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC).

**Section 4 Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)**

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

a.	Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input type="checkbox"/>
b.	Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input type="checkbox"/>

c.	Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input type="checkbox"/>
* Give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b>			

### Section 5 Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

a.	Will you be collecting any new data from participants?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input type="checkbox"/>
b.	Will you be analysing any secondary data?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input type="checkbox"/>
* Give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b> If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g., systematic review, literature review) <b>and</b> if you have answered <b>No</b> to both questions, please go to <b>Section 8 Attachments</b> .			

### Section 6 Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

a.	Name of dataset/s		
b.	Owner of dataset/s		
c.	Are the data in the public domain?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
		<i>If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?</i> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No* <input type="checkbox"/>	
d.	Are the data anonymised?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
		<i>Do you plan to anonymise the data?</i> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No* <input type="checkbox"/>	
		<i>Do you plan to use individual level data?</i> Yes* <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
		<i>Will you be linking data to individuals?</i> Yes* <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
e.	Are the data sensitive ( <a href="#">DPA 1998 definition</a> )?	Yes* <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
f.	Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>
g.	<b>If no</b> , was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>
h.	<b>If no</b> , was data collected prior to ethics approval process?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>
* Give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b> If secondary analysis is only method used <b>and</b> no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to <b>Section 9 Attachments</b> .			

### Section 7 Data Storage and Security

Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.

a.	<b>Data subjects</b> - Who will the data be collected from? Data will be collected from adults (educators) working with autistic children based at a Pupil Referral Unit.
----	--

b.	<p><b>What data will be collected?</b> Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected</p> <p>Data collected will be based on views of the participant regarding the topic. The Consent Form will be kept separately from the data itself. No identifiable information will be displayed on the transcripts. Instead, anonymous ID coding will be assigned to participants, and used as the sole means of identifying the participant.</p>
c.	<p><b>Disclosure – Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?</b></p> <p>Results of the project to be made available to supervisory team and in the first instance, available online as an unpublished thesis. A report will be available to all participants.</p>
d.	<p><b>Data storage – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick*, encrypted laptop* etc.</b></p> <p>Data stored within UCL password-protected network. This will include the audio data from a dictaphone, which will be transferred as soon as possible to the UCL network. Once transferred, audio will be deleted from the Dictaphone. Any items stored on a personal computer will be password-protected, with any USB device encrypted.</p>
e.	<p><b>Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution) - Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?</b></p>
<p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>	
f.	<p>How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?</p> <p>Data and records will be kept for 10 years after being collected. Consent Forms will be kept in a locked cabinet, and transcripts will be stored electronically.</p> <p>Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with the DPA 1998 and state what these arrangements are) No</p> <p>Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.) No</p>

## Section 8 Ethical issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

**All** issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

### Methods:

Being mindful of the time- and work-related commitments of educators, telephone interviews place less pressure on the participant by allowing them to propose the most suitable time and place at their convenience (Cachia & Millward, 2011). The researcher will be able to accommodate the participant by avoiding any expected arrival time at the setting, as well as avoiding the participant having to organise a secluded room. The Semi-Structured Interview is well suited to telephone interviews.

**Recruitment:**

It will be emphasized that any decisions not to opt-in will not have any effect on a potential participant or their role. The researcher will re-iterate that there is no pressure for potential recruits to participate when approaching headteachers to promote the research.

**Informed Consent:**

Participant's right to withdraw reiterated not only verbally, but with this being outlined and accessible within the printed *Information Sheet* (see Appendix 1) and *Consent Form* (see Appendix 2) presented to the participant.

**Catering for Potential Vulnerability of Participants:**

Although targeted participants are not from a vulnerable group, it is still important to allow for any eventuality. Discussions might include sensitive topics based around the children they work with. The researcher will therefore be mindful and aware of any early signs of discomfort or anxiety during the interviews. Pausing as necessary, and ultimately, if requested, allowing the participant to withdraw from the research. Due to the flexibility of the Semi-Structured Interview approach, this awareness will help to cater for any moments or phases during the questioning and prompting where a participant might feel that a sensitive topic has been touched on. The Telephone Interview (highlighted above) is regarded as a powerful medium for allowing the researcher to be more aware of changes in tone of voice, pauses, and other auditory signals. In addition to this, participants will be signposted the options for seeking emotional support as and if required following the interview. Options for those participants based at a pupil referral unit will include support through their line-management, and structures specific to the setting that promote staff well-being. For educators from outside the PRU setting, various options can include line management, peer support, and mechanisms for supervision. Added to this, individuals not part of an organization but functioning as, for example, sessional workers can be signposted to professional bodies, charities, helplines, and services that provide specific support by focusing on well-being.

**Confidentiality/Anonymity:**

In addition to paperwork and digital data being kept securely, use of codes will make the risk of identification of participants highly unlikely.

**Disclosures/limits to confidentiality:**

Confidentiality will be limited to those within this specific team. However, as highlighted on the Information Sheet (see Appendix 1 - below), relevant persons should be informed if the researcher is concerned by any particular points expressed. If a safeguarding issue arises, the researcher will bring this to the attention of both supervisors (Educational Psychologist and Academic Researcher) for advice.

**Data Storage and Security both during and after the Research:**

Belongings kept on person at all times if travelling and stored securely. Use of locked filing cabinet for any hard copies containing data. Data encrypted and password-protected. All recordings will be immediately deleted after being transferred to the UCL secure network.

**Dissemination and use of Findings:**

Ensure debriefing material for participants is in clear and accessible language.

**Section 9 Attachments** Please attach the following items to this form, or explain if not attached

a.	Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research ( <i>List attachments below</i> )	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
----	--	---

**Appendices:**

1. **Appendix 1:** *Information Sheet*
2. **Appendix 2:** *Consent Form*
3. **Appendix 3:** *Interview Protocol*
4. **Appendix 4:** *Featured References*

	<b><i>If applicable/appropriate:</i></b>	= Not Applicable
b.	Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
c.	Full risk assessment	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes

**Section 10 Declaration**

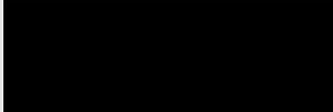
I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

**I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:**

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name	 Alan E. Smith
Date	17.06.2018

**Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.**

**Notes and references**

**See Appendix A**

### Professional code of ethics

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example: [British Psychological Society](#) (2009) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*, and (2014) *Code of Human Research Ethics*

or

[British Educational Research Association](#) (2011) *Ethical Guidelines*

or

[British Sociological Association](#) (2002) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the Institute of Education

<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/ethics/>.

### Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE. Further information can be found at

[http://www.ioe.ac.uk/studentInformation/documents/DBS\\_Guidance\\_1415.pdf](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/studentInformation/documents/DBS_Guidance_1415.pdf)

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

### Further references

The [www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk](http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk) website is very useful for assisting you to think through the ethical issues arising from your project.

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

## Departmental use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor **must** refer the application to the Research Ethics and Governance Coordinator (via [ioe.researchethics@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:ioe.researchethics@ucl.ac.uk)) so that it can be submitted to the Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC.

Also see 'when to pass a student ethics review up to the Research Ethics Committee':

<a href="http://www.ioe.ac.uk/about/policiesProcedures/42253.html">http://www.ioe.ac.uk/about/policiesProcedures/42253.html</a>	
Student name	
Student department	
Course	
Project title	
<b>Reviewer 1</b>	
Supervisor/first reviewer name	Dr Laura Crane
Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?	None that have not been accounted for within this ethics submission
Supervisor/first reviewer signature	
Date	
<b>Reviewer 2</b>	
Dr Karen Majors	
Second reviewer name	
Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?	No
Supervisor/second reviewer signature	
Date	21.6.18
<b>Decision on behalf of reviews</b>	
Decision	Approved <span style="float: right;">X</span>
	Approved subject to the following additional measures <span style="float: right;"><input type="checkbox"/></span>
	Not approved for the reasons given below <span style="float: right;"><input type="checkbox"/></span>
	Referred to REC for review <span style="float: right;"><input type="checkbox"/></span>
Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC	
Comments from reviewers for the applicant	
<b>Once approved by both reviewers students should submit the ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team <a href="mailto:IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk">IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk</a>.</b>	

## **Appendix Two**

### **- *Information Sheet***

## Information Sheet

### ***Educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school***

Hello, my name is Alan Smith and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at UCL Institute of Education. As part of my studies, I am completing a research project under the supervision of Karen Majors (Educational Psychologist) and Laura Crane (academic researcher), both at UCL Institute of Education. This research examines ***educators' views on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units following exclusion from mainstream secondary schools.***

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to contact me or my supervisors if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### **1. Why are we doing this research?**

A high number of autistic children are excluded from mainstream secondary schools. Many of these children may end up in a Pupil Referral Unit, which caters for a wide range of children with varying needs. However, we know little about how best to support autistic children who end up in such a setting. In this research, we are keen on hearing educators' views on this issue, given that they play such a pivotal role in supporting autistic children in such settings.

#### **2. Why am I being invited to take part?**

Your participation in this research will be important in helping us to gain a broader understanding of supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school. Educators from both within the PRU staff and those from outside are all eligible for this study. The views gained will be important for building a clearer picture of this support.

#### **3. What will happen if I choose to take part?**

You will be invited to take part in an interview over the telephone. This interview will last 30 to 40 minutes. The interview, with your permission, will be **audio-record** (please see *Consent Form*). This will help us with the accuracy needed for analysing this spoken data.

#### **4. Will anyone know I have been involved?**

Strict ethical guidelines will be adhered to regarding the safe-keeping and security of the data. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained throughout the research, and beyond its completion. Participants are identified to researchers by a code number only with no way of identifying you. All information and results are kept on a secure computer and locked filing cabinet. However, if during the course of the interview any information is presented raising safeguarding concerns, I will be obliged to disclose.

(continued on next page >>>)

### **5. Any Limits to Confidentiality?**

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm. If so, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

### **6. What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**

I do not predict there to be any disadvantages of taking part in the study. However, if you do experience any discomfort during the interview, you are free to withdraw at any time.

### **7. What if I am unhappy about something during the research?**

If at any time you are concerned by something about the research, you are invited to contact my research supervisors, Karen Majors and Laura Crane. If you feel that your concern has not been handled to your satisfaction, you may contact the Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee, [ethics@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@ucl.ac.uk).

### **8. Could there be problems for me if I take part?**

At the end of the interview, you can be signposted regarding available support if you would so wish to discuss any issues. During the interview itself, if at any point you feel uncomfortable, it would be perfectly fine for you to pause. The interview can be terminated at any point with no pressure on you.

### **9. What will happen to the results of the research?**

The results will be written into a thesis to be submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Doctorate in Educational Psychology. Results may eventually be published in an academic or practitioner journal.

### **10. Do I have to take part?**

You are free to decide whether or not to take part. Please take time to consider this decision, and feel free to discuss this decision with others. You can also contact the research team (email: [alan.smith.15@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:alan.smith.15@ucl.ac.uk)) to discuss this decision.

### **11. What should I do next?**

In addition to this Information Sheet is the Consent Form. If you would like to take part, please fill in the Consent Form and return it to me. You are 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 professional role in any way.

Please do not hesitate to contact me via [alan.smith.15@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:alan.smith.15@ucl.ac.uk) if there are any further enquiries.

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this research study.**



Alan Smith - UCL Institute of Education.

---

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the  
UCL IoE Research Ethics Committee.*

**Appendix Three**  
**- *Consent Form***

**Institute of Education**



**UCL**

# Consent Form

***Educators' perspectives on supporting autistic children at Pupil Referral Units following their exclusion from mainstream secondary school.***

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete this consent form and return to Alan Smith, Trainee Educational Psychologist, in person or at the address below:

I have read and understood the information leaflet about the research.

I understand that participation is voluntary, that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, and that if I choose to do this, any data I have contributed will not be used.

I understand that I can contact Alan Smith to discuss this study at any time.

I am happy for my interview to be recorded.

I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations they will not be attributed to me.

I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

-----  
Name: (BLOCK CAPITALS) \_\_\_\_\_  
(Forename) (Surname)

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact email: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Best number for Telephone Interview (if different from above): \_\_\_\_\_

Contact address: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Alan Smith,  
Trainee Educational Psychologist,  
Doctorate in Educational Psychology,  
Psychology and Human Development  
UCL Institute of Education  
25 Woburn Square  
London WC1H 0AA

the Data Protection Officer is:  
Lee Shailer [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk)

**Appendix Four****- *Post-pilot semi-structured interview amendments***

**Examples of amendments to semi-structured interview measure  
in response to pilot study**

Prior to pilot	Amendments in response to pilot
<p><b>Item 3</b> (on what has worked well for autistic children at a PRU) was originally presented as an isolated question on experiences.</p>	<p>Following the pilot, this item was linked to a follow-up question (<b>Item 4</b>) where participants were asked: ‘<i>On the flip-side, is there anything that has not been as successful for you in the PRU setting?</i>’. This is an example of how the questions were allowed to flow.</p>
<p>Originally, <b>Item 5</b> was a stand-alone question asking educators about the main needs of autistic children they have worked with at a PRU.</p>	<p>The pilot allowed for further thinking, and resulted in a follow-up question (<b>Item 6</b>) on specific strategies. Hence, this allowed the participant to not only consider needs, but also to reflect constructively on specific strategies for addressing these needs. The design of Item 6 also allowed for comparisons to be made between autistic children and non-autistic populations.</p>
<p>Semi-structured interview <b>Item 17</b> (on working with others) was originally a single item.</p>	<p>Feedback resulting from the pilot also led to the addition of 17.1, 17.2 and 17.3 as a means of allowing specific probing and also exploration of perspectives on: progress, improving ways of working, and challenges experienced.</p>

**Appendix Five**  
**- *Interview Protocol***

# Interview Protocol [...type of educator = \_\_\_\_\_ ]

## Draft Schedule for Semi-structured Interview

*Please note that this draft interview schedule is subject to change following submission to Ethics. The final draft will be determined by the outcome of piloting, which will not be pursued until after ethical approval obtained.*

*[Researcher Opening Script:*

*“Building Rapport”; key points; and re-iterating ethical considerations]*

*Hello, I’m Alan.*

*Thank you for offering to take part in this research.*

*[...flow into research topic...]*

*Before starting the interview, I’d just like to run through some information please(?)*

*{Pause} 🖐️*

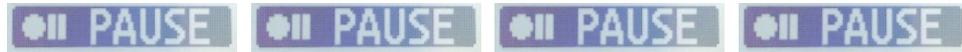
*This research is about gaining the views of educators on supporting autistic children attending Pupil Referral Units, after being excluded from mainstream secondary school.*

*The views of educators such as teachers, Teaching Assistants, Learning Mentors, outside organisations, sessional workers and charities are important to us because of their direct involvement with autistic children during their time at a PRU.*

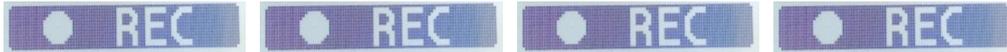
*Your views and experiences will help us to build up an understanding of how important this support is. The outcomes of the study will also be valuable for identifying good-practice, strategies and recommendations in this area of research.*

*...Just to let you know that, as mentioned in the Information Sheet and identified in the Consent Form, you have the right to withdraw at any stage during this research without needing to give any reason... And if you need any support following this interview process, these sources can be signposted.*

*I also want to reassure you that when we present the results of the project, any information that could identify you - like your name or the PRU - will be kept confidential, so feel free to speak freely.*



*Are you happy for this interview to take place? {Pause} 🖐*



*Also, are you happy for me to record our conversation to make sure that I don't miss anything? {Pause} 🖐*

*[if "yes" = additional pause 🖐 for switching on recorder = "Ok, Thanks. I'm just setting things up"]*

*This recording will only be listened to by myself for transcription purposes. Once I've transcribed your words the recording will be deleted and the transcription itself will be password protected. {pause} 🖐*

*Do you have any questions before we begin? {pause} 🖐*

*Thank you. ~~~~~*

*[Questions for the semi-structured interview]*

*[any PROMPTS and PROBING for depth will be guided by interviewee responses to each question]*

*[Researcher]*

*...To start with...*

- 1. Can you just tell me a little about yourself - your background, and your role as an educator?*
- 2. Can you tell me about your experiences of working with autistic children at a Pupil Referral Unit?*

3. *In your experience, what has worked well for autistic children in a PRU?*  
**[prompt as necessary]**
4. *On the flip-side, is there anything that has not been as successful for you in the PRU setting?*  
**[prompt as necessary]**
5. *What do you feel stands out as the main needs of the autistic children you have worked with at a PRU?*
6. *...And, are there any specific strategies that you use with autistic children compared to the non-autistic population?*
7. *What do you feel are examples of good-practice when working with autistic children attending a PRU?*
  - 7.1. *How do you feel that this good-practice should be promoted?*
8. *Are there any specific challenges you have experienced when working with autistic children at a PRU?*
  - 8.1. *What do you feel would help to address this?*
9. *How do you know when you've made a difference when working with an autistic child at a PRU?*
10. *Thinking about the skills you need for working with an autistic child... How do you develop or progress as an educator?*
11. *Have you received any specific support related to working with autistic children excluded from secondary mainstream school?*
  - 11.1. **(If so,)** *what kind of support?*
  - 11.2. *What are your feelings on this support?*
  - 11.3. **If you haven't** *what would you like to receive?*
12. *In what way do you feel that support such as training, and other means of support, enable you to work effectively with autistic children at a PRU?* **[prompt as necessary]**

*[“...The next three questions are thinking about working how PRUs can work with mainstream secondary schools...”]*

13. *Before an autistic child starts attending a PRU, what do you feel would aid their transition from mainstream secondary to the PRU?*
14. *...And in your view, as an autistic child approaches the end of their time at a PRU, what should be happening to support their transition?*
15. *How do you think the other provision can help to make this transition smoother?*  
**[prompt for examples]**
16. *...And thinking of mainstream secondary schools, in what ways do you feel they can benefit if PRUs share with them good-practice in autism?*
17. *Thinking about of how best to address the needs of autistic children attending a PRU,... how would you normally work with the family, other staff at the PRU, or other professionals from outside? How would you normally work with them?*
- 17.1. *How do you think that this way of working helps with an autistic child's progress at the PRU?*
- 17.2. *Is there anything that could be improved for this way of working?*
- 17.3. *Have you experienced any challenges when working with other people, organisations, or services? [prompt according to response]*
- 17.4. *Thinking of how you might feel supported,... can you give me any examples of what you would see as strong ways of working with others?*
18. *...and finally,... Is there anything at all you feel you would like to add in terms of your experiences of supporting an autistic child at a PRU, excluded from mainstream secondary?*

**[Researcher End Script]**

Well,...

*...thank you very much once again for your time, and for sharing your really valuable views.*

*This will certainly contribute to the outcomes of this study.....*

*Please feel free to refer to the leaflet regarding any further information and guidance regarding this interview and the research in general.*

*Hopefully, at some point in around 12 months' time, I will be feeding back regarding the outcomes and the main findings of the research.....*

*Before that time, I may check in with you regarding the data you have provided through your responses.*

*19. Can I ask you please one more question? .....*

*19.1. Do you know of any other educators from inside or outside a PRU setting with this experience of supporting an autistic child,... and who you feel could also contribute to this research?*

*.....once again,..... thank you so much for your time.*

**Appendix Six**

- *Excerpt of coded interview transcript*

39 work with that and help them with that in order for them  
 40 to at least be able to concentrate in some lessons, and to  
 41 get some GCSEs. So, that's the bit that I do. I first came  
 42 across working with autistic children before I trained,  
 43 I used to work with Special Educational Needs children, so  
 44 we got a lot of autistic children, and I did a lot of voluntary  
 45 work in autistic schools as well. And, what I found that was  
 46 quite difficult I think for me was that it was mainly  
 47 behaviour, behaviour, behaviour, but actually, their  
 48 processes and the way they understand things are  
 49 completely different to say you and I. This is going back a  
 50 good 25 years or so. I think we've come a long way, but, I  
 51 think there's still so much we need to know, and we do get  
 52 children as they say on the spectrum here, and some of  
 53 them have been diagnosed with say's, and it's usually  
 54 Asperger's. What I find is that some autistic children I work  
 55 with at the PRU really need specialist help, so, although I  
 56 can provide that support on a psychological side of things  
 57 in terms of learning and school, I don't think it's quite  
 58 enough because we're not specialised in that way, and you  
 59 don't necessarily need to be specialised, but you need to  
 60 understand autism. So, I've just finished with a child  
 61 whose gone on to Key Stage 4, and he was very high  
 62 functioning's, highly intelligent, and had very fixed ideas  
 63 about the world and how you do things, and unable to mix  
 64 very well socially, didn't pick up social cues, things like  
 65 that, didn't get it. And we've got a new child coming, and  
 66 again, she's been referred to me, and she's also Asperger's  
 67 diagnosed, but, another point is when you meet with  
 68 parents or carers. Sometimes parents don't see it, or  
 69 sometimes they don't want to, because it's the whole  
 70 connotation of what autism, of what Asperger's means.  
 71 So, that's difficult, and I can see it from both sides, but it's  
 72 the child that needs the support, and trying to get inside  
 73 the mind of an autistic child, that's not easy, that's not  
 74 easy. I think being consistent works well with autistic  
 75 children. Having that regular time, regular day, same  
 76 room, "...when you see Sally [pseudonym], this is what  
 77 happens...". So, the same kind of routines - like that, to a

Ln039: \_support allowing autistic child to focus on academic.

Ln041: \_support for attainment.

Ln042: \_lots of experience in autism.

Ln046: \_difficulties in emphasis on behaviour.

Ln048: \_different way of processing and understanding things.

Ln050: \_some progress on autism understanding, but more needed.

Ln052: \_autistic children do attending a PRU.

Ln055: \_more specialist input required.

Ln056: \_need for specialist help due to limitations.

Ln060a: \_need for understanding autism.

Ln060b: \_moving up to Key Stage 4.

Ln063: \_fixed world view.

Ln064a: \_difficulties with social interaction.

Ln068: \_parents' denial/lacking recognition of autism.

Ln070: \_parents not wanting to face implications of autism and Asperger's.

Ln071: \_acknowledging contrasting perspectives.

Ln073: \_support to focus on the child.

Ln074: \_difficulty seeing from the autistic child's perspective.

Ln075: \_promoting consistent approach to support through regularity.

78 certain degree, and then, I found, so especially for this boy  
 79 with High Functioning Autism, it took a long while, it took  
 80 longer than another child, but, once he felt comfortable  
 81 and safe, and knew the expectations, and knew what was  
 82 going to happen in the sessions to a certain degree, then  
 83 we were able to explore “uncertainty” and things that he  
 84 didn’t quite understand, and also him being confident  
 85 enough to say “I don’t understand what that means”,  
 86 “why won’t they let me wear my coat all day?”, you know,  
 87 things like that. So, I think, for me, being consistent, and  
 88 also, I’m thinking of another child, he’s quite good at  
 89 covering up when he doesn’t understand something, so,  
 90 some people would often not recognise that there might  
 91 be a learning difficulty there, or Asperger’s or something.  
 92 He’s very good at covering it up, but, I can see from how  
 93 he responds and his thought processes that he’s not quite  
 94 understanding. So, again, that’s about trust, I have to get  
 95 the children to trust me. And, with this child in particular,  
 96 I would say things to him and then filter out what he does  
 97 understand and what he doesn’t understand, and then  
 98 break it down again. And through doing that, he’s then  
 99 able to say to me: “What d’you mean miss? I don’t  
 100 understand”. So, I think it’s just those very early, early  
 101 steps of consistency, and just keeping things simple. I  
 102 suppose it’s about my experience; the experience before I  
 103 even became a therapist. Because, I learned a lot working  
 104 in, I think they used to call them EBD Schools back then, so  
 105 I did a lot of work then, and there was a lot of restraining  
 106 going on which I didn’t like. So, there’s that, but I think the  
 107 cues that I look for are eye-contact, body-language, and  
 108 how they speak - because sometimes people that are on  
 109 the spectrum, if you like, if you want to use that way of  
 110 saying it, the way you and I talk is kind of a certain rhythm,  
 111 and sometimes they can be, like there’s on child at the  
 112 moment, and the children call her “robot”, because she  
 113 sounds robotic with no feeling when she speaks, yet, there  
 114 is feeling, but, it’s not socially being picked up. It’s hard to  
 115 explain.

Ln079: \_variability in how long to settle.

Ln080: \_feeling safe and comfortable at PRU.

Ln081: \_the need to know expectations of PRU.

Ln082: \_the need to know what’s going to happen in sessions at PRU.

Ln083: \_staff supporting the student to explore and understand.

Ln085: \_confidence to admit not knowing.

Ln087: \_consistency as a personalised approach.

Ln088: \_all staff consistent with flexible procedures.

Ln089: \_covering up not understanding.

Ln091: \_staff not recognising when learning difficulty present.

Ln092: \_hiding difficulties from staff and others.

Ln093: \_educator being able to recognise this child’s difficulties and processes.

Ln095: \_children having trust in educator.

Ln096: \_determining what child does or doesn’t understand.

Ln098: \_re-enforcing principle of breaking tasks down.

Ln100: \_being consistent early on.

Ln101: \_maintaining simplicity in approach.

Ln102: \_important relevance of own experience prior to current role.

Ln104: \_educator learned a lot from working in EBD schools.

Ln107: \_actively looking for visible cues from autistic child.

Ln110: \_the rhythm of our talk

Ln112: \_other children labelling autistic child due to talk-style.

Ln114: \_others’ difficulty reading communication style of autistic child.

## **Appendix Seven**

### **- *Thematic Maps***

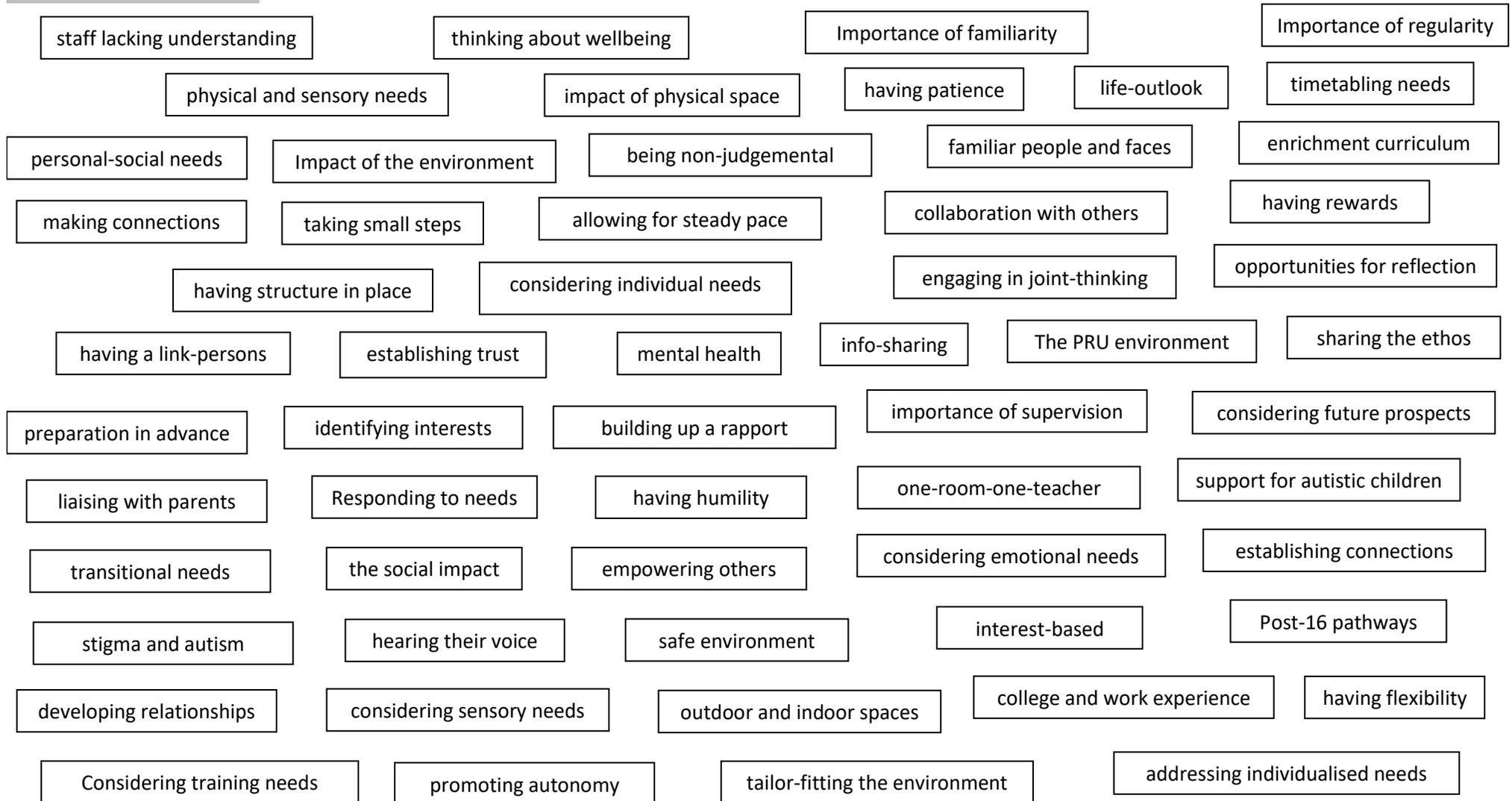
*Initial themes*

*Developing themes [sample]*

*Developing themes and their sub-themes*

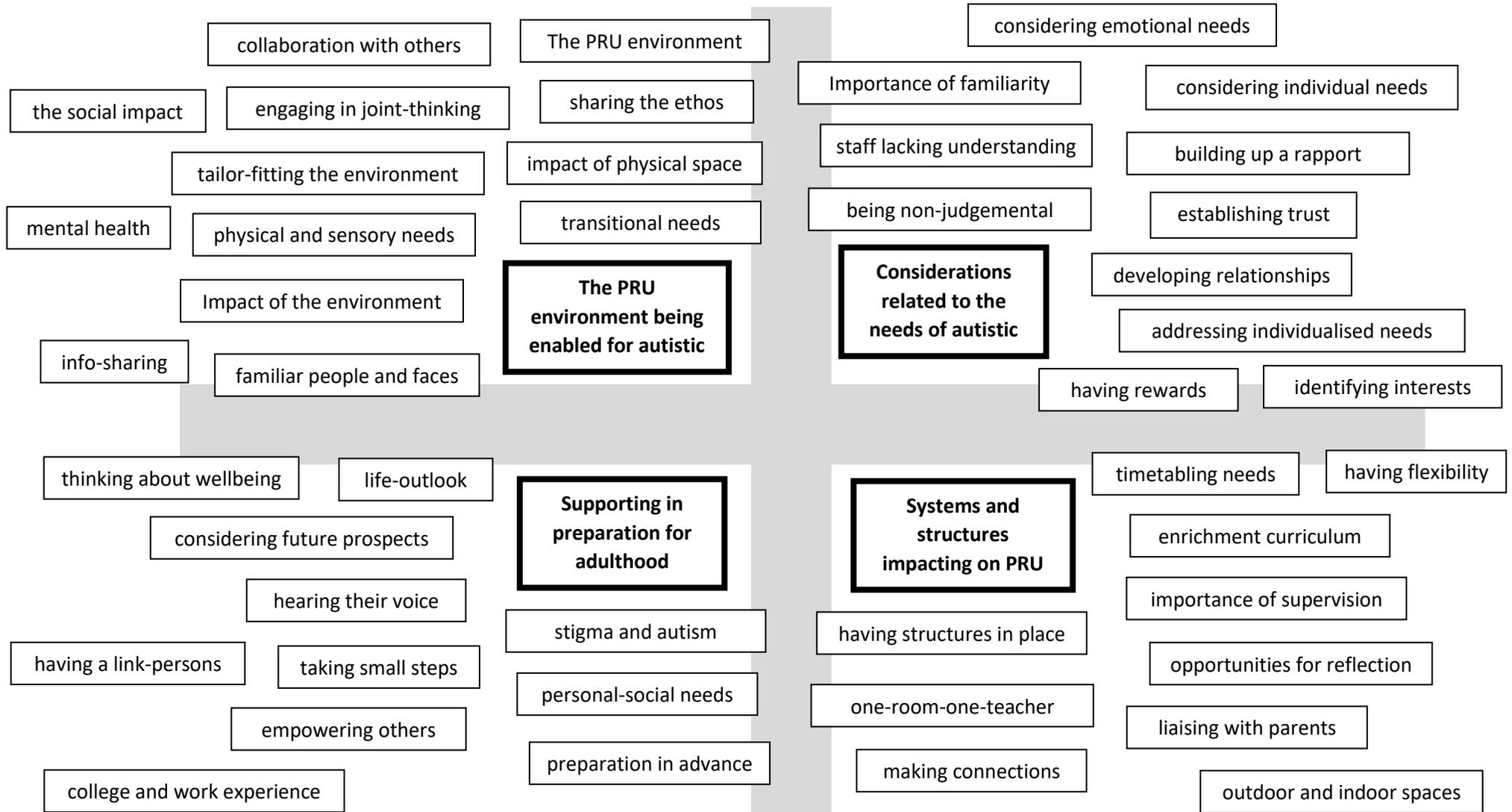
*The four final themes and their sub-themes*

● Initial themes *Early phase of initial themes*



● Developing themes [sample]

*Interim phase of developing themes and sub-themes*



● Developing themes and their sub-themes *Themes and sub-themes prior to final refining and modification of naming*

<i>Understanding the needs of autistic children attending PRU settings</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Acknowledging the challenges experienced in mainstream secondary school</li> <li>● Understanding PRU-based transitional needs</li> <li>● Establishing a one-to-one relationship</li> <li>● Actively listening to the autistic child</li> </ul>
<i>The PRU environment as an enabled one</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Acknowledging the impact of environmental barriers</li> <li>● Importance of being consistent within the PRU</li> <li>● Enabling the PRU environment with joint-working</li> <li>● Enabling the PRU environment through an ethos with positive reinforcement</li> </ul>
<i>Supporting through systems and structures</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Perspectives on varying levels of communication</li> <li>● PRU facilitating varying forums for support</li> <li>● Impact of adopting the primary school model</li> <li>● Effectiveness of support through an inclusive curriculum</li> </ul>
<i>Preparation for adulthood through the PRU setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of support leading to future consequences</li> <li>● Supporting the emotional transition from adolescence to adulthood</li> <li>● Cementing partnerships for Key Stage 4 and beyond Post-16</li> <li>● Supporting the transition to adulthood with the PRU curriculum</li> </ul>

- The four final themes and their sub-themes

*Final themes and sub-themes following process of thematic analysis*

<b>Theme One</b>  <i>Understanding the needs of PRU-based autistic children</i>	Acknowledging the challenges that PRU-based autistic children previously experienced in mainstream secondary
	Supporting PRU-based autistic children through both macro- and micro-transitions
	Establishing a valued one-to-one relationship between the educator and autistic child
<b>Theme Two</b>  <i>The enabling environment of the PRU</i>	Acknowledging the impact of environmental barriers on autistic children's wellbeing and academic progress
	Importance of being consistent within and outside the PRU environment
	Enabling the PRU environment through joint-working featuring internal and external stakeholders
	Enabling through the positive ethos of an autism-friendly inclusive environment
<b>Theme Three</b>  <i>Effectiveness of support through systems and structures</i>	Perspectives on promoting effective communication within and beyond the PRU setting
	PRU facilitating varying forums for support
	Impact of adopting the more supportive primary school model
	The need for an inclusive curriculum
<b>Theme Four</b>  <i>Preparing autistic children and adolescents for adulthood through the PRU provision</i>	Acknowledging that a lack of support has future consequences
	Supporting the journey to adulthood through the PRU curriculum pathway
	Cementing partnerships for Key Stage 4 into Post-16 and beyond