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# "Everyone deserves to be different": an IPA exploration of the views of Key Stage 4 pupils with Asperger syndrome in mainstream schools

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# Abstract

This research explores the views of four pupils with Asperger Syndrome at Key Stage 4 who are in mainstream high schools. Participants were selected purposively according to specific sampling criteria. Each participant was interviewed in their own home using a semi-structured interview schedule. The researcher transcribed the data deriving from each interview. Using these transcripts, the researcher analysed the data using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore participants' contributions.

Three themes were identified, namely: *Views Related to Self, Views Related to Peers and Others* and *Views Related to the Educational Context.* Each theme is presented with extracts taken from each participant and with the interpretations made by the researcher and the analysis is discussed with reference to extant literature.

One of the most dominant features of the analysis suggests that pupils with Asperger Syndrome cannot be considered as a homogeneous group and that each has individual and differing needs. Recommendations are made in the light of this, with a particular focus on the developing skills of the researcher as an Educational Psychologist, and the possible implications for other educational practitioners are also discussed. The limitations of the study are also addressed and suggestions made for future qualitative research.

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# Introduction[5]

The contents of this thesis relate to an exploration of the views related to the educational experiences of four pupils with Asperger syndrome (AS) in mainstream high schools in a large county in the UK. Since becoming employed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist in this county, I have noticed an increase in the number of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) being brought to the attention of the Educational Psychology Service, many of whom are in Early Years settings. I am also aware that some older children with ASDs are being placed in schools which specialise in teaching pupils with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD). At the time of writing, the Coalition government has asked all local authorities to make financial savings over the next few years, with approximately one hundred and seventy million pounds having to be saved in the authority where this research was conducted. Therefore, it has been suggested that capacity in special schools for BESD within this county be increased so that higher numbers of pupils with ASD can be placed in those settings. Within this context, I am interested in ascertaining the views of pupils with ASD in order to explore how they make sense of their own views of their educational experiences. As a former teacher and a current trainee educational psychologist, I have always endeavoured to elicit pupils' views and this research will provide me with an opportunity to continue to do that within the context of a research project. In order to do this, I have formulated one research question:

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[5] This thesis is written in the first person as the researcher occupies a central position within IPA studies. The interpretations of the analysis are those of the researcher and are, therefore, reflexive. This is discussed further in Chapter 2.

How do Key Stage 4 pupils with Asperger syndrome in mainstream schools view their educational experiences?

The first chapter presents a review of the literature related to ASD with a more focused examination of that which pertains specifically to Asperger syndrome (AS). It will consider legislation regarding 'the voice of the child' and will also hear some of those 'voices' from an insider perspective by considering some of the contributions made by writers who themselves have ASD. It will then discuss research in which young people with AS have participated.

Chapter 2 describes my epistemological and reflexive position before justifying the selection of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analytic research design rather than other approaches. It also includes a discussion of the criteria which may be used to discuss the quality of this work, followed by an outline of the methods used.

Chapter 3 presents an account of the interpretative analysis, supported by extracts from the participants' data. Chapter 4 discusses the analysis with reference to relevant literature. The final chapter considers the possible implications of this research for educational practitioners and makes suggestions regarding future research. The limitations of this study are discussed and final thoughts are recorded as a means of concluding the thesis.

# Chapter 1: Literature Review

*Right from the start, from the time someone came up with the word 'autism', the condition has been judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced.*

(Williams, 1996, p. 14)

This chapter will provide a review of extant literature related to Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) generally, but with a more particular focus on Asperger's Syndrome (AS) and the characteristics of it which specifically pertain to this research. It will examine current educational provision for pupils with AS and will discuss current legislation related to eliciting the 'voice of the child', thus describing the statutory context within which this research is based. It will then consider accounts provided by authors who themselves have ASD, thereby providing an 'insider' perspective prior to considering research in which the views and perceptions of pupils with ASD are investigated.

**A Brief History of Autism**

Since the publication of Leo Kanner's paper, 'Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact' in 1943, there can be very few areas within the field of educational psychology that have had such intense scrutiny as that of autism. Indeed, interest in this subject has not been confined only to educational psychology but also to disciplines as diverse as psychiatry, biology and neurology. Although this interest might currently emanate from an academic curiosity and a need to try to unravel the mystery of what has

so aptly been described as "the enigma of autism" (Frith, 2003, p. vi), it might also, at least in the past, be attributable to the alluring way in which Kanner introduced his work:

> Since 1938, there have come to our attention a number of children whose condition differs so markedly and uniquely from anything reported so far, that each case merits – and, I hope, will eventually receive – a detailed consideration of its fascinating peculiarities.

(Kanner, 1943, p. 217)

The "fascinating peculiarities" to which Kanner referred pertained to each of the eleven children upon whom his paper was based. The behavioural features common to them all included an innate inability to form relationships with others, delayed acquisition of speech, the use of language inappropriate to its context or without meaning, echolalia, repetitive behaviours, a lack of imagination and a desire to maintain sameness. Kanner concluded that these children were examples of *"inborn autistic disturbances of affective contact"* (p.250) and were thus unlike any previously recorded accounts of schizophrenia or child psychosis.

The following year, in 1944, Hans Asperger's thesis was published, entitled 'Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood', in which a condition was described which showed many similarities to that reported by Kanner. Among the characteristics that Asperger described were difficulties with social interactions, unusual use of eye contact, particular speech patterns, stereotypic movements and repetitive activities, an odd posture or gait and difficulties with motor skills, excellent rote memory and an intense interest in a specific subject. However, whereas Kanner's work became widely known internationally, Asperger's was relatively little known outside German

literature. Indeed, it was not published in English until 1991 having been translated by Uta Frith. Despite the similarities between the two conditions, the debate still continues as to whether they share the same underlying aetiology or whether, as Asperger believed, they are two separate syndromes (Lyons and Fitzgerald, 2007). What is interesting, though, is the fact that both writers chose the term "autism" to describe the condition about which they were writing, thus conveying the notion of what might be called *self-ism.* Frith suggests that 'autism', from the Greek word *autos,* meaning 'self', is "a withdrawal from the fabric of social life into the self" (2003, p.5) and this does indeed capture a common and dominant characteristic of both writers' descriptions.

**What is Autism?**

The journey towards current understanding and conceptualisation of autism has uncovered several interesting features which are characteristic of individuals with this condition. One of the most fundamental of these is the notion of a 'triad of impairments'. This term was first coined by Wing (1996) following her earlier epidemiological study among children in Camberwell, Inner London, known to be suffering from 'physical or mental handicap' (Wing and Gould, 1979). This research revealed that, among socially impaired children with a mental age of above 20 months, significant impairments in pretend play and in verbal and nonverbal communication were also present. Because these three features co-occur, they are described as a 'triad' rather than as three separate impairments and, as such, have become central to the current diagnostic criteria.

Those criteria, as set out in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition* (DSM – IV; APA. 1994) and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, Text Revised* (DSM – IV TR; APA, 2000) include qualitative impairments in social interaction, in verbal and non-verbal communication and there must be evidence of restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities. Aspects of all three areas must have been present prior to the age of three if a diagnosis of an Autistic Spectrum Disorder is given.

**Asperger Syndrome – the Same or Different?**

As discussed above, Asperger's work was less well-known than Kanner's and was initially somewhat ignored, the belief being that his 'syndrome' referred to children who were quite different from those whom Kanner had described. Consequently, it was not until 1992 that Asperger syndrome became officially recognised as a distinct condition when it was included in the tenth edition of the World Health Organisation's diagnostic manual, 'International Classification of Diseases' (ICD-10). Shortly afterwards it was added to the DSM – IV (APA, 1994).

In terms of diagnosis, the difference between people with Asperger syndrome and people with autism is that the former show no delay, or a less marked delay, in language acquisition or in other aspects of their intellectual development. However, it is known that subtle abnormalities in communication are present among those with AS with word choice often being pedantic or over-formal (Ghaziuddin and Gerstein, 1996) and they may be unaware of a listener's interest level or the non-verbal feedback received

from the listener. In this way, communication can be one-sided with insensitivity being shown to others' points of view (Attwood, 2006). It is perhaps for this reason that a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome tends to be later than for autism, often in adolescence or even adulthood. A further possibility for a delayed diagnosis is because the effects of Asperger syndrome often become more noticeable with increasing age. Although a delayed diagnosis may indicate that the effects of the condition are less severe than those of autism, the difficulties encountered by some individuals can be unbearable (Sainsbury, 2000).

There are several characteristics associated with Asperger syndrome that are likely to affect pupils' educational experiences. These traits, as identified by Wing (1981), can be summarised thus:

- Difficulties with two-way social interactions;

- Lack of understanding of the rules governing social behaviour;

- Most are poor at games involving motor skills and executive problems may affect ability to write or draw;

- Specific learning difficulties affecting maths, reading or writing may be present;

- Youngsters may become over-sensitive to criticism as they approach adolescence as they experience a growing awareness of being different.

However, Wing (ibid) states that all these characteristics are also found, to a greater or lesser extent, among 'typical' populations.

Indeed, it is for this reason that several writers (e.g. Happé, 1999; Baron-Cohen, 2000; Billington, 2006a) have argued in favour of describing individuals with ASD as being 'different' rather than 'impaired', thus avoiding value-laden judgements which pathologise the minority. This is the stance that I personally support and is one which is compatible with the view that autism appears on a continuum (Wing, 1988). Furthermore, this position allows for individual variations among all people, including those with ASD who are often regarded as a homogenous group (Boucher, 1996).

In the past, it has been conventional to describe individuals with autism whose Intelligence Quotient is within the average range or above as having "high-functioning autism" (HFA; Baron-Cohen, 2000). Indeed, many writers use the terms AS and HFA interchangeably, probably because the similarities between the two conditions are greater than their differences (Attwood, 2006). Throughout this research, I will use the term AS to include both Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism.

> **Reflection**
>
> *Up to this point, this review has intentionally been written descriptively as it serves to illustrate that the context of this research is one in which individuals with ASDs are viewed as 'having' a condition.*

## Characteristics Associated with AS Specifically Pertinent to this Research

In addition to the characteristics described by Wing (1981), several other writers have identified other difficulties among individuals with AS which are pertinent to this research. As it is seeking to elicit the views of individuals

with AS, research indicates that there are likely to be some difficulties associated with language. A study by Colle et al. (2008) used a story-telling task to assess pragmatic skills in adults with AS. Pragmatic skills relate to the way in which language is used and, in that study, such skills included the use of personal pronouns and of temporal and referential expressions. The authors argue that these linguistic skills require that a speaker has a Theory of Mind (ToM). Theory of Mind, a characteristic believed to be absent in those with ASD, was first identified by Baron-Cohen et al. (1985) and refers to 'the ability to attribute mental states to another person and to infer their underlying intentions, thoughts, emotions and motivation' (Colle et al., 2008, p. 28). In that study, the authors argue that the way in which a speaker is able to consider the needs of a listener in terms of editing and keeping track of the information they are imparting equates with the employment of a ToM. Their findings indicated that, among adults with AS/HFA, although there were no differences in general narrative skills when compared with a control group of 'neuro-typical' adults, there were significant pragmatic deficits, particularly in those aspects of language in which a Theory of Mind is required. These findings led the authors to conclude that mild linguistic impairments, such as the ability to describe a character's affective or cognitive state, are an effect of ToM deficits.

Adreon and Stella (2001), in studying the transition from middle to high school for students with AS, suggest that:

> Many pupils with AS have significant weaknesses in comprehending and expressing language, although they typically possess average to superior vocabularies.                                    (p. 2)

Bennett (2005) also found difficulties with expressive language when using an interpretative approach to explore the reflections of a Year 11 pupil on his school experiences. An absence of words to describe emotions was found when interviewing this pupil, leading the author to question whether highly emotional experiences are 'buried' as a means of defending against the effects of such experiences.

The 'burying' of emotional events may be related to the difficulties that some researchers have found with regard to the ability of people with AS to recall autobiographical memories. For example, Tanweer et al. (2010) explored autobiographical memory in 11 adults with AS and compared them with 15 neuro-typical individuals. When asked to recall autobiographical memories from three lifetime periods, those with AS showed a diminished ability to recall episodic autobiographical memories. This also supports earlier findings by Millward et al. (2000). Adler (2010) suggests that these difficulties are related to Theory of Mind impairments whereas Happé (1999) believes that they are attributable to weak central cohesion, which she describes as a:

> tendency to process incoming information in context for gist-pulling information together for higher level meaning, often at the expense of memory for details.

(p. 541)

Clearly, there are several differing perspectives as to why people with AS may have difficulty recalling past personal events. However, Beversdorf et al. (2000) found that individuals with ASD are better able than their 'typical' counterparts to discriminate false memory items from true items. Participants were presented with an audiotape consisting of lists of words which were semantically related. They were then given seven words which they were

required to identify as being either on the original list or not. Only two of these words were included on the initial list although all of them were related or closely related to the original topic. Those words that were on the original list were described as 'true items' whilst the others were classed as 'false memory items'. The authors found that individuals with ASD were better than 'typical' participants at discriminating between true and false items suggesting that, at least in this respect, their memories may be more accurate.

Particular difficulties are experienced at high school by pupils with AS in addition to those that might be expected when the characteristics discussed above are considered. A predominant and challenging area for pupils with AS is that related to emotional and behavioural issues. For example, Tonge et al. (1999) found that 85% of pupils with AS encountered difficulties related to emotional and behavioural disturbance compared with 10-15% of the typical high school population. Moreover, depression and anxiety were found to be more prevalent among children and young people with AS. From the viewpoint of teachers and peers, students with AS are also more likely to be regarded as defiantly oppositional or disobedient (Myles and Southwick, 1999). Adreon and Stella (2001) report that at high school, there is a greater pressure for pupils to conform and, because adolescent peers are less tolerant of differences, those with AS are more likely to be bullied, left out or persecuted. These alienating incidents are more likely to occur at less structured times of the school day such as lunch time or break time (Odegaard and Heath, 1992) or during PE lessons when poor gross motor

skills and an inability to grasp the concept of 'team mentality' (Adreon and Stella, *ibid.*) provide an opportunity for differences to be more noticeable.

**The Need for a Label**

What has been described in the first half of this review may be interpreted as having portrayed people with ASD as having a categorical medical condition. Although this presents a level of professional dissonance for most practising educational psychologists (myself included) who would be uncomfortable working exclusively within a medical-deficit paradigm, the application of a formal label might be described as being essential in the case of ASD. This is because services cannot be accessed and resources cannot be directed until a diagnosis has been given (Volker and Lopata, 2008). Indeed, Jordan (2007) questions how, without a categorical medical classification, parents and teachers can support individuals with ASD and how those individuals can develop self-knowledge and a sense of not being alone.

The label itself is also currently the subject of debate within local authorities with some preferring to use the term 'condition' rather than 'disorder'. The Autism Research Centre in Cambridge has suggested that Autism Spectrum Condition might be used by educational professionals whilst health professionals continue to use the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (Jones et al., 2008). Regardless of the label *per se*, Jordan (2007) advises that, because resource allocation depends on the recognition of a disability, a label *is* needed. Perhaps, rather than causing confusion by changing the label, it would be more beneficial to focus on 'increasing understanding of the autism spectrum and the variety within it and to try to develop fairer and

more effective ways of resource allocation to support actual identified needs rather than categories' (Jones et al., 2008, p. 11).

Another way in which the label has been useful has been for research purposes and, for this research, it has provided a means by which participants could be selected; this is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. Furthermore, this use of a label has meant that 'alongside the new knowledge of ASD gained from research has been a growth in outlets for the voice of individuals with ASDs themselves' (Jordan, 2007, p. 10). Some of these 'voices' will be discussed below.

**Educational Provision for Pupils with ASD**

One of the most challenging and difficult environments for any child with ASD is the school (Sainsbury, 2000; Carrington and Graham, 2001). The social demands alone can be overwhelming and, along with sensory stimuli and changing rules and routines that may appear to be illogical and incomprehensible, the educational placement of such pupils is of paramount importance. A review by Jones et al. (2008) identified a range of provision currently existing in the private, voluntary and independent sectors.

This includes:

1. mainstream schools;

2. special schools or units;

3. schools, units and classes specifically catering for children with ASD;

4. schools or units for children with other types of special educational needs;

5. home-based programmes;

6. advisory teams for pupils with ASD;

7. individualised programmes for pupils who do not attend school.

Although most children are educated within their home authority, some attend schools, including residential schools, in a different part of the country, their place often being funded by their local authority.

As yet, there is little evidence to show which type of placement is associated with the most positive outcomes for children with ASD and nor is it easy to acquire data as to where these pupils are placed (Jones et al., 2008). These difficulties may be because pupils with ASD each have differing needs and should be treated as individuals rather than the homogenous group to which Boucher (1996) refers[6]. However, Jones et al. estimate that about 90% of these children attend either a mainstream school or a generic special school with the remaining 10% being placed in the other settings mentioned above. The majority of those who attend a special school attend a school for pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties.

In the Local Authority where the research presented in this thesis was conducted, the figure is similar (based on data related to January 2010); of the 1046 pupils with a statement of ASD, 92% attend a mainstream or generic special school while the remainder are placed in either a special school for ASD, are home-educated or are in Early Years settings.

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[6] In Boucher's work, she offers an interpretation of the accounts of people whom she estimates represent 15 to 20% of people with autism. She cautions against the dangers of generalising or of viewing these people as a homogenous group.

In recent years, several studies have sought to elicit the views of parents of children with ASD about the educational provision their children receive. In part, this increased interest has been due to a review by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006) in which concerns were expressed specifically about children with ASD:

> Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (SEBD) provide an excellent example of where the old Warnock framework is out of date and where significant cracks exist in the system to the detriment of those who fall between them. Far more important, however, is the frustration and upset caused to parents and families by the failure of the system to meet the needs of these children. This needs most urgent resolution.

(p. 18)

This same review also includes evidence from the National Autistic Society (NAS) stating that over 50% of parents of children with ASD were unhappy about the current educational placement of their child. Furthermore, Batten et al. (2006) revealed that more appeals about ASD are made to the SEN and Disability Tribunal in England than are made for any other SEN. In the Local Authority where the research in this thesis was carried out, 34% of all Tribunals involved a dispute related to a pupil with ASD. It seems, therefore, that both the significant difficulties experienced by pupils with ASD as well as a lack of understanding about autism in general have contributed to a disproportionate level of dissatisfaction among parents of these children in comparison with the parents of children with other special educational needs (Parsons, Lewis and Ellins, 2009).

However, some studies have found that many parents of children with ASD *are* satisified. For example, Whitaker (2007) elicited the views of every

parent of a child with ASD in one English county and found that 61% were satisfied with their child's educational placement. However, a significant minority of 39% were dissatisfied, mainly because of a lack of understanding about the difficulties associated with ASD among teaching staff. A national postal survey of parents of children with ASD conducted by Tissot and Evans (2006) revealed that the securing of a desired placement was very stressful for most families but of the 79% who managed to secure their first choice of provision, 70% were satisfied. This statistical majority is clearly at odds with the findings of the study by the NAS where half of the parents were found to be dissatisfied with their child's educational provision. A recent study by Parsons et al. (2009) compared the views of parents of children with ASD with those of parents of children with other disabilities. They found that the majority of parents in both groups were mostly satisfied with their child's current educational provision. However, as is consistent with earlier studies (Batten et al., 2006; Tissot and Evans, 2006) they found that, for all parents, times of greatest stress were choosing a school or placement for their child and managing transitions between schools. It is concerning that none of the studies cited above sought the views of the pupils themselves and this too needs 'most urgent resolution', not least because of the reasons described in the following section.

**The Voice of the Child**

This research is concerned with exploring the views of pupils with AS. The following section describes the statutory context related to eliciting children's views, particularly with regard to those with special educational needs. Traditionally, educational philosophy and practice has been based upon the

belief that adults know what is best for children and young people. Indeed, as discussed below, it is only relatively recently that children's views have been formally sought. Recognition of the right of a child to express his or her views and to have those views taken into account when decisions are made appertaining to them was acknowledged in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and the Children Act (1989) explicitly stated that the 'wishes and feelings of the child' must be considered if a court were to make an order regarding that child. However, it was not until the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice was first introduced in 1994 that educational settings were provided with guidance regarding the identification of children's views about their 'current and future education' (DfEE, 1994). However, the revised Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) devotes a whole chapter to pupil participation with one of its five 'fundamental principles' being that 'the views of the child should be sought and taken into account' (Section 1:5, p.7). The SEN Toolkit (DfES, 2001) includes guidelines for ensuring participation by all children, including those for whom communication is difficult or whose needs are profound (Section 4, p. 6). The belief that 'knowledge is not merely confined to professionals, but may be possessed by our clients' (Billington, 2006b, p.2) has continued to be promoted by the UK government through initiatives such as the *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003), although this is no longer part of current government policy.

Despite the intention of this statutory requirement being to ensure that pupils are given a 'voice' , it is concerning to note that the Lamb Inquiry (Lamb, 2009) reported that, during the Statutory Assessment process leading to a

statement of special educational needs, pupils' participation in the process was 'rare' and that where it did happen, their involvement was 'tokenistic' (p.7). Furthermore, few of the statements analysed for the Inquiry showed any evidence that the child's views had been included.

There is already a substantial body of research related to this topic, most of which suggests that listening to children is beneficial, not only for pupils themselves but also for teachers and schools (May, 2005). Indeed, pupil participation has been found to be a means of improving schools (McBeath et al., 2004) and of promoting co-operation and good discipline (Pomeroy, 1999). Furthermore, Lamb (2009) recognises the importance of the contributions made by children and young people to the statutory assessment process as 'their insights into what can help them learn and what hinders their learning is critical' (p.7).

**The 'Expert' Perspective:  Insider Accounts**

An increasing number of authors with ASD have provided readers with an insight into their own experiences through their autobiographical accounts. This particular genre gives an alternative perspective about what it means to live with 'autism' and it also highlights the fact that, even though the writers share the same diagnosed condition, each one is unique and should be regarded as such.

Donna Williams, perhaps one of the best-known writers in this area, questions the assumptions that are made about 'autism' (always placed in inverted commas). She regards the word 'autism' itself as a misnomer

because it assumes that people are 'self-focused' or in a 'self-state'. Williams (1996) challenges this by stating:

> People can be intensely focused on their body parts or sensations or workings, specifically *because* they perceive them as foreign, incomprehensible, ever new and 'other' and generally not aware that these things are part of themselves. As a teenager, I spent many of my lunch breaks at my first secondary school trying to shake a hand off an arm without the perception that both were part of my body. I had spent a childhood trying to get away from my own body ... If anything, my 'autism', like that of so many others like me, was often an example not of a kind of 'self-ism' but of a kind of 'other-ism' where any conscious and conjoined or consistent sense of selfhood doesn't come easily at all. . . . right from the start, from the time someone came up with the word 'autism', the condition has been judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced. (p.14)

In the same way that ASD is recognised medically as being characterised by a triad of impairments, Williams (1996) also describes her 'autism' as being based on three 'categories of problems': control, tolerance and connection. Her ensuing descriptions and recommendations for helping people to manage these aspects of their 'autism' provide a far more illuminating way of reconsidering the approaches that professionals might adopt when working with children with similar difficulties. Barrett (2006) suggests that the use of insider accounts "can shift perspective to the emotional elements that many teaching professionals would easily recognise from their involvement with children and young people" (p. 100) thus helping them to better understand, not only the differing emotional needs of their pupils, but also the differing learning needs, and so bring about more positive outcomes. The differences in these learning needs are eloquently summarised by Williams (1996):

... new experiences, sometimes no matter how similar to previous experiences, get perceived as 'new', 'unfamiliar' and 'unpredictable'. This is like being trapped in an infant's perception yet with the capacity of a grown mind. . . . In other words, things generally don't get easier with time or learning.

(p. 143)

Williams further describes how these difficulties also extend to the processing of sensory and emotional information:

Emotions are experienced physically. Without comprehension to help diffuse or make sense of the emotions, the effect on the body may be so extreme that it may feel that it is too much for the body to sustain. These extreme reactions can mean that even being emotionally 'moved' in a minor degree may result in severe tremors, palpitations and hyperventilation.

(p. 216)

Insights such as these are 'extraordinarily powerful' (Barrett, 2006, p.103) and this area of literature is steadily increasing with several younger authors producing autobiographical accounts about their experiences of growing up with autism. As the following extracts demonstrate, 'children with AS are the best experts about AS' (Hall, 2001, p.103).

Kenneth Hall (ibid.) describes primary school as being:

... very traumatic ... I can't say anything about what my behaviour was like because I can't remember ... there were lots of problems and I had difficulties trying to cope.

(p.20)

He explains that his main difficulties were his inability to interact with others and his dislike of handwriting. Similar sentiments are also felt by Luke Jackson (2002) who describes school as 'a whole minefield of challenges'

(p.113), with his problems being related to bullying, loud noises, changes in routine, a need for explicit instructions and handwriting. He also expresses such a dislike of homework that 'I would really rather not mention it actually'! (p.123). However, unlike Kenneth, Luke is keen to make friends and considers himself to be 'getting better each day' (p.165) at learning how to interact with others. These differences serve to emphasise the unique nature of both boys and in the words of Peter Vermeulen (2001), an adult author with AS:

> Autism is – and I can confirm it – a serious disorder. But autism doesn't stop there and individuals with autism are more than the sum of their disorder. Individuals with autism are, first and foremost, 'different'. (p. 18)

'Expert' accounts such as these are able to provide some insight into the experiences of those with an ASD. The next section will examine some of the academic literature in which the views of individuals with AS have been sought.

**The Views of Pupils with ASD: What Research Tells Us**

Despite a vast amount of research into autism and other pervasive developmental disorders, very few studies have sought to elicit the views of pupils with ASD, although several have focused on parents' views (e.g. Whitaker, 2007; Parsons et al., 2009), teachers' views (e.g. Ashburner et al., 2010), and some have examined siblings' perceptions (e.g. Petalas et al., 2009). This is at odds with the growing number of publications within popular literature written by adults and young people with Asperger Syndrome, as described in the previous section. Moreover, this paucity of research based

on 'insider' accounts fails to reflect the professional practice of Educational Psychologists who endeavour to ascertain, listen to and act upon the views of the children and young people with whom they work. Indeed, Educational Psychologists have always been at the forefront of assessing children's perspectives (Gersch, 1996) and, as a profession, we continually endeavour to adopt a *modus operandi* that is evidence-based. Otherwise, as Billington (2006) cautions:

> Rigid adherence to simplistic interpretations of the autistic 'triad of impairments' in communication, interaction and imagination (Wing, 1996) can in practice lead inadvertently to the development of services and professional practices that struggle to address the needs of those children who are identified (as well as their families).
>
> (p.2)

Most of the studies in which the views of youngsters with ASD have been ascertained all tend to be fairly recent publications. However, an earlier investigation conducted in Australia by Carrington and Graham (2001) examined the perceptions of school of two 13-year-old boys with AS and of their mothers. Data was provided through semi-structured interviews and was then analysed using an induction model, or, what the authors describe as a 'part to whole' approach. Three main themes were generated:

- Developmental differences;

- Specific problems associated with AS: social and communication difficulties, restricted range of interests, need for routine, and stress;

- Masquerading.

The latter theme was described as the most interesting as it was 'unexpected'. The authors describe this as the need for pupils with AS to play a part in order to fit in with others, thus masking their deficits. However, in this study, a greater emphasis was placed on the mothers' accounts with the pupils' views serving to confirm those accounts. Nevertheless, the study sought to, and, to an extent, succeeded in giving a 'voice' to these youngsters.

Losh and Capps (2006) focused on children with High Functioning Autism, aged between 7 and 13 years, to investigate their emotional experiences. This was a large study which adopted a discourse analytic framework to gain an insight into how these individuals interpret emotional and non-emotional encounters when compared with typically developing children. They found that, although children with HFA were able to talk about their recollections of simple emotional events, they were less likely to use personalised causal-explanatory frameworks than 'typical' children, suggesting that their understanding of emotional experiences is more limited, particularly as these difficulties were not observed when they were asked to recall non-emotional events. The authors acknowledge that because individuals with autism may have difficulties using narrative (Tager-Flusberg, 1995), their capacity for appraising and relating emotional experiences may have been inhibited. This in itself casts doubt on whether their research is able to provide a greater insight into the emotional understanding of those with HFA or whether it serves to confirm what is already known about the difficulties that many children with autism have with speech and language. As a comparative study, it could be suggested that one of its aims was to find deficits among

the participants with autism, rather than viewing such 'deficits', as Baron-Cohen (2000) suggests, as differences.

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to gain an understanding of how 20 pupils with Asperger syndrome experience the inclusion process in their secondary schools. Semi-structured interviews and pupil diaries provided the data from which several themes were identified, namely:

- Characteristics associated with AS;

- Constructing an understanding of AS;

- Anxiety and stress in school;

- Relationships with peers;

- Working with teachers and other staff.

They also reported that almost all the pupils with AS and HFA had experienced bullying and teasing.

Although this research provides some insight into the perceptions and experiences of pupils with AS, the transcribed data were collated in a computerised analysis programme which then produced the themes above. It could be argued, therefore, that this study had methodological weaknesses in that it did not adhere to the basic principles of an IPA study (as discussed in Chapter 2) as the sample size of 20 was very large, as was the age range (11 to 17 years), which indicates a lack of homogeneity in the sampling

criteria and, moreover, the interpretative element, a fundamental tenet of IPA, was generated artificially by computer.

The study referred to above by Ashburner et al. (2010) in which teachers' perceptions of students with ASD were sought by means of rating scales found that such pupils exhibit significantly higher levels of behavioural and emotional difficulties in a wide range of areas. These included difficulties with attention, internalising behaviours such as anxiety and depression and externalising behaviours such as oppositional or aggressive outbursts. They also found that students with ASD are significantly more likely to have difficulties with emotional regulation including temper tantrums, rapid mood changes, a tendency to cry and they are easily frustrated. Further difficulties reported included issues related to perfection with an insistence that things be done in a certain way.

In relation to the findings regarding attention difficulties, this may be because earlier studies have found that a high rate of 'co-morbidity' of ASD and ADHD exists (Goldstein and Schwebach, 2004). This may also account for the high number of pupils with ASD being excluded from school.  A survey by Barnard et al. (2000), conducted with 818 parents of children with ASD in the UK, found that 21% of these children had been excluded from school with 17% of them having been excluded more than six times. This was an even greater problem for higher functioning children, such as those with AS, with 29% having been excluded. Barnard et al. report that this rate is twenty times that of children who do not have special educational needs.

Wainscot et al. (2008) used a case-control design to investigate the relationships with peers of 30 high school pupils with AS / HFA and a control group of 27. A structured interview schedule was employed and responses were analysed statistically. When compared with the control group, they found that pupils with AS tended to engage in fewer social interactions, had fewer friends, and were more likely to spend break and lunchtimes inside where there was more adult supervision. They were also found to be less active physically and they were more likely to be targets of bullying. It is interesting that although social interactions were fewer in number for AS pupils, they were just as likely as their peers to have a best friend.

A study by Billington (2006b) describes his experiences of working with 'James', a boy with autism, in which the juxtaposition of the traditional view of autism is starkly contrasted with 'insider' views. Moreover, Billington argues that, if professionals are to work more effectively with children with autism, then an understanding of, and an insight into, a child's experience of 'intense feelings' (p.3) is required. He further suggests that:

> it is the person with the disability (in this case, autism) who when allowed a 'voice' can access insightful truths which are in advance of professional knowledge.
>
> (p. 6)

Billington's work with James was part of his professional practice and, as such, was not a conventional piece of research. However, his work indicates that, unless research focuses on gaining an insight into a child's world, then many services and professional practices will continue to be underpinned by 'the language of psychopathology and the conventional models of deficit' (Billington, p.7).

**Research Question**

This literature review has served to illustrate that, whilst there exists a plethora of research related to autism in general and, in particular, to the difficulties associated with ASD, there is still very little research that provides an 'insider' account of what it means to experience life from this perspective. Furthermore, no study has been conducted in which only the views of pupils were sought and subsequently analysed and interpreted by the researcher[7]. This is in spite of the growing number of autobiographical accounts being published by writers who themselves have autism. Carrington and Graham (2001) suggest that 'more qualitative research in the field of autism is necessary to achieve an in-depth exploration of the real-life experiences of these individuals from their own perspective' (p.27). As a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I am keen to base my professional practice on a model of delivery which takes account of pupils' voices and places them in the role of 'expert'. In view of this intention, and in response to the suggestion above, I have formulated only one research question:

- How do Key Stage 4 pupils with Asperger syndrome in mainstream schools view their educational experiences?

Given the possible speech and language difficulties of youngsters with classic autism, I have chosen to work with pupils with Asperger syndrome or High Functioning Autism who are likely to be more able to describe their experiences. In selecting youngsters at Key Stage 4, it is anticipated that,

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[7] The IPA study by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) employed a computer programme to analyse the data derived from participants.

because they are in the final stages of their education, their experiences will be greater than those of younger pupils.

Chapter 2 will provide a detailed account of why an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to answer this question with specific reference to my epistemological position.

# Chapter 2: Methodology

*They're trying to live our life and they can't live their own.*

*(Pilot study; 21-22)*

This chapter provides an explanation of why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith, 1996) was selected as the most appropriate methodology with which to answer the research question *'How do Key Stage 4 pupils with Asperger syndrome in mainstream schools view their educational experiences?'* Section A discusses aspects of the research design with reference to my epistemological position. Section B addresses the philosophical tenets of IPA and Section C provides information related to validity and quality. Section D describes the research process and ethical issues are considered in Section E while Section F explains how the data were collected and analysed.

## Section A: Research Design

### Epistemological Position

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome are a group *upon* whom, rather than *with* whom, research is more often conducted (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). This research seeks to gain an insight into the personal, lived, educational experiences of four pupils with AS, and how they make sense of those experiences. As such, it does not lend itself to a hypothesis-driven, hypo-deductive methodology which quantitative approaches offer as the collected data would not be rich enough to provide a 'naturalistic, contextual-based and holistic understanding' of the participants (Gelo et al., 2008, p. 268).

Whereas quantitative research, emanating from a positivist paradigm, supports the view that there is one reality that can be measured using scientific principles, qualitative methodologies, within an interpretivist paradigm, support the belief that there are 'multiple constructed realities that generate different meanings for different individuals' with interpretations being dependent on 'the researcher's lens' (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005).

Willig (2001) suggests that qualitative research methods span a continuum of epistemological positions, ranging from *naïve realism* to *radical relativism.* Ontologically, naïve realism supports the view that there is one true reality which is 'apprehendable, identifiable and measurable' (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130) whereas radical relativism rejects the existence of truth or knowledge and emphasises the multiple interpretations that can be applied (Willig, *ibid.*). IPA, the chosen methodology for this study, is placed around the mid-point of this continuum and it subscribes to a social constructionist epistemology, at what Eatough and Smith (2004) describe as the 'light end of the social constructionist continuum' (p. 184). This means that language is an important component of the way in which we experience and understand the world around us although, as Eatough and Smith suggest:

> Seeing the individual's life world merely as a linguistic and discursive construction does not speak to the empirical realities of people's lived experiences and their sense of self.

(p.184)

Furthermore, they believe that IPA subscribes to a symbolic interactionist perspective because it acknowledges that experiences are situated within social interactions and processes. This perspective, originally developed by Blumer (1969) and based on the work of George Mead (1934), views

individuals as pragmatic actors who continually alter their behaviour according to the actions of others. These actions and those who perform them are regarded as symbolic objects and, through interpretation, meaning is ascribed through the use of language (MacKinnon, 2005).

---

*Reflection*

*Social constructionism is compatible with my personal view of the world and, as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, it is the paradigm within which I work, thus acknowledging that multiple realities exist. However, I do not believe that reality is constructed entirely by language and I find the symbolic interactionist perspective to be more consistent with my personal ontology or world view.*

---

## Section B: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Prior to writing this section, I considered an opinion posited by Silverman (2006) regarding 'good research':

> I have lost count of the run of the mill qualitative research papers I have come across which find it necessary to define their work in terms of obscure philosophical positions such as phenomenology or hermeneutics … In my view, you do not need to understand these terms in order to carry out good qualitative research.

> (p. 7)

However, for me personally, an attempt to understand these 'obscure philosophical positions' was necessary in order that I could adhere faithfully to the basic tenets of IPA, thus increasing the validity of this research. Issues related to the validity of this research will be discussed in Section C. Therefore, a brief summary of the foundations of IPA is provided below.

**Phenomenology**

IPA is founded upon three main areas of philosophy: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Phenomenology (based on the work of philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre) is concerned with the world as it is experienced by individuals at particular times and in particular contexts. Its main focus is the 'phenomena' we encounter consciously as we engage with our lived reality (Willig, 2001). The aim of phenomenology is to focus on things themselves, as they appear to the perceiver and to 'bracket' any pre-formed assumptions about what is already known about them. Husserl referred to this process of bracketing as epoché and it is explained by Langdridge (2007) as:

> The process by which we attempt to abstain from our presuppositions, those preconceived ideas we might have about the things we are investigating ... The core of epoché is doubt: not doubt about everything we say we know, but doubt about the natural attitude or biases of everyday knowledge.

(p. 17)

From a phenomenological perspective, all objects present themselves to us as something and that which we perceive is a manifestation of their reality at any one time. The way in which a phenomenon is perceived varies according to location, context and our 'frame of mind' at the time. Heidegger developed the notion of *Dasein* or 'being in the world' which suggests that we are already immersed in the world around us. In this way, our engagement with objects and others in the world cannot be separated from our experience of it. In philosophical terms, this is known as *intentionality*; our engagement with

the world is an intentional act and is part of experience itself. Husserl argued that, in order to know our own experience of a phenomenon, the essential qualities of that experience need to be identified, and this is done through a process of *phenomenological reduction*. This involves a full description of the phenomenon as it is experienced and, by identifying all its features (including physical and emotional aspects), it is possible to recognise the total experience and to 'become aware of what makes the experience what it is' (Willig, 2001, p. 52). This process is summarised thus by Giorgi (1997):

> In summary, then, to enter into the attitude of the phenomenological reduction means to (a) bracket past knowledge about a phenomenon, in order to encounter it freshly and describe it precisely as it is intuited (or experienced), and (b) to withhold the existential index, which means to consider what is given precisely as it is given, as presence, or phenomenon. No work can be considered to be phenomenological if some sense of the reduction is not articulated and utilized.

(p. 240)

Husserl also described *imaginative variation,* a process whereby the structural aspects of an experience are identified. Structural components include time, space and social features. Both the physical and the structural aspects of an experience lead to an understanding of the *essence* of the phenomenon. This refers to the way in which the fundamental meaning of the way in which a phenomenon presents itself is articulated and is based on intuition (Giorgi, 1997).

The work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre developed Husserl's work further, with each describing a more interpretative position in which our involvement with the world is linked to our relationship with it and with others.

> *Reflection*
>
> *I am confident of my ability to 'withhold the existential index' and to view the minutiae of the interview transcripts as phenomena. However whether I am truly able to bracket my knowledge and experiences of pupils with AS within educational settings remains to be seen. Any interpretations I make will need to be considered in the light of my reflexive position (Section C).*

## Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, the second major theoretical foundation of IPA, refers to the theory of interpretation. Historically, hermeneutics was used as the philosophical basis for interpreting biblical texts in order to provide a framework within which, among other things, the original intentions of an author might be uncovered. The phenomenologist, Heidegger, defined phenomenology as a hermeneutic activity in that its primary aim is to examine an entity itself as it appears to the reader. This 'appearance' of meaning can be overt or hidden and, as Moran (2000) suggests, 'the proper model for seeking meaning is the interpretation of a text and for this reason Heidegger links phenomenology with hermeneutics' (p. 229).

One of the most fundamental aspects of hermeneutic theory is the principle of the hermeneutic circle. This is described by Schleiermacher, the father of modern hermeneutics, as the 'continual interplay between the particular parts of the text and its complete whole' (Jasper, 2004, p. 86). By applying attention to the minutiae of a text, an overview of the text in its entirety can be gained: without a sense of the whole, the small details and particulars cannot be fully appreciated. Jasper summarises this non-linear process in the following way: 'we begin with the big idea, read the text clearly and in

detail in the light of this, and then use the text to substantiate the initial idea' (p. 21). This implies that there is no end to the interpretative process and presents the problem of how to escape the 'hermeneutical circle' (Denzin, 1989). However, Heidegger argued that getting *out* of the hermeneutic circle is less important than actually getting *in* (Jasper, 2004). It is thus acknowledged that my own experiences, preconceptions and assumptions have some part to play, both in 'gaining entry' into the hermeneutic circle, and in the overall interpretative process. Because these preconceptions are present prior to reading any text, 'reflective practices and a cyclical approach to bracketing' are necessary (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35), if possible. This means that my reflexivity is an essential component of this research.

**Idiography**

The third major tenet of IPA is idiography in that its focus is on the particular rather than the general. This is in contrast to the nomothetic approach adopted by more traditional, positivist and post-positivist psychological research which aims to apply its findings to a wider population. Indeed, as Eatough and Smith (2008) argue, an idiographic approach supports '(a) the intensive examination of the individual in her/his own right as an intrinsic part of psychology's remit and (b) that the logical route to universal laws and structures is an idiographic – nomothetic one' (p.183). In other words, generalisations can only be established by locating them in the particular before developing them very cautiously (Smith et al., 2009). Indeed, Smith and his colleagues further propose that an idiographic approach 'has an important role to play in psychology, and that there is considerable ground for the development of phenomenologically -  informed models for the

synthesis of multiple analyses from small studies and single cases' (p. 32). Therefore, the study in this thesis makes no claims regarding generalisation but will hopefully form part of a growing corpus of similar IPA studies which, together, will be able to provide greater theoretical transferability about how pupils with AS view their educational experiences and whether their views can enable professionals to more effectively meet their specific needs.

**Rationale for selecting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA was chosen as the most appropriate methodology for answering the research question *'How do Key Stage 4 pupils with Asperger syndrome in mainstream schools view their educational experiences?'* for several reasons, all of which are compatible with my personal position within this research. It is a qualitative approach which enables the participants to describe events and experiences within their natural environment. For pupils with Asperger Syndrome, being able to talk about their experiences of school (some of which were very negative) in their own homes was considered to be imperative as it ensured that they were in a familiar environment and were more likely to feel at ease. Furthermore, the effect of any negative connotations associated with the school environment were more likely to be minimised. IPA acknowledges that, as a researcher, my own preconceptions, beliefs and attitudes will affect my understanding of participants' accounts and will enhance my ability to make sense of their experiences. In this sense, the knowledge produced from an IPA study is reflexive and may, therefore, increase the transparency of the final account (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). This is particularly important when working with pupils with AS who may have been marginalised, misrepresented and almost certainly pathologised

by some professionals working with them. Furthermore, the use of a hermeneutic approach offers an opportunity, to a certain extent, to mirror the interpretative stance that individuals with AS have to adopt daily in order to try to make sense of the world around them, and this too is compatible with a symbolic interactionist epistemology. It aims to explore the meanings that they apply to their own lived experiences and they are, rightly, recognised as being the experts in the phenomenon being investigated. Because it is not ever possible to have complete access to others' experiences, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) suggest that:

> If we wish to do justice to the complexity of our subjects, an interpretative approach is unavoidable. It can also be fair, democratic and not patronising, as long as this approach to knowing people through their accounts is applied to the researcher as well as the researched.

(p.3)

This again emphasises the need for me to adopt a reflexive stance.

The idiographic focus of IPA provides the opportunity for a detailed analysis into how pupils with Asperger Syndrome make sense of their educational experiences and, in this way, enables their views to be heard with a richness and a depth that less idiographic methods would be unable to provide (Lander and Sheldrake, 2010).

In summary, IPA is a methodology that will best enable me to gain some access into how pupils with Asperger Syndrome make sense of their educational experiences. Its phenomenological perspective allows for an exploration of their personal perceptions and access to their personal world can only be gained through an interpretative process. This access is

dependent upon my own pre-conceptions which, though bracketed, are required if I am to make sense of that personal world.

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*Reflection*

*I am unsure whether I chose IPA or whether it chose me! As a past student of French, I recall translating some of Sartre's work on existential phenomenology which resonated strongly with me both at the time and when I recalled it more recently. Also the hermeneutic aspect of IPA is also a familiar philosophy for me as my reflexive position demonstrates (Section C). I was also drawn to the fact that it is relatively new and that its major proponents (Smith et al.) are keen to promote it as a worthwhile approach to psychological research. Although it is fairly structured, it allows the researcher to be flexible and creative and this too was very appealing.*

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**Limitations of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

As with any methodological approach, IPA has some limitations. The first of these is the role of language, with semi-structured interviews being the only method of data collection in this study. Because the focus of phenomenological research is on the experience itself, it assumes that participants have the necessary level of linguistic competence to describe that experience. For pupils with Asperger Syndrome, this may not necessarily be the case, even though my purposive sampling criteria, as presented in Section D, include 'an ability to articulate thoughts and feelings'. As Willig (2001) argues, 'language constructs, rather than describes, reality' (p. 63). Therefore, direct access to a participant's experience is impossible.

IPA is concerned with capturing the essence of a phenomenon and this includes all the pre-cognitive aspects of that phenomenon. It is dubious whether most people are able to recall such minutiae of an experience. Consequently, it requires a high level of skill from the researcher if these

aspects are to be elicited. Similarly, the process of epoché, as described by Husserl, may not be entirely possible. Although I can bracket those preconceptions of which I am aware, there are likely to be subconscious influences that may affect my interpretations. For this reason, a critical friend will play an important role in 'checking' that any subconscious *a priori* assumptions do not influence the results of the analysis.

A third limitation of IPA is that, although it enables experiences or perceptions of experiences to be described, it does not seek to explain them and, therefore, generalisations cannot be made. Finally, because the researcher is central to an IPA study, the interpretation requires a high level of reflexivity and reflectivity on their part and would be an approach best adopted by one who values the importance of such skills. Reflexivity refers to the way in which the researcher has a relationship with, or is implicated in, the phenomenon being studied (Willig, 2001) while reflectivity is the ability to apply deep, careful thought to events and experiences (both are described in further detail in Section C).

**Consideration of other methods and approaches**

In order to answer the research question, several possible methodological approaches were considered then rejected. These included approaches based on empirical phenomenology, Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and Narrative approaches, all of which will be briefly discussed below, along with the reasons why each was rejected.

Empirical phenomenology, is a popular form of research in psychology. It has been influenced by the work of van Kaam (1958, cited in Hein and Austin,

2001; 1966), Giorgi (1975) and Colaizzi (1978) and their approaches are very similar. An empirical phenomenological analysis involves dividing participants' narratives of an experience into units, transforming those units into a description that encapsulates psychological and phenomenological concepts and, finally, combining these descriptions to produce an overall summary of the phenomenon being investigated (Dowling, 2007). In this way, the essence of an experience is identified through a process of epoché and phenomenological reduction and is, therefore, underpinned by Husserlian philosophy and, to a lesser extent, by Heidegger's. Indeed, Hein and Austin (*ibid.*) suggest that "many empirical phenomenological researchers recognize that hermeneutic activity ... is an intrinsic part of the research process" (p. 9).

Of the three phenomenologists mentioned above, Giorgi's approach is the one that is classically Husserlian, subscribing to a transcendental stance which reflects the belief that it is possible to "stand outside of lived experience ... to see things as they really are" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 23). The research presented in this thesis is more concerned with exploring the participants' experiences of what Heidegger refers to as *Dasein* or "being-in-the-world (rather than simply [their] experience of being") (Hein and Austin, 2001, p.3). Moreover, as described above, I do not believe a full suspension of presuppositions is entirely possible because, as McConnell-Henry et al. (2009) state, "the researcher does not exist in a vacuum" (p.10). I feel that my reflexive position in this research is central as I wish to make sense of how participants make sense of their educational experiences and the best way to do this is through an explicitly hermeneutic phenomenological

approach. Furthermore, the emphasis of empirical phenomenological approaches is on "verifiability and replicability" (Hein and Austin, *ibid*.) whereas IPA allows for a more idiographic focus from an emic perspective and is, therefore, more compatible with my epistemological position.

Grounded Theory and IPA share many common characteristics. The aim of both is to produce an account of participants' views of the world. They both require a systematic and cyclical analysis of a text so that themes and categories can be identified, the ultimate aim of which is to capture the essence of the phenomenon being investigated. The reason I opted for IPA rather than Grounded Theory is consistent with a view expressed by Willig (2001) in which she argues that, 'while Grounded Theory was developed to allow researchers to study basic social processes, IPA was designed to gain insight into individual participants' psychological worlds' (p.69). Because the focus of an IPA study is to gain a better understanding of how participants make sense of their experiences, I felt that this methodology would be a more effective means of answering the research question. In addition, IPA is relatively new and offers the researcher freedom to explore and more opportunities for creativity.

A Narrative approach was also considered as a way in which the educational experiences of pupils with Asperger Syndrome could be explored. Its initial appeal was that it would allow me to remain faithful to the participants' voices (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). It is based on the assumption that people's experiences are reconstructed as stories (Hiles and Čermák, 2007) or, as Billington (2000) describes:

> … people attempt to make sense of their lives by narrativizing their experiences; people tell stories, both to others and to themselves, not merely through their words but also through their actions.

> (p.37)

As it is based on a psychoanalytic paradigm, I was also attracted by the psychodynamic aspects of narrative research which, like IPA, explicitly acknowledges the position of the researcher in that 'resulting narratives are always a product of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 45). The interpretative stance adopted by a narrative researcher means that participants' accounts are not viewed as truthful accounts, but as accounts that they have chosen to share. In this way, this type of approach can be described as empowering as it can introduce agency and enable the construction of new identities (Pomerantz, 2005).

The use of free-association narrative interviewing, as developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), was also appealing as a means of data collection because of its ability to more easily elicit stories from participants. However, although the use of a narrative approach was rejected, the free-association interview method was adopted within an IPA framework in that open-ended questions were used, 'why' questions were avoided and the ordering and phrasing used by participants was followed during each semi-structured interview.

One of the limitations of narrative approaches is that it requires prosodic incidences to be included in the analysis. For individuals who have difficulties with prosody and who may possibly use pedantic, literal language, this

method may not have been an appropriate one. Moreover, I did not feel that, by analysing aspects of story-telling such as tone of voice or length of pauses, any further light could be shed on participants' educational experiences than could be discovered within the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

## Section C: Validity And Quality

The fact that qualitative research has tended to be judged according to criteria for validity and reliability, which traditionally applies to quantitative research, has led to several debates in recent years. Such judgements are based on what Salmon (2003) refers to as "an epistemology of 'methodologism'" which he further describes as 'limited' in that it is not possible to guarantee quality 'simply by following procedures'. It is hoped that the quality of this research is assessed according to Yardley's (2000) criteria which, rather than espousing a 'methodologistic' epistemology, are judged according to sophisticated, pluralistic and broad ranging criteria (Smith et al., 2009). Yardley proposes four principles, each of which can be addressed by IPA, as discussed below.

### Sensitivity to context

In choosing IPA as a methodology, sensitivity to context is demonstrated through focusing on the idiographic and the particular. This sensitivity is also required during negotiations with others when recruiting a purposive sample, liaising with participants and their parents and when conducting interviews with individuals who are likely to be uncomfortable talking to a stranger in a one-to-one situation. The ability to establish rapport, build up trust, display

empathy and attentiveness are all means by which sensitivity to context can be displayed.

Sensitivity is also evident throughout the stages of analysis and by ensuring that any interpretative claims made are grounded in the original data: this also enables the reader to check any interpretations being made with the original data.

## Commitment and rigour

Commitment can be demonstrated in IPA in several ways. During the interviews and during the analysis, a degree of considerable commitment is required to ensure that participants are at ease and know that they are being listened to. Rigour can be assessed based on how thorough the study has been, particularly in terms of the analysis itself which should be thorough and systematic. It should also have an idiographic perspective as well as being interpretative. Within the results section, each theme is supported by quotes drawn proportionately from each participant where relevant.

## Transparency and coherence

Transparency can be measured by the extent to which each stage of the research process has been described. In order to increase the transparency of this research, an audit trail was produced at each stage of the analysis, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009), so that the themes generated can be tracked back to the original data. This was done electronically using Microsoft Office Word 2007. Regular supervision with a university tutor and with my professional supervisor within the Educational Psychology Service

has been invaluable throughout the research process in ensuring that transparency has been maintained. Similarly, a colleague who completed her IPA research last year has also provided her support as a 'critical friend'.

Coherence is demonstrated in the write-up of the thesis which aims to adhere to the principles which underpin IPA. The reader's role is, therefore, to try to make sense of the researcher trying to make sense of the experiences described by the participants.

**Impact and importance**

Yardley suggests that the real validity of a piece of research is whether it has something important, interesting or useful to say. It is hoped that this research will fulfil all three suggestions and all four principles.

**Reflexivity**

Having considered the principles by which this research might be judged, my reflexive position will now be considered so that the influence I may have on this work can be better understood.

As described above, the researcher occupies a central position within IPA research. Therefore, in order to enhance the credibility of this study, some of the more salient and relevant aspects of my experiences, beliefs and attitudes will be described in order to assist the reader to gain some understanding of the interpretative stance that was adopted during the gathering and analysis of data. Langdridge (2007) describes reflexivity as:

the term for the process in which researchers are conscious of and reflective about the ways in which their questions, methods and very own subject position ... might impact on the psychological knowledge produced in a research study.

(p.58-59).

This research has clearly been guided by a qualitative paradigm which I fully espouse. Prior to this, I had only ever conducted quantitative research which I considered to be more 'scientific'. However, while completing some research for a Diploma in Psychological Studies, I became more aware of the limitations of positivist approaches. I had undertaken some research with 40 pupils who were well known to me and, even though their data had been converted to numbers, I could not help but consider them as unique individuals, each with a richer story to tell than the statistical analyses. As a teacher and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator for several years, I had become very disheartened by a system in which statistics are used to measure levels of teaching and learning with seemingly little recognition of the people, particularly children with special educational needs, within that system.

As a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I have always recognised that the pupils with whom I work are the experts in their own lives and have endeavoured to elicit their views whenever possible. I am guided by a social constructionist epistemology whereby I acknowledge that an understanding of the world results from social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged (Pomerantz, 2005). IPA also endorses this view although its social constructionist perspective is closer to symbolic

interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) in that individuals are regarded as 'creative agents' who construct their social worlds through intersubjective interpretative activity, thus developing their sense of self. Ontologically, I subscribe to a relativist view which, as summarised by Willig (2001), 'questions the 'out-there-ness' of the world and it emphasizes the diversity of interpretations that can be applied to it' (p. 13).

My interest in exploring the views of young people with AS stems, firstly, from my experiences as a primary school teacher during which time I taught one pupil with AS and another with severe 'classic autism' and very little language. I am aware that, until commencing the Doctorate course, my knowledge of pupils with ASD was very much informed by the traditional understandings of autism or, in other words, the 'Triad of Impairments' (Wing, 1996). Although I no longer view individuals with ASD through this narrow, limiting and pathologising lens, my past understanding may influence some of the interpretations made in this study. Furthermore, I have more recently been a teacher rather than a pupil and my perspective of secondary school experiences may be influenced by my role as a teacher.

As a mother of two 'typical' children, I am aware of the difficulties faced by *all* children, particularly on transition to secondary school and during the ensuing years of adolescence. However, I have no experience of parenting a child with AS although I do not feel that this is a necessary requirement for an IPA study; indeed, it may help to reduce any preconceptions of autism that I may have already formed as a teacher.

With specific reference to IPA and with particular reference to the interpretative element of this approach, as a practising Catholic and, as part of my remit as a primary school teacher, an ex-teacher of Catholic Religious Education, I am familiar with the necessity of adopting a hermeneutic approach to Scripture when imparting my faith and understanding of Biblical teaching. Although the Bible is an historical text and the data in this study is contemporary, I feel that I have the necessary 'frame of mind' for using IPA to its full potential. Furthermore, having studied French, Spanish, Russian and Latin, much of my education was spent translating and (particularly in the case of Latin) interpreting texts in order to try to gain proximity to authors' intended meanings.

As a past teacher, a future Educational Psychologist and a parent, my desire has always been to promote optimum outcomes for all children and young people. This can only be achieved by listening to what those young people have to say, not least because "insider' accounts may provide professionals with a valuable source of information when creating services and developing practices' (Billington, 2006b, p.2). Reflexivity has been a fundamental aspect of this entire process as a reflective research diary has been used from the very beginning so that my thoughts and feelings about the research, from planning to analysis, could be recorded.

## Section D: The Research Process

**Participant Selection**

IPA has an idiographic perspective and 'its primary concern ... is a detailed account of individual experience' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51), a small sample size of 4 pupils was employed. The sample was homogeneous according to age, gender, type of current educational setting, a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome (or high-functioning ASD) and an ability to articulate thoughts about past experiences. It was necessary to include only pupils in mainstream schools as concerns had been expressed within the Local Authority that to stipulate pupils who had been excluded and were currently placed in special schools (as had been my original intention) might cast a negative light on the LA. The sampling criteria, therefore, included pupils who were currently educated in mainstream schools. The purpose of selecting a homogeneous sample ensured that psychological variability among the participants could be identified through analysing patterns of convergence and divergence (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were thus selected purposively, as is consistent with qualitative approaches. I had originally hoped that my colleagues in the Educational Psychology Service would be able to recommend pupils known to them who met the purposive sampling criteria (Table 1); however, this proved to be difficult as they tended to work with these pupils only at the time of diagnosis or transition to Key Stage 3 and the individuals whom they recommended to me tended to be younger.

**Table 1: Purposive Sampling Criteria for Participants**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Age:** | 15 to 17 years (Key Stage 4) |
| **Gender:** | Male |
| **Educational Setting:** | Mainstream Secondary School |
| **Diagnosis:** | Asperger Syndrome / ASD (high-functioning) |
| **Statement of SEN:** | ASD |

I was then provided with access to a database on which were listed all pupils with statements of special educational needs. However, among those with ASD, no indication was given as to their level of 'functioning'. I was able to identify 17 pupils of the selected age, setting and gender. I then contacted a Specialist Teacher for ASD within the county's Inclusion Service. After lengthy discussions, she was able to identify only three students known to her whom she felt met the sampling criteria. At this stage, I was reluctant to study any files held by the EPS as I wanted to maintain an 'open-mind' before interviewing those who were selected. The fourth participant was recommended to me by a Specialist Senior Educational Psychologist for ASD who had worked with him extensively when he was younger.

---

*Reflection*

*In the sampling criteria, I had included pupils who were between the ages of 15 and 17 as I felt that their experiences of school would be greater than for younger pupils who have not experienced transition to high school, and that their accounts would, therefore, be richer. This was confirmed by the Pilot Study in which a younger pupil (and his mother) was interviewed (see p. 53) Males were chosen as boys with ASD who have fewer intellectual impairments outnumber girls by 6 to 1 (Klin, 2006).*

---

## Section E: Ethical Considerations

In planning this research, ethical issues were considered according to guidelines provided by the British Psychological Society's ethical code of practice. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Review Panel of the School of Education on 18th May 2010 (Appendix 1).

### Informed Consent

The parents of each participant were sent a letter (Appendix 2) in which I introduced myself and expressed my interest in involving their son in my research. I also provided a date and time when I would contact them by telephone to ask whether they were willing to give permission for their son to participate. Along with the letter, an Information Sheet was also sent which provided further details about the research and what would be expected of their sons should they wish to take part (Appendix 3). At the times indicated on each letter, I telephoned all parents. All of them expressed their enthusiasm about the research and, having discussed it with their sons, they all gave their verbal consent. The participants themselves were then sent a letter in which their willingness to participate was requested (Appendix 4) and they were also sent a copy of the Information Sheet (Appendix 3) and copies of consent forms to be signed on the day of the interview (Appendix 5).

### Protection, Well-Being and the Right to Withdraw

Each participant and their parents were provided with the contact details of my university research supervisor should they have felt the need to make any complaint. At the time of the interviews, they were reminded that they

could withdraw at any point and I ensured that they did not feel coerced in any way into saying or doing anything that they were not comfortable with. Each participant was assured that their involvement was valued and that their views were respected. Had any participant wished to withdraw from the study, having already provided personal information, then they were informed that their data will be destroyed unless the analysis has already been completed. This was made clear to participants and their parents prior to their consent being given.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Participants were informed that their confidentiality could be assured, as far as possible, by means of anonymising their identities. They were also assured that any relevant personal information would also be anonymised in any form of dissemination of the study. They were informed that the research will form the basis of my thesis and that it may be published in an academic journal. Data was written with the names of staff, schools and settings anonymised, including the county wherein they are situated. Prior to obtaining their consent, participants and parents were advised that the maintenance of confidentiality could not be guaranteed with absolute certainty as personal information in the form of transcripts were likely to be discussed with my supervisor during or after the stages of analysis. However, names would not be used during these discussions.

## Section F: Data Collection and Analysis

**Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted, primarily in order to assess whether the open-ended questions I had prepared for the semi-structured interviews were appropriate. I was also interested in having an opportunity to use IPA on extracts from the transcripts. Because of the very limited time available to me for conducting this pilot, I decided to enlist the help of a mother whom I had met recently through working with her son. At the time of the Pilot Study in February 2010, I had intended to interview mothers as well as sons, and did so, although after some consideration, and after discussions with university peers and tutors at the time of presenting my Research Proposal in March 2010, I decided to focus solely on pupils' accounts for this research as it is the 'insider', pupil perspective that this study was seeking to elicit.

Having gained written consent from his mother, her older son also participated in the pilot study. He is a 9 year old pupil in Year 4 who was also happy and confident about answering my questions. When talking to him, I found that it was necessary to be far more flexible with my questions and more responsive to what he was saying, particularly as he was very keen to talk only about a school trip to London in answer to most of my questions. Therefore, the interview scheduled presented in Table 2 (p. 56) was used far more flexibly than I had initially anticipated during the main research data-gathering process. I also realised that his experience of school was limited to his present school which he had attended since being in the Reception class. In the light of this, the research question was changed to one in which the

focus was on the experiences of older pupils who have experienced transition from primary to secondary school and who have either completed, or almost completed their secondary school education.

The Pilot Study also gave me the opportunity to practise using IPA on a small extract taken from my interview with the mother. At first, I found it very difficult to focus only on the descriptive comments and seemed to be trying to identify emergent themes before attempting to capture the 'essence' of the account. It was only through using a process of deconstruction, by reading parts of the transcript in reverse, that I was able fully engage with what had been said. At this time, I had only just started to consider the philosophical bases of IPA although I was aware of the need to bracket my preconceptions and was surprised that I was able to do this to a certain extent. The pilot study also gave me some indication as to the amount of time that will be needed to analyse a much larger amount of data.

**Data Collection**

The data used for this study is in the form of verbatim transcripts of participants' accounts of their educational experiences. IPA requires 'rich data' which is derived from participants having been 'granted an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express concerns at some length' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used in order to facilitate participants to tell their stories. The questions used during the interviews were trialled during the Pilot Study and were considered to be open enough to facilitate a 'natural' conversation. They were also discussed by my peers at university at

the time of presenting my Research Proposal. The interview schedule is presented in Table 2 and was designed to be used flexibly so that an attentive focus on the participant's world could be adopted.

In this way, questions could be asked in a different sequence if contextually appropriate. Similarly, additional questions were asked during each interview in response to the information provided by each one. In this way, 'the respondents can be perceived as the experiential expert on the subject and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell their own story' (Smith and Osborn, 2003, p. 59).

**Table 2: Interview Schedule**

- Do you remember your first day at primary school? Can you tell me about it?

- Which class / year did you enjoy most? What was good about it?

- Was there a time when you didn't enjoy school?

- Tell me about your present school *(Teachers, friends, other pupils, lessons)*

- What do you like best? How does it make you feel?

- What do you like least? How does that make you feel?

- In which lessons do you learn the most? What is it that helps you to learn?

- In which lessons do you find it hard to learn? What prevents you from learning?

- Can you describe the ideal lesson?

- Can you describe the ideal teacher?

- Can you tell me what your ideal school would look like?

  *Mainstream or Special?*

> **Reflection**
>
> *I was reluctant to add too many prompts to the interview questions as I knew I would be able to respond better to what I was listening to if I did not have a detailed 'script' to follow.*

Participants were interviewed in their own homes and interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone. Recordings were then saved on a CD which was kept in a locked drawer in my home. Interview data was subsequently transcribed verbatim onto a Microsoft Word document. Because the aim was to interpret the content of verbal accounts, it was not necessary to transcribe prosodic aspects, although some features (e.g. pauses, laughter) were included.

**Data Analysis**

Although there is no single prescribed method of data analysis for IPA, that suggested by Smith et al. (2009) was used which involves five main stages, as displayed in Figure 1, each of which will be described below. It is iterative and inductive in that it moves from the descriptive to the interpretative and ultimately ends with an account of how I interpret how each participant interprets their experiences, thus involving a double hermeneutic. Throughout the entire process, a reflective diary was used to record my thoughts and feelings.
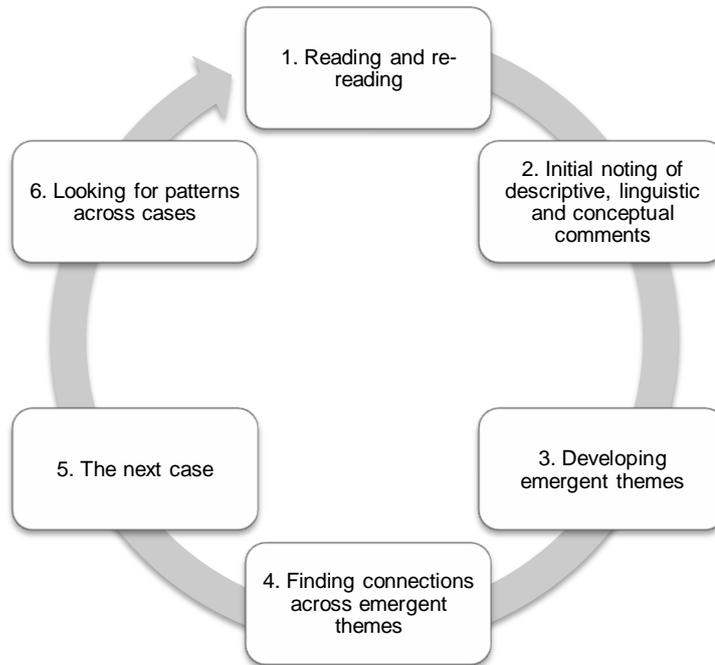
**Figure 1: The stages of data analysis in IPA**

## Stage 1. Reading and re-reading

Because the participant is the focus of analysis, the first stage of IPA is immersion in the data involving an active engagement with the transcript through repeated listening to the audio recordings and a close reading of each transcript in turn. Initial observations were sometimes noted and bracketed off for later scrutiny if appropriate.

## Stage 2. Initial noting

This stage was the most detailed and time-consuming part of the analysis. It involved an exploratory examination of the text in order to identify semantic and linguistic content. An open mind was required and anything of interest was noted. It was necessary to engage with each line of the transcript and,

overall, it was then possible to begin to identify similarities, differences and contradictions within the account. These exploratory comments were descriptive, linguistic and conceptual, the latter being more interpretative in nature.

**Stage 3. Developing emergent themes**

An analysis of the exploratory comments made in the previous stage led to the identification of emergent themes. Rather than working with the original transcript, the initial notes were used in order to reduce the amount of detail. Such themes are intended to reflect the psychological essence of the data and are both grounded and conceptual. Although they pertain to a particular part of the text, they were also influenced by the content of the whole text. This process is reflective of the iterative nature of IPA and relates to the concept of the hermeneutic circle in which the part and the whole can only be interpreted in relation to one another. An example of the first three stages of analysis is provided in Appendix 6.

**Stage 4. Finding connections across emergent themes**

Once a set of chronological themes had been established for each transcript, the way in which they fit together was then considered. (An example of part of a chronological list of emergent themes is provided in Appendix 7). The list of themes was then cut up and placed on a large surface in order to make it easier to find patterns and connections between the themes (Appendix 8). By identifying thematic patterns in this way, several 'super-ordinate' themes were generated where two or more similar themes were grouped together and, if necessary, were re-named.

**Stage 5. The next case**

The process described above was then repeated for the other three cases. I found it necessary to try to bracket the ideas that had emerged from the first analysis in order that I could adopt an idiographic perspective and to attempt to eliminate any *a priori* assumptions that I may have held based on my interpretation of the previous transcripts.

**Stage 6. Looking for patterns across cases**

Once all the transcripts had been analysed, it was then possible to identify any connections across all cases. Although each case had unique qualities, they also shared some common features. Indeed, as Smith et al. (2009) claim, 'some of the best IPA has this dual quality – pointing to ways in which participants represent unique idiosyncratic instances but also shared higher order qualities' (p. 101). At this point, the amount of data was very large. Appendix 9 shows a master table of sub-ordinate and super-ordinate themes for the group. Finally, extracts that were pertinent to each sub-ordinate theme were pasted electronically onto a table (Appendix 10) with page and line numbers to accompany them, grouped according to super-ordinate themes.

# Chapter 3: Interpretative Account of the Analysis

*No two Aspergers people are the same, that's for certain.*

(Neil, 107-108)

This chapter will present an interpretative account of the phenomenological analysis that was undertaken in order to answer the research question, *'How do Key Stage 4 pupils with Asperger syndrome in mainstream schools view their educational experiences?'* and it will include extracts from all participants[8] (Appendix 9).

Langdridge (2007) recommends that a 'mini-biography' of each participant is provided which will enable the reader to inspect the homogeneity of the participants as well as providing further background information pertaining to the educational experiences of each individual from a professionals' perspective. Because of word count restraints, these biographies are presented in Appendix 10. However, 'micro-biographies' have been included below as a means of presenting relevant details about each participant (Figure 2) prior to presenting the results of the analysis.

---

[8] The iterative nature of IPA means that some extracts are taken directly from participants' interview transcripts and, therefore not all extracts are included in those provided in Appendix 9.

**Figure 2: 'Micro-biographies' of each participant.**

---

**NEIL**

*"I had never had the belief that I would make it to the end of secondary school."*

**Age:** 16:10

**Age at diagnosis:** 7

**Statement:** BESD; later amended to ASD

**Educational History:** Mainstream primary school, Pupil Referral Unit, special school for BESD, independent special school for ASD, mainstream high school

**Reason for initial EP involvement:** Concerns about his 'extreme behavioural problems'. He was also described as having rigidity of thought, aggression and an intense interest in some subjects, particularly space and skeletons. His 'extreme behavioural problems' were exhibited by his hitting and kicking members of staff (including the Head Teacher) seemingly in response to simple requests (Year 1).

---

**LEE**

*"I get scared round other people."*

**Age:** 14:11 (just completed Y10)

**Age at diagnosis:** 8

**Statement:** ASD

**Educational History:** Two mainstream primary schools, mainstream high school

**Reason for initial EP involvement:** Concerns expressed about his violent behaviour, his dislike of change or of intrusion into 'his world', his need for lots of reassurance and his 'deep, lengthy' conversations. He was also described as having several strengths which included excellent logic skills, an astute understanding of maths, particularly mental calculations, and his memory was 'excellent' in that he needed to be given information only once (Year 4).

---

**MARK**

***"I just walked around in circles around the school."***

**Age:** 16:1

**Age at diagnosis:** 7

**Statement:** SLCN / BESD; later amended to include ASD

**Educational History:** Nursery, mainstream primary school, Pupil Referral Unit, mainstream high school

**Additional Information:** Speech and Language Therapy from age of 4

**Reason for initial EP involvement:** Concerns about several 'unusual' behaviours which included nonsensical talk, physical aggression such as biting, hitting and throwing toys and appearing to be excited for no apparent reason or screaming or shaking his head while speaking to himself (Nursery, aged 3).

---

**JOHN**

***"Then I got in a group and I got happy when I was there."***

**Age:** 16

**Age at diagnosis:** 3

**Statement:** ASD

**Educational History:** Nursery, mainstream primary school, mainstream high school

**Additional Information:** Speech and Language Therapy from age of 2 ½

**Reason for initial EP involvement:** Concerns about his tendency to throw toys on the floor if they did not interest him, and to have 'tantrums' in response requests from adults. He liked to 'set his own agenda' and the development of flexibility of thinking and his imaginative play was delayed. He also had difficulties with attention skills and his cognitive abilities were in the low range (Nursery, aged 3).

> **Reflection**
>
> *In order to enable me to analyse the transcripts without (or with fewer) a priori assumptions, the information contained in the EPS files was not examined until the interpretative analysis had been fully completed. However, in many ways I feel that had I had further knowledge of each participant before interviewing them, my questions may have been able to elicit richer accounts of their experiences, even though a greater degree of 'bracketing' would have been required. The interpretative analysis is, therefore, based solely on the information provided within the transcripts.*

## Interpretative Analysis

From the analysis of interview transcripts[9], three super-ordinate themes were identified: Views Related to Self, Views Related to Others and Views Related to the Educational Context. An account of each theme is presented below organised into sub-headings of contributing sub-ordinate themes. It should be noted that Neil's interview was the lengthiest and John's the shortest. This is reflected throughout this chapter with greater reference being made to Neil's contribution than to the others. This should not be taken as an opinion related to the value or quality of any of the information provided: it is simply that more information was provided by Neil and his ability to articulate his thoughts clearly and succinctly was very advanced. This will be discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5.

## Views Related to Self

Figure 3, presented below, shows the sub-ordinate themes derived from each participant's transcript, grouped together to form the super-ordinate theme *Views Related to Self.*

---

[9] The original transcript from Neil's interview is presented in Appendix 11.

### *Self as a Learner*

It appears that, to a varying extent, each participant's experiences of school has enabled them to develop a perception of themselves as learners. For example, Lee states:

> my grades aren't brilliant in any one subject, I'm not particularly intelligent at all ... I don't enormously excel at anything.

(150-151; 157)[10]
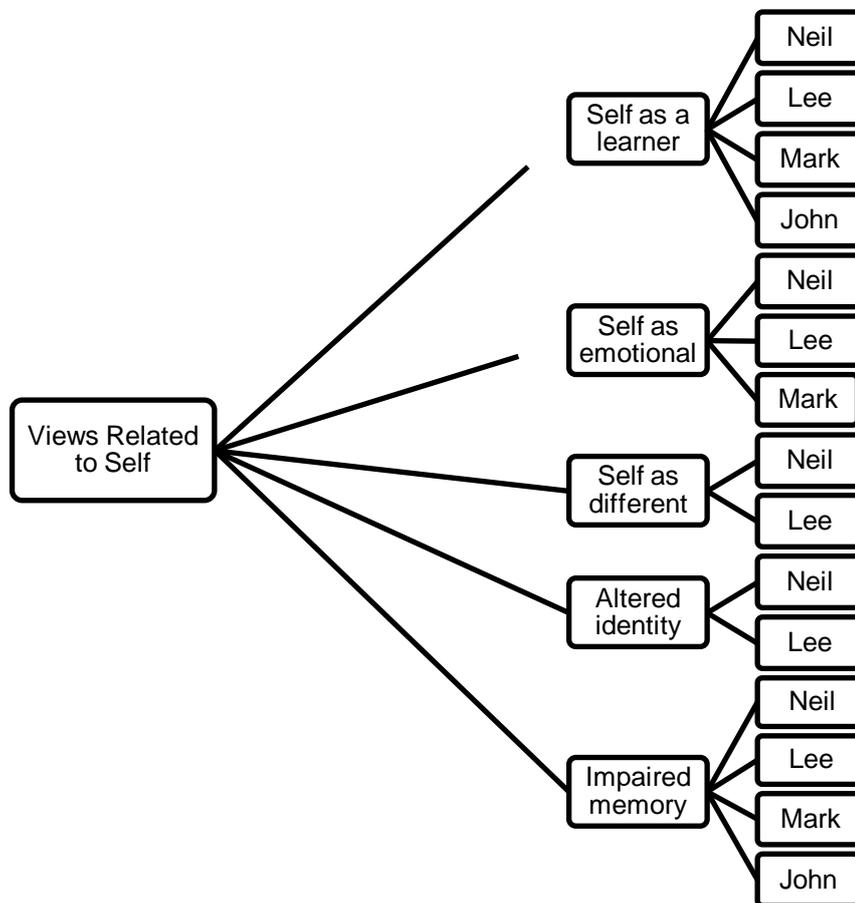


**Figure 3: Diagram to show sub-ordinate themes derived from each participant which contribute to the super-ordinate theme, *Views Related to Self***

---

[10] Numbers refer to line numbers in each transcript

However, it seems that he excels when "messing around on computers ... making programmes" (18-19). Computer programming is an advanced skill and may not be within the capabilities of many young people of 16. Mark, a "kinaesthetic learner" (192), expresses a preference for using a computer (81) and seems to regard it as something that is very important to him:

> I must say I like ICT; it has been my life's work really, and I really do like ICT.

> (29-30)

His repetition of his liking of ICT possibly emphasises its importance for him, and describing it as his 'life's work' seems to suggest that he has devoted a lot of time to this pursuit. Indeed, a description such as this appears to be an unusual one for a person of his age, and I feel that it is perhaps Mark's way of expressing the magnitude of his feelings towards ICT. It also suggests that ICT is as much a hobby as an academic subject. These strong feelings could also be a result of the dislike that he has of handwriting, which he claims is "a disgrace" (80) and which has led him to equate more formal lessons with being more difficult:

> Harder lessons are more like theory, er sometimes er mostly like writing up reports for English.

> (71-72)

When questioned further about why he finds handwriting difficult, he explained:

> I've just not been able to fully grasp handwriting really. I haven't been able to learn how to handwrite really well. But I have been given multiple learning sheets, but it's done nothing for me really.
>
> (91-94)

Mark seems to have acknowledged that handwriting is a skill that he just cannot acquire, despite having been provided with a great many, or 'multiple' opportunities to practise. His use of the verb 'grasp' is a semantically appropriate one, even though I suspect it was used without conscious consideration.

Perhaps Mark's preference for practical lessons, which "got you away from heads down in books all day" (197-198), is directly related to his handwriting difficulties. It certainly seems to suit his preferred learning style:

> I definitely can remember every single one of my practicals in comparison to theory. Which I can't remember as much but it stays in there, but I definitely know my practicals more than I do my theories.
>
> (186-190)

In contrast, when Lee was asked to describe the sort of lesson in which he learns best, he expressed a preference for lessons in which writing is a main component:

> Something that's basically just writing down, them telling me what I need to do and then doing it ... just me sitting down and writing the answers to questions. Something like maths ... .
> (170-173)

Lee further explained that maths is a preferred subject because "it doesn't differentiate or change. It's just mathematics, end of." (218-219). The use of 'end of' implies that this argument can be taken no further and perhaps reflects the nature of mathematics itself in that it is a logical subject in which

answers are static and either right or wrong, with less inferential skills needed for finding answers. By describing it as a subject that does not 'differentiate' suggests how much he values, or even needs, the predictability that this offers when compared with subjects requiring greater interpretation.

Neil also appears to have positive views about maths because of having experienced well-taught lessons:

> One subject that I enjoyed doing and had a bit of a knack for from the start was maths. And the teacher that I had for most of the time I was at Breckfield was Mr Carrol, and he was fantastic, in a word, at what he did.
>
> (176-180)

When questioned later about what an ideal lesson would be like, Neil further described his views towards his maths teacher by stating:

> There's no sort of like one lesson that you can sort of like copy and paste and erm that would be right for every single subject in every single lesson ... but in general, erm my ideal lesson would be with a teacher who's got a nice ... a good attitude towards the students, I'll use Mr. Carrol as an example because all the time he was with me, teaching me, he never gave a bad maths lesson. He said from the beginning that he would not shout at the pupils, but also that if they did not want to listen, then they would be quiet so they wouldn't interrupt other people. His attitude was if you didn't want to learn, then that is your problem, and you'll eventually sort of like pay the price for that. And although that sounds like quite a full-on attitude to be telling his pupils at the beginning of the year, it stuck, and a lot of pupils in our class got very high grades. We were all expected 'A's or 'A*'s in our set.
>
> (348-363)

For Neil, because there is no transferable model lesson, the best lessons seem to be dependent on the teacher and how the teacher views his or her

students. He also appears to value the explicitly stated rules and boundaries of the lesson, as well as the clear expectations of the teacher. It seems that Mr Carrol empowered his students to make their own choices about whether or not they engaged with lessons and Neil regards this as a "full-on" attitude. The "price" for making the wrong choice is failure. The positive influences of teachers will be discussed further when factors relating to the educational context are considered.

Failure, as perceived by Neil, is a dominant theme throughout his interview and he seems to attach a great deal of importance to academic and personal attainment. As the following extract demonstrates, Neil draws an analogy with physical pain to describe the profound effects of not having achieved his best:

> If I was at the SATs level, and I got that wrong, it really would have seared deeply.

(293-294)

This implies that, for Neil, to have erred is to have been wounded in a way that might be commensurate with being burned or branded. Such an injury would leave a life-long scar; this metaphor illustrates the significance of the effect that being wrong might have on Neil. He again alludes to the 'depth' of his feelings of personal failure by stating:

> It just felt that like there was so *very* little that I was doing right. It felt like, erm it felt like that whenever I got a question wrong, it was a deep failure for me

(282-284)

'Deep failure' can again be equated with a deep wound or searing pain. This contrasts with John's straightforward comment regarding his failure to achieve an expected grade:

> When I got my exam results in English I was really upset 'cause I got a G. ... I was expecting a D at least.
>
> (108-109; 111)

Had John had similar verbal skills to those of Neil, perhaps he too would have described the effect of his lower grade as being more devastating than he was able to articulate. However, like John, Neil also seems to suggest that he is aware of his own capabilities and that his attempts at striving to improve his work helped him to know his own potential:

> it *[in-class support]* allowed me to look at my own work and think, right this can be better, that can be better, how can I tackle that. In a way, it helped me to sort of like become a lot more aware of what I was capable of.
>
> (243-247)

Indeed, Neil seemed highly motivated to achieve, as suggested by his comment: 'nothing was going to stop me from achieving what I wanted' (80-81).

All four participants appear to have experienced high levels of pressure whilst at school. For Lee, a lack of explicit and clear instructions from teachers causes him to 'get really confused' (304):

> it's just er very stressing when someone asks me to do something that I don't understand. You know, if people aren't clear, if they aren't er very, very direct, just point at something and say, "Do that," like I have no idea what they're talking about.
>
> (97-102)

Mark also seems to have needed greater clarity with regard to interpreting questions in English; 'I needed guidance because I don't understand some of the questions' (148-149) and, even more so in Maths as 'some of the algebra in there just drove me bonkers' (150-151). Neil identifies the necessity of clear explanations delivered individually, from which he appears to have benefited, at least from the teacher he describes as 'fantastic' (179):

> the one thing that we tend to pick up on very well is one-on-one sort of like attitudes. For example, if I asked Mr. Carrol for help for Maths, he would go straight over it, and explain in detail each little bit, so that it all sort of like slotted in well and it would really stick in my mind because I'd know that he was explaining this to me and I would remember every little detail.
>
> (512-518)

Neil's use of the pronoun 'we' seems to demonstrate his desire to inform me of the phenomenon under investigation, not just from his perspective, but also on behalf of others with AS. John describes his inability to keep up with a lesson as being "horrible" without one-to-one support:

> It was horrible. At one time in science, not science, somewhere, he told me to write it down, but he was too quick, when I was about to finish it, he rubbed it off and I couldn't remember what.
>
> (207-211)

It seems clear that the lesson is not as important as the feelings that John has when recalling this experience. Indeed, during the interview, this comment was made with some emotion, with much emphasis applied to the adjective 'horrible', suggesting that John is still affected by this memory. It may be possible that John, like Mark, also has difficulties with handwriting and the speed with which he was expected to record his work may have been an unrealistic expectation on the teacher's part.

Another pressure identified by Neil and Mark was related to their exams. Neil's apparent desire for perfection in all tasks, and perhaps even more so in his GCSEs, appears to have placed him under some stress and caused him to be in a 'baddish mood' (156):

> I found out that one of my science tests was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I didn't manage to finish it all, I got to the last question and then I ran out of time. I know it might sound silly to some people, but just knowing that I hadn't been able to get everything done leaves me feeling like there's just something incomplete.
>
> (157-162)

It is interesting that Neil acknowledges that other people may not consider his failure to complete an exam as something that might worry them as much as it does him; this suggests that he acknowledges his individuality or perhaps even his differentness. Mark seems to recognise the importance of exam success and, despite a lot of preparation, like Neil, he still found exams unexpectedly difficult. The most difficult year he experienced at school was Year 11 for the following reasons:

> Probably 'cause the shock of just the exams. You only get a couple of shots at life to do, if you don't do it right the first couple of times then really there isn't much you can do about it. So I just piled on a lot of things, you've got to do lots of revision, you've got to have to do lots of homework, and with that, revision.
>
> (176-181)

His preparations appear to have placed him under great pressure which he 'piled on' himself. This metaphor is also repeated when he discusses times when he didn't enjoy school: 'sometimes I've had *piles* of homework, and it's just so stressful to get through. Absolutely piles' (54-55). This presents an image of Mark being overwhelmed by the physical amount of work he had to

complete, perhaps feeling trapped or hemmed in by the metaphorical 'piles' to which he refers.

While Mark describes ICT as his 'life's work' and Lee likes making computer programmes, Neil considers Art to be extremely important. In fact, its importance to him is so great that he was concerned that taking it as a GCSE subject might prove to be a mistake:

> Art was something that was very close to me, so that obviously when I took that, I was quite worried that it was going to be sort of like something stressful that would eventually break me.
>
> (201-204)

When asked to explain what he meant by 'break' him, he seemed to be saying that Art is a means by which he can express his innermost feelings and memories, perhaps as a therapeutic activity, and, because of the personal nature of artistic expressions of this kind, his disclosures may make him vulnerable:

> I put it down into how I feel at that moment, and then on it goes, it's like a lasting impression, so it's bringing up those parts of me that I might have either forgotten or I can still feel inside me.
>
> (223-226)

He later reveals that his worries about opting for Art were also related to his dislike of criticism as well as his desire to achieve perfection:

> the worry I had with art, is that at the beginning of it, I was very, very resistant to criticism, because I always wanted to do my best, so finishing a piece of art work, or thinking that I'd finished it, and then someone telling me that I still had to continue further with it was quite tough.
>
> (232-236)

It is likely that, for a perfectionist, to have his work criticised, particularly when it is so personally meaningful and so emotionally expressive, is something very difficult to accept. It is also likely to have a considerable impact on self-esteem and motivation levels. For Neil, perhaps this is what he means by being 'broken'.

> **Reflection**
>
> *As I record this interpretative account of the analysis, I am aware that many of the sub-ordinate themes are inter-connected. This means that, for example, the above extracts which illustrate Neil's passion for Art could have been referred to under the sub-heading 'Self as Emotional'. However, other extracts seemed to address this more explicitly and, as the above were related to his choice of GCSE subjects, I have included them here as they are relevant to his knowledge of himself as a learner. I suspect that this is an example of being within the hermeneutic circle. Will I ever get out?*

### Self as Emotional

The phenomenon under investigation, the views of the participants within the educational setting, indicates that some memories related to their experiences are very distressing. Lee 'over-reacted all the time and was very emotional' (49-50) and he appears to have had to suppress his emotions in order to cope at high school:

> all these emotions I've been suppressing in all this time suddenly burst out and er find a way out.

> (304-306)

It seems that his emotions were so strong that, as a coping strategy, the suppression of feelings was ineffective:

> Crying once, I once burst into tears in class for absolutely no reason ... I burst into tears again, a few more times during the day and then I went home.
>
> (78-79; 84-85)

The use of the verb *burst* is evocative of an involuntary release of intense pressure and this seems to illustrate well the attempts made by Lee to control his emotions even though at times he failed. When asked what had triggered this, he replied, 'it was all just emotional problems' (87-88).

Whereas Lee describes the expression or suppression of his emotions, Neil attempts to articulate the extent of his feelings, whether they be internalised or externalised:

> In primary school ... I was looking at myself, and almost wanting to spit at myself. I'd really gotten to a level of self-hatred that I honestly erm ... I can't even put it into words how much I'd begun to hate myself at that point.
>
> (310-316)

It seems that Neil's self-hatred is perhaps related to feelings of remorse as he was referring to an incident at school when he describes himself as 'almost out of control at some points' (299). He also recalls 'an incident where [he'd] thrown a chair across the room' (300) and a time when he'd 'accidently blacked a teacher's eye' (306). These incidents occurred during his time at primary school when he seemed to encounter great difficulties managing his emotions:

> through primary school, it just felt harder, every step forward felt like I'd been put backwards again.
>
> (317-318)

At high school, Neil continued to externalise his emotions through the commission of aggressive assaults on those who bullied him. He describes these incidents graphically and without much attempt to justify them other than to comment, 'I'd literally had enough of him and I snapped' (619):

> I ran up straight behind him and just as he was turning round I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and slammed him head first straight into the technology room wall. Straight after that I just went on with fists clenched getting him at the head, anywhere that I knew would hurt him.

> (624-629)

Neil seems to have been motivated by extreme anger and a desire to administer pain to the other pupil. It seems that Neil had tolerated being bullied for some time and perhaps wanted to inflict the same level of pain that he had experienced as a victim of bullying. However, afterwards, Neil appears to have been shocked by his actions and experienced some remorse for what he had done, saying, 'I was scared myself. ... I didn't mean to start a fight, I didn't want to hurt anyone, which is true; I didn't want to hurt him' (639; 641-642). This contradiction seems to suggest that Neil was guided by his emotions and that his self-control did indeed 'snap'. He seems to be asking to be believed by his repetition of his desire not to have hurt anyone. However, Neil also describes a second incident when his anger was directed towards a second boy who had bullied him:

> while he was laughing, I did the only thing I could think of at that point which was to just get up while he was looking the other way, and smack, and get him right across the jaw

> (719-722)

Unlike the feelings of remorse he seemed to experience following the first incident, he seems to be able to justify this second act by implying that the assault was deserved: 'I'd never want to get someone innocent' (732).

In contrast with the extreme extent of the emotionally motivated behaviours described by both Lee and Neil, Mark describes a 'terrible' event which he recalled when asked to describe a time when he didn't enjoy school:

> I went away with school to Italy as a geography trip, and the first day there we didn't eat or anything until about roughly 11 o'clock, and we hadn't eaten anything since like 5. And I just had terrible, terrible home sickness, and I was er constantly texting my mum I wanted to go home. So that was just terrible.

> (47-52)

Although his memory seems to focus primarily on food, it may be that his 'terrible, terrible homesickness' was caused by his being in an unfamiliar environment away from his usual routines. A prevalent theme throughout Mark's interview is the importance he seems to place on his surroundings; when describing his high school he said, '[it was] well laid out, easy to get round. I mean I learnt, I used to struggle learning places' (98-99), and this may partly account for the emotional effects of his being away from home.

John was unable to recall any instances of unhappiness or distress stating, 'I don't think there is much bad memories' (55-56). However, when asked whether he had ever fallen out with other people, he was able to recall the following:

> I used to make a rumour about someone who I thought that was true, about someone who shoved his penis towards me which is not very pleasant. It was true, but he says there isn't. But then it

was all sorted out which is a good thing. I was worried I was getting into trouble because he told the teacher but I wasn't.

(117-124)

This extract illustrates the possible difficulties John may have had with social interactions, which will be addressed below in greater detail. It also demonstrates how his communication skills may have affected his ability to express himself and make his feelings known. He voices his concerns about getting into trouble when it seems that he was describing an incident that had happened to him but which was possibly reported to a teacher as being a rumour. It may be that he chose to share this memory, either because it is a vivid one for him, or because it was one of many similar incidences that left him feeling upset.

> **Reflection**
>
> *I am concerned that I am unable to include as many extracts from John's interview as I can from the others. I have also felt that I have had to use a greater level of hermeneutic inquiry when considering his comments as I feel that he was less able to express his thoughts as fully as the other boys. I am also aware that some of my preconceptions about ASD and its traditional conceptualisation may have been present when considering his comments.*

### Self as Different

The participants' views of themselves as being different from others was a theme that emerged frequently from the data provided by Neil and Lee and was consequently identified as a sub-ordinate theme. Being 'different' seems to be an inherent and pervading factor within their perceptions of self. The

interpretations presented below pertain specifically to how being different from others relates to Asperger Syndrome.

Lee and Neil both use the term 'normal' as a means of comparing themselves with others. For instance, Neil says that he 'was so removed from what people thought was normal' (429-430), suggesting that what is considered to be 'normal' is a view held by others. Lee uses the term 'weird' to describe his differentness: 'I'm always the quiet one in the corner who everyone thinks is weird' (25-26). However, he also equates this with a mental condition; when asked to describe the perfect teacher, he responded:

> Just a person who knows I've got Aspergers. But doesn't overreact, doesn't tell the class, 'Hey, be careful with that kid, he's not mentally normal'.

> (204-206)

Lee seems to feel that he is supported by having the label of AS and, indeed, his diagnosis appears to have been a protective factor for him: 'it's stopped me from wondering why I'm so different' (123-124). His view that he is not 'normal' is reiterated throughout his interview with comments such as: 'we need to be with people who are normal' (253-254); 'we need to learn to cope being around normal people' (255-256) and 'we need to learn to cope with being around people who might make fun at you or ... get annoyed that you are different' (257-260). The latter comment suggests that Lee perceives 'normal' people, or people other than him, to be intolerant of difference and it is possible that some of his negative educational experiences have invoked this view. He also seems to feel that he has to adapt or 'learn to cope' rather than others being expected to change their attitudes, because. 'in the real world everybody doesn't have Aspergers' (254-255).

In contrast, Neil seems to feel that, because 'everyone with Aspergers is so different from everyone else with Aspergers' (403-404), everyone should be '[treated as] individuals rather than members of one big group' (342). When asked what primary school teachers can learn from secondary school staff, he commented:

> the biggest thing a primary teacher can learn from a secondary is to have that attitude of treating everyone as an individual

(331-332)

It seems that Neil views primary school teachers less favourably than secondary school teachers, perhaps because at primary school, 'every step forward felt like I'd been put backwards again' (317-318) for the following reason:

> she'll *[primary teacher]* treat them all as if they're some sort of mannequin with a different face painted on the front. Erm, I think the biggest thing that they can learn is to treat them all differently, knowing that they're individuals.

(336-340)

Neil's views about primary teachers suggest that he feels he should have been treated as an individual and, moreover, as a human, rather than a facsimile of a human. The implication of this analogy is that Neil's negative memories of primary school are possibly affected by the failure of his teachers to meet his unique educational needs. Indeed, he believes that this failure to be treated as an individual is 'what set me off a lot in primary school' (342-343).

*Altered Identity*

A sub-ordinate theme shared by Neil and Lee was that of transformation of identity in that both boys seems to have felt the need to present themselves as other than their natural selves. This may have been a coping strategy that they felt they had to adopt as a means of self-protection. For example, upon leaving primary school, Lee 'just stopped being emotional. [He] stopped showing emotion' (55-56). Furthermore, this seems to have been a conscious act in that he would 'concentrate on keeping a blank expression' (184) and even stopped talking in school (133-134). This may have been a strategy that he adopted in order to avoid expressing emotion, along with his tendency to '[draw] a blank expression on [his] face at school' (181-182). It seems that he was very aware of the way in which others perceived him and that the presentation of self under an altered identity became the only means by which he could cope with his differentness.

Neil seems to have actively chosen to change his identity and his appearance as a result of his own conscious decision:

> I was reinventing myself. At the end of year 7 I'd taken a look back at myself and thought, I've had enough, I don't want to be this person anymore so I'm going to change. And I changed practically everything about myself to change into the person I'd always wanted to be ... I saw myself as something I physically I wasn't, so I decided to turn that all around

> (569-574; 576-577)

Neil seems to have altered his image as a result of disliking the person that he was. He describes this metamorphosis as a reinvention of himself,

evoking the notion of him being an artefact or product. Indeed, when describing his feeling that there was 'a second version' of him 'below the surface, a version that I didn't like at that point' (62-64), he then says, 'I learned to change that other person and myself into what I wanted to be' (66-67), seeming to imply that his two selves became *'what',* as opposed to *who,* he wanted to be. Like Lee, this appears to have been a protective factor for Neil:

> I'd really found a lot more of that peace of mind than I had before... so I had a lot more resistance to it *[bullying]*
>
> (704-707).

### *Impaired Memory*

The first question asked during each interview was about the memories the participants had about their first day at school. None of them were able to fully recall their earliest educational experiences, although John was able to relate a vague memory of his first day:

> At reception I was nervous, because it was the first day in primary. The teachers were very nice, and they showed me where I sit. And showed us what to do in reception, we did nothing but play but er... Erm that's it really.
>
> (5-10)

Mark's initial response of 'Yeah- ish' (2) preceded a slightly confused recall of what seems to be his attendance at an alternative setting:

> I did at one stage, actually at school, at one stage I went to erm, think it was like half way through the day, and I went to this other place like erm, I dunno what it was called. ... I can't remember what it was called.

(8-14)

His memory is not clear and it seems unlikely that he attended another provision on his first day at school. However, his memory of his secondary school years appears to be more secure.

> **Reflection**
>
> *At the start of each interview, I was quite taken aback that their memories of their first days at school and of primary school were so impaired. It was only when I interviewed Neil that I began to suspect that their failure to recall negative life events may be a protective factor. However, it is likely that many people are unable to remember their early school days. Upon reflection, it may have been more supportive to have used visual cue cards in order to facilitate participants' understanding of the intended meaning of my questions.*

Lee is also unable to recall his time at Nursery or in his Reception class: 'frankly I can only remember, at most, year 4' (5-6) because his memories 'don't go back very far' (12). He later states, 'my memory wasn't working properly back then' (117-118) as if to suggest that his ability to recall past events has developed as he has grown older. Unlike the others, Neil is able to give an explanation as to why he has difficulty recalling his primary school years, stating that 'that was a very difficult time' (5). He describes his 'patchy' memory (45) and his earlier years at school as being 'quite hard' (47) to think about, perhaps because of having had such difficult experiences:

> To be honest it was such a stressful time that I can't remember it that well. But erm from what I can remember, I really was about as bad as a student could have got.
>
> (279-282)

Neil seems to link his poor memory with his stressful experiences which he appears to attribute to himself rather than to the situations or demands he was encountering.

**Views Related to Peers and Others**

The sub-ordinate themes derived from each transcript and which contribute to the super-ordinate theme *Views Related to Peers and Others* are presented below in Figure 4.
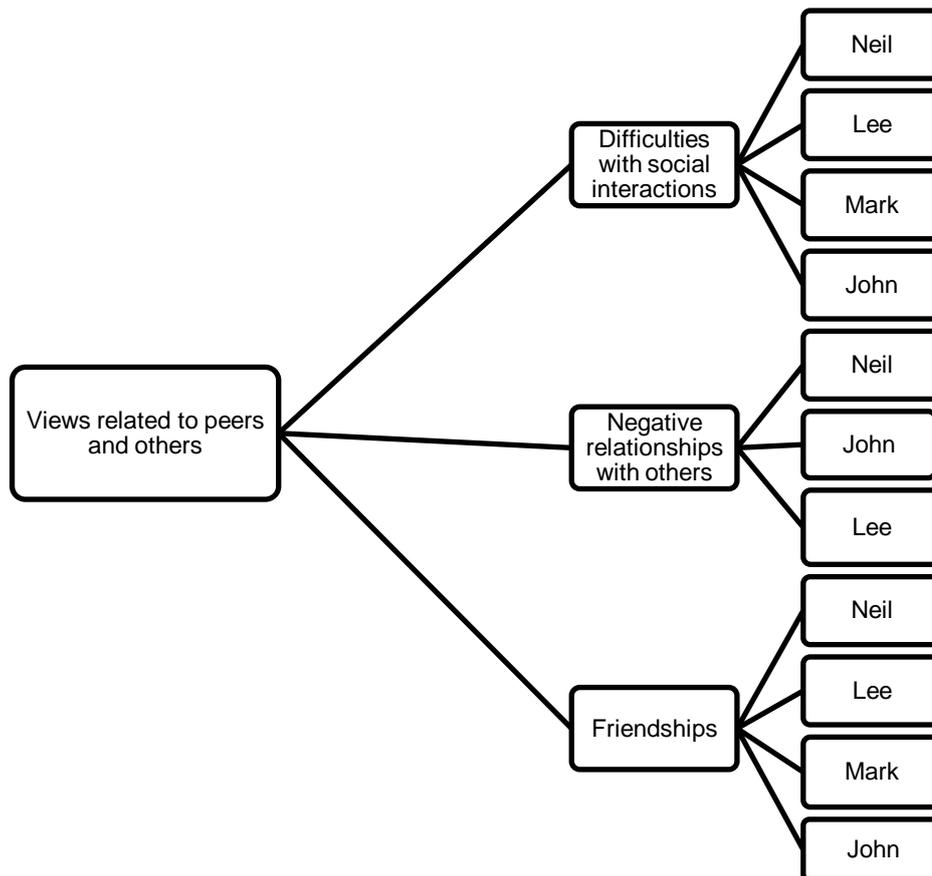


**Figure 4: Diagram to show sub-ordinate themes derived from each participant which contribute to the super-ordinate theme, *Views Related to Peers and Others*.**

*Difficulties with Social Interactions*

A common and recurring theme that emerged from the analysis of each

transcript was related to difficulties with social interactions or with social

skills. It seems that this is an area that has one of the greatest impacts on

the educational experiences of the participants and, in Neil's case, the

learning of social skills became a subject within his educational curriculum:

> this is how I learned to socially interact, because practically
> everything from body language to how I should talk to people, how
> my tone of voice changes to keep people more or less interested,
> everything that I'm using to talk to you now I probably learned
> from Poolside [School].

> (487-491)

This seems to illustrate an acknowledgement on Neil's part that every skill

required for communication was not something he naturally possessed. Even

non-verbal behaviours had to be learned:

> [They taught me} what things gave out certain impressions, and
> they'd show me how certain body language would show I'm
> relaxed, they'd show me how certain actions would give the
> impression that I'm preoccupied or not or would give the
> impression that I'm preoccupied, and, as such, that's why I'm
> generally nervous-appearing to some people.

> (495-500)

Neil is possibly 'nervous-appearing' because of the great effort he seems to

have to apply when in the company of others. Being 'preoccupied' may mean

being in a state of self-focus as Neil described going into himself (139) as a

means of dealing with his 'depression' (138). Neil may have had to learn

discretely taught social skills to enable him to function appropriately when

interacting with others. However, Lee finds the process of mixing with others

'traumatic' (212) and lessons in which 'something social' (174) is required leave him 'terrified' (176) and with unpleasant physical effects:

> Heartbeat gets faster, my heart rate increases. Get shaky, and just generally really, really scared.
>
> (178-179)

This reaction to social situations seems to indicate a feeling of panic within Lee and is similar to the analogy used by Neil, 'it's like a mental car crash with someone else' (395) to compare how he feels about working with a partner. Lee's fear of social interaction means that his least favoured lesson is PE and, rather than participate, he says, 'That's why I'm always in the corner of the pitch doing absolutely nothing. ... I don't participate' (192-196). John also shares this dislike of PE, particularly of team games:

> I'm happy when I don't play football. One thing I do not like apart from football is basketball. It's difficult to get involved with when you're as a team.
>
> (169-173)

John seems to feel that his dislike of football is a reason not to participate, suggesting that his understanding is at a literal level. He also dislikes team sports as he appears to find it challenging to co-operate or interact with other team members. By commenting that he is happy when not taking part implies that he is unhappy when he does participate.

The 'unwritten' rules of relationships with others also appear to be an area that causes John some difficulty:

> There was once someone had a fight with her, and then someone swore to her, saying words like 'shut the f*** up,' and she said, 'I dare you to say that,' and I don't. And she also denied that she calls me a Paki. (143-148)

John reported this incident quite vehemently and appeared to be shocked by it when recalling this memory. It appears that he does not understand the concept of being teased.

Mark's dislike of socialising is apparent when he describes how he spends his time during lunch breaks:

> I just wandered around. Literally went around in circles. ... I couldn't cope with anything else. I just walked around in circles around the school. ... I just didn't feel like socialising.
>
> <div align="right">(110-116)</div>

Mark seems to have adopted an effective strategy in order to reduce the possibility of his having to interact with others. However, he later contradicts himself by saying, 'having friends was dead pleasing' (231). This is an unusual way of describing friendships and it suggests that his understanding of friendship in general is atypical, particularly as lunch and break times at school are treated by most pupils as an opportunity for interacting with friends.

---

*Reflection*

*Of all four participants, Lee appears to have the greatest difficulties interacting with others. He told me, 'I get scared round other people'. Because of this, I feel greatly privileged to have been able to talk to him as the interview must have put him under immense pressure.*

---

### Negative Relationships with Others

Two participants perceived themselves to have had very negative relationships with others in that they had been bullied whilst at school. Lee, when asked to talk about any bad memories he has of school, recalls an

incident involving one of his teachers, which he describes as a 'very bad' memory (43):

> I had a teacher called Mr. Reilly, who didn't care at all about special needs in any way so, you know, because I acted differently to everyone because I sometimes got stressed, and back then I overreacted all the time and was very emotional. So, when I didn't do work right he put it up in front of the class and yelled at me. Sat me on a table with a bunch of girls so they could just watch me cry.

> (46-53)

It seems that Lee feels that he was being singled out by his teacher for being different. In his view, this teacher appears to have had no understanding of Lee's needs and, even though he acknowledges that he frequently over-reacted, possibly in an aggressive manner, he seems to feel that he was deliberately humiliated for his inability to complete his work correctly. He also appears to consider that he was the subject of the girls' attention and it is this, along with being 'yelled' at that makes the memory a 'very bad' one. Neil also considers that these two behaviours, in combination, are likely to have a negative impact on pupils with AS:

> [The ideal school] would be a place where teachers don't have to use shouting as a method of discipline because generally people with Aspergers can be a bit more sensitive than other people and shouting obviously alerts them to the fact that there's tension being done to them And that, with [a person who has Asperger syndrome], is almost as wounding as someone being like slapped, because we feel with loads of attention being drawn to us, it feels like there's that many more people having a go at us.

> (405-412)

Along with a comment Neil made earlier in his interview, that 'being shouted at, no matter what, always feels like you're on the receiving end of someone

just really having a go at you' (370-372) suggests that being shouted at has two effects: a sensory one and one that focuses the attention of others. Neil seems to equate shouting with a painful act that causes him to feel 'tension'. This play on words could be that his understanding of the word 'attention' is that it has a declensional relationship with the word 'tension'. Again, Neil alludes to the physically painful effects of these actions, with shouting and being the focus of attention having the same impact as a physical assault.

Both Lee and Neil appear to have been victims of bullying during their time at secondary school. Lee believes that, following his diagnosis of AS, a Learning Support Assistant was employed to 'protect *[him]* from bullies' (119-120), thus implying that he had experienced being bullied. Neil refers to two occasions when he was bullied:

> He'd been bullying me for a bit. ... He'd been picking on me for a bit and er at one point he just went straight by me and erm he slapped the side of my coat pocket ... I kept a large bunch of pencils and pens in that pocket because I never wanted to forget them ... And he went by me kicking all these out of my pockets and I heard some people laughing beside me.
>
> (605-618)

> He, for some reason, had decided to ... start having a crack at me ... I look at him standing over me trying to have a good laugh at me.
>
> (700-701; 712-713)

The fact that, like Lee, Neil was being laughed at on both occasions seems to be a memory that has remained with him. Perhaps, for both, this was more hurtful than any physical attack. This seems to indicate a level of sensitivity within each boy as well as a recognition of their apparent 'differentness'. For example, as referred to above, Lee said, "I acted differently to everyone,"

(48) and Neil feels that he was bullied for the same reason: "I was the odd one out. I was the most, the most useable target really" (628-629). This self-identified 'differentness' was a prevalent theme throughout Neil and Lee's interviews in particular and, as discussed above, was also one of the identified sub-ordinate themes which contributed to the super-ordinate theme 'Views Related to Self'.

*Friendships*

Friendships, either as supportive or as confusing, was a theme common to all participants. Lee seems to have found support from being able to identify with another pupil with whom he feels he shares a common understanding:

> we understand each other much better because we all have those little things that we really, really dislike and we all understand emotionally what the other person is going through. We understand why they'd obsess over one thing or why we really just don't like socialising with people, we understand each other much better
>
> (265-272)

'Understanding' one another, and the social difficulties and obsessional interests they seem to share, appears to be a central premise upon which their friendship is built as Lee also comments, 'people with Aspergers much better understand other people with Aspergers' (263-264) and 'he's a very good friend' (275). He appears to view his friend with some empathy, recognising that the challenges he faces are perhaps greater than his own:

> I understand why the emotions inside him would cause him to do those sort of things, if he's under pressure or something ... I understand emotionally what he's going through because I go through the same things he goes through, you know obviously I

> feel it less than him because I don't throw chairs across the
> classroom.

<div align="right">(286-296)</div>

Mark's views about friendship were stated bluntly, 'having friends was dead pleasing' (231), and without the depth of emotion that Lee was able to express. His comments possibly indicate a different level of understanding of what 'friendship' really means: 'I do like to blend with other people' (227-228). His use of the word 'blend' is perhaps less emotive than the more traditionally used verb *mix.* It also seems to imply a desire to engage passively in social situations and to not be noticed by others. John also appears to find friendships confusing:

> Well, there was someone called Toni, who was part my friend and
> part not, because one minute she was nice to me, the next not,
> sort of thing

<div align="right">(134-137)</div>

It may be that Toni was not a true friend to John but someone who may have teased him or made fun of him. This was also discussed above in relation to social interactions and provides another example of the inter-relationships between some of the themes.

Neil's views of friendship seem to indicate that his friends are an important part of his experiences at school as references to two friends are prevalent throughout his interview. However, his descriptions of his feeling towards them appear to suggest that it is their shared love of performing music in a band that is perhaps more important than their relationship:

> ... being with Mike and Charles, who are sort of like friends who
> play with me in this band we've got together, being able to create

> something between us, and have something that all three of us can share and work together at was such a nice feeling

> (84-89)

Neil also seems to be able to identify with his friends as they all share a common experience of having been ostracised by their peers:

> I think the best way to describe the feeling that I got from me, Mike and Charles is that all of us had been what you'd call pushed to the side a bit. Charles was more or less silent all the time, so nobody really took much notice of him, but I really just clicked with him. He's probably the closest friend I have now

> (781-787)

Because of Charles's tendency to be 'silent all the time', it appears that verbal interaction is not an important aspect of their relationship. Nevertheless, Neil values this friendship because Charles is 'undoubtedly one of the nicest guys I've ever met' (847) and has been a source of support at times of difficulty; 'in all the times when I've broken down and had upset days, he's never once let me down' (848-849). Neil's appreciation for his two friends is evident towards the end of his interview when he describes the pride he felt having performed with his friends for the whole school:

> Here we were, three misfits in mainstream secondary school, erm not many people even knew we existed for the most part, there were only a small group of people who even talked to us for the most part, but yet, at the end of the year, we could go up in front of the entire school, and give everyone a big grin and make them all clap, that to me, knowing that we've had probably the worst run of luck, but still just done the best we possibly could with it, makes me feel proud of it

> (810-818)

This seems to summarise well the feeling Neil has towards Charles and Mike and it also seems to explain clearly the basis on which their friendship is based. That all three have had 'the worst run of luck' suggests that their individual and shared experiences have been negative and is perhaps why they all share a mutual understanding of one another.

**Views Related to the Educational Context**

The third super-ordinate theme to emerge from the analysis is related to how participants view different aspects of the educational environment, including the role that teachers and adults play within that context. The sub-ordinate themes that contributed to this are presented in Figure 5 and are discussed below.
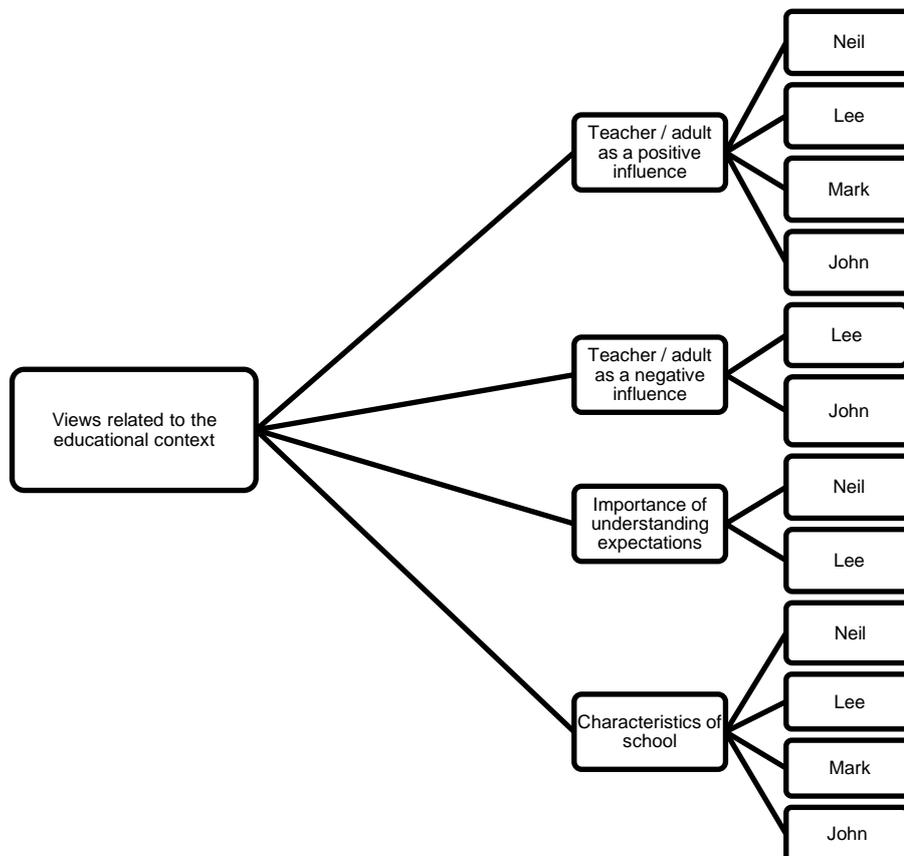


**Figure 5: Diagram to show sub-ordinate themes derived from each participant which contribute to the super-ordinate theme,** *Views Related to the Educational Context*.

### *Teacher / Adult as a Positive Influence*

Throughout Neil's interview, he spoke positively about several of his teachers or the adults who supported him. He appears to feel that the most well-regarded adults were those who took the time to get to know him as an individual: 'The biggest thing that school did to help me though, was erm they tried to learn who I was' (97-98). This perhaps refers to his teachers taking the time to ascertain exactly what his needs were although Neil seems to imply that it was necessary to get to know him, perhaps because of his individuality and his being so different from others. Indeed, when discussing a Support Assistant, he reiterates that by knowing him well, she was better able to support him with his learning:

> she really learned what my pattern was and learnt to follow it, so that she could recognise when I was getting sort of like to the point of sort of like bursting, she could recognise sort of like what would make me more productive in lessons. She could really help me focus myself, and that was really something that I needed at that point.

(110-116)

His use of the word 'pattern' suggests that he had certain habitual characteristics and, because his Support Assistant was able to predict the times when he was perhaps becoming anxious, she was able to pre-empt any emotional outbursts. This is later confirmed when he comments: 'A lot of the support workers ... picked up on what was making me agitated. And actually found a way of softening the impact' (288-290).

Neil's need to be treated as an individual is a common theme throughout his interview and he seems to feel that this type attitude is a prerequisite for any teacher:

> I think the biggest thing that they can learn is to treat them all differently, knowing that they're individuals rather than they're all just developing; treating them as individuals rather than members of one big group; that would be a big step

> (338-342)

It seems that Neil believes that this attitude still needs to be developed in some teachers, a 'big step' implying that this would be a means of making progress. Perhaps because of his happier memories of his secondary education or because of his better relationships with his teachers at that time, he states that 'the biggest thing a primary teacher can learn from a secondary is to have that attitude of treating everyone as an individual' (330-331). He also believes that 'Aspergers people' (451) need to be spoken to 'as a parent would talk to a child' (453) because it 'fit so well with what we needed, it was just a wonderful feeling to be there' (462-463). He appears to suggest that, as well as being treated individually, pupils with AS also need to be in a nurturing, caring environment.

Lee also expresses his desire to have his 'differentness' acknowledged by his teachers: 'I think they're considerate of my problem' (227), his 'problem' seemingly being that he has Asperger syndrome. He appreciates how one of his teachers understands his needs: 'he's very concerned about my Aspergers I think. He doesn't get angry with me because I'm different' (198-

199). It is possible that Lee has encountered teachers who have expressed anger towards him and that he has associated this with his 'differentness'.

John equates his favourite class as being the one in which his favourite teacher taught: 'I liked Year 5 because my favourite teacher was there' (29-30), the reason being: 'I think she knew me, and she was very kind' (34-35). It is possible that in 'knowing' John, this teacher was able to treat him as an individual and, through her kindness, enabled him to feel nurtured. John also described the role of his Support Assistant as someone who helped him to 'understand about which bit I did not get, start by saying words I didn't know what they mean' (76-78). He seems to have viewed this support as beneficial because without it, 'it was a struggle ... it was horrible' (205; 207).

Mark had less to say about the positive influences of his teachers although his favourite year was Year 7 because 'all the teachers were still being nice to you' (28), suggesting that, from Year 8 onwards, they stopped being nice. However, he seems to appreciate the assistance given in class: 'my support teacher did an awful lot for me, and I don't think I could have got the grades I could if it wasn't for her' (214-216), appearing to acknowledge that this success was dependent on this support.

### Teacher / Adult as a Negative Influence

All the participants viewed several adults as positive influences on their educational experiences, but only Lee and John were able to provide examples of when they have viewed adults less positively. The incident described by Lee also contributed to the super-ordinate theme, *Views Related to Peers and Others,* as discussed on page 90 under the sub-

heading 'Negative Relationships with Peers and Others'. However, it also provides an example of how Lee viewed one of his teachers and, therefore, it contributes to this sub-ordinate theme also.

Lee's memory of a teacher whom he seems to view in a negative light is related to his belief that this teacher 'didn't care at all about special needs in any way' (46-47) and he seems to have wanted this teacher to have shown more understanding about his individual needs.

In contrast, John's reference to a teacher whom he recalls as someone who made him feel angry is stated much less emotively:

> There was one called Mr. Baker, who's a PE teacher, who had to
> make me play football and all that, and he said that I'm not trying,
> he said 'you're not trying,' and I said 'I do not like football.'

> (159-166)

John seems to be saying that he should not have to do anything that he does not want to do. However, it could also be that his dislike (or fear) of participating in a team sport should have been recognised by the teacher, and it is perhaps this that made John angry.

### *Importance of Understanding Expectations*

The need to understand, either in terms of future events or of expectations related to task outcomes, seems to have been an important aspect of the educational experiences of Lee and Neil. Lee's need is related to having explicit information given to him prior to commencing a task:

> it's just er very stressing when someone asks me to do something
> that I don't understand. You know, if people aren't clear, if they

aren't er very very direct, just point at something and say, 'do that,'
like I have no idea what they're talking about.

<div align="right">(97-102)</div>

If Lee does not understand what is expected of him, it is probable that his levels of anxiety are raised to such an extent that he will 'burst into tears' (84). Indeed, it was his Support Assistant (whom he refers to as 'my social worker' (90)) who triggered this 'stressing event': 'she was asking me to do something that I didn't understand' (90-92). Towards the end of Lee's interview, when he was asked to summarise what he needs most from an education system, he provided the following advice:

> when they [teachers] talk to people with Aspergers they need to know that we need to completely understand what it is that we're doing. That you need to be very, very descriptive of what they want the person to do. Because if you're not there's a chance that they're gonna get really, really upset. If we get confused, we're in big trouble.

<div align="right">(316-322)</div>

The 'big trouble' to which Lee refers is possibly an extreme expression of emotion and this seems to be what he wants to emphasise to me by his repetition of 'very' and 'really'. Furthermore, he believes that all people with Aspergers syndrome have to have complete understanding of what is expected of them.

In a similar way, and as a final comment, Neil also speaks on behalf of others with Aspergers syndrome:

> You've gotta make sure the person with Aspergers is *aware* of what's going on. The best way I can describe it is that we don't like surprises. Having a surprise for someone who's Aspergers, it feels like there's something going wrong.

<div align="right">(852-856)</div>

It seems, therefore, that for both boys, the need to understand in advance reduces the possibility of their feeling out of control.

### Characteristics of School

This sub-ordinate theme relates to the views of the pupils about their ideal school and will be summarised briefly.

When asked whether pupils with AS should attend a mainstream school or a special school, Neil suggested that it be:

> a mix between the two.  One obviously you need to know everything that you want, you need to be able to know everything that you have to know and a specialist school is not really going to be able to provide that all the time, but it can more or less go all the way some of the time. I think that if it were a special school with all the capabilities of a mainstream school then that would probably be the best.

<div align="right">(504-510)</div>

He seems to feel that the advantages of both types of school, if combined, would be able to best meet the needs of pupils like himself.

Lee considers that people with AS 'need to be with people who are normal, because in the real world everybody doesn't have Aspergers' (253-255). Despite all the difficulties that he has encountered in his mainstream school, he seems to view this type of provision as being necessary. However, he also expressed some preferences about the ideal school, mostly related to the behaviour of others. It would be:

where everyone just goes to school they could socialise at break. People wouldn't talk in class, wouldn't swear or blasphemise, that's just pointless, I don't know why people do that. You know, they go to class, they do the work. They go out of class, then they socialise, they socialise during dinner. They do what they're supposed to do basically, and not disobey the rules.

(238-245)

Lee's dislike of social situations seems to be stated quite explicitly and he seems to prefer a structured environment where rules are followed and the behaviour of others is not offensive in his view.

Mark's idea of an ideal school is very much dependent on the geographical context:

My ideal school would have to be set out in such a way that it was easy to get around, memorisable locations

(222-223)

Indeed, the layout of a school appears to be an important feature for Mark as he described the sixth form college he is to attend as being 'well laid out, easy to get round ... I used to struggle learning places' (98-99). Mark also expresses a preference for mainstream because of the other students: 'I'm not too bothered what school I'd go to really. Ideally it would be mainstream because I do like to blend with other people' (226-228). Perhaps, like Lee, he also feels that he would benefit from mixing with a wider range of students. John's response was concise, 'I think a main kind of school' (231) with no further information provided.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the results of the interpretative analysis of the information contained in the transcripts produced from the interviews. It has described the three super-ordinate themes *Views Related to Self*, *Views Related to Others* and *Views Related to the Educational Context* which were identified from the sub-ordinate themes. The analysis has been described with reference to each sub-ordinate theme and extracts have been included from each participant, where relevant, and have been interpreted, as far as possible, without any *a priori* assumptions being present.

# Chapter 4: Discussion of Interpretative Analysis

*The experiences I had in high school prepared me for a bright future, for they gave me strength and insight and confidence to look at myself as an individual and not as a parallel image.*

*(Willey, 1999, p. 45)*

The previous chapter presented the results of the interpretative analysis of the data derived from interviews with the four participants. This chapter will discuss how the three super-ordinate themes that emerged from the analysis, namely *Views Related to Self, Views Related to Others* and *Views Related to the Educational Context,* are able to answer the research question, thus providing an insight into how these pupils view their educational experiences. Each super-ordinate theme will be considered, and interpreted further if appropriate, with reference both to the literature review presented in Chapter 1 and to literature not hitherto considered.

## Views Related to Self

Hobson (1993) has written widely about the development of children's awareness of self and others and has reported that children with autism have limitations in their awareness of self. However, in this study, the way participants perceive themselves was one of the most prevalent themes to have emerged from the analysis. Although Hobson's work was based on younger children, mostly with classic autism as opposed to Asperger Syndrome, this suggests that participants in this study have an awareness of self that enables them to view their educational experiences from a

perspective that is very much related to how they perceive themselves in different domains. The first of these, and one of the most dominant, was how they view themselves as learners. Although there were some similarities among the views expressed, for example, for Lee and Mark, a love of computers and ICT generally, there were also some divergent views offered. Mark's dislike of handwriting is consistent with the traits associated with AS as documented by Wing (1981) and with similar views expressed by Hall (2001) and Jackson (2001) in their autobiographies. Indeed, writing legibly and at the required pace may be an 'issue' for some individuals, particularly those with dyspraxia (Gething, 2003), and it is often the case that students with AS also have dyspraxia (World Health Organisation, 2007). Williams (1996), whose preferred learning style is similar to Mark's (192), describes her ideal educational environment as 'one where learning was through objects and nature and doing, not through having to rely on the interpretation of written or spoken words' (p. 284). Wing (*ibid.*) also suggests that pupils with AS frequently encounter specific learning difficulties related to maths, among other subjects, although Neil and Lee described this as their preferred subject. Lee's preference was based on the factual nature of maths and Neil's was as a result of his having a 'knack' for it.  These preferences are consistent with comments made by Gething (*ibid.*) suggesting that pupils with AS are likely to be more skilled in factually based subjects such as maths, science and ICT.

Another common characteristic among pupils with AS is an 'over-sensitivity' to criticism (Wing, *ibid.*) and Neil alluded several times to his desire to achieve perfection in all things, possibly to avoid being criticised. This is

consistent with the findings of Ashburner et al. (2010) who reported that 43% of students with ASD have significant issues related to the achievement of perfection. Indeed Neil described that to get something wrong 'would have seared deeply' (293-294). Williams (1996) confirms that the processing of emotional information is 'experienced physically' the effects of which 'may be so extreme that it may feel that it is too much for the body to sustain' (p.216). It seems, therefore, that Neil's view of his educational experiences, at least in this respect, is that there were occasions when he must have been in extreme physical pain. The implications of this are considerable and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The experience of taking exams was also a source of pressure for Mark and Neil. Although Neil's concerns may be attributable to his desire to achieve perfection in the form of success, Mark seemed to be overwhelmed by the amount of preparation he had to do in terms of homework and revision. Gething (*ibid.*) says that 'such pressure may prove unbearable' (p.2) while Jackson (*ibid.*) suggests that homework should be forbidden! These difficulties are likely to be related to organisational skills which are common among those with AS (Attwood, 2002).

Several studies have indicated that pupils with AS are significantly more likely to experience emotional and behavioural difficulties whilst at school (e.g. Tonge et al., 1999; Asburner et al., 2010) and these experiences were also reported by the participants in this study. Lee's feelings were so extreme that he attempted to suppress his emotions in order to cope with the challenges he encountered, although he was not always able to do this. His strategies for regulating his emotions were not always successful as he

seems to have been in tears on more than one occasion. Neil's emotions were both internalised and externalised and this again is consistent with findings by Ashburner et al. (2010). Neil described how, at primary school, he had come to hate himself, 'almost wanting to spit at myself' (311) following an aggressive and violent incident in the class room. At secondary school, those emotions had become externalised when he retaliated against other pupils who had bullied him.

Mark also internalised his emotions during a school trip abroad when he had 'terrible, terrible home-sickness', possibly as a result of significant changes in his familiar routine. Vermeulen (2001) suggests that situations in which a flexible reaction is demanded are difficult for people with ASD as flexibility is not usually present for these individuals, or, as Carrington and Graham (2001) state, "children with Asperger syndrome may be overwhelmed by even minimal change" (p. 43).

One of the most salient themes identified in this study was the participants' perceptions of being different from others. The vocabulary used to describe these perceptions ranged from 'so removed from normal' (Neil: 428-429), 'weird' (Lee: 26) to 'not mentally normal' (Lee: 206). These descriptions are very similar to those found by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) although one participant in their study expressed a preference for not being treated as different. In this study, both Lee and Neil would like to be treated as an individual because 'everyone with Aspergers is so different from everyone else with Aspergers' (Neil: 402-403). To view one's experiences from a perspective of 'differentness', where being unlike others is a negative construct, indicates that those feelings have been reinforced over time by the

attitudes of others, so much so that they have become part of one's self-concept (Humphrey, 2001, cited in Humphrey and Lewis, *ibid.*). It is possible that what each of these pupils requires is to be treated as an individual whose differences, rather than disabilities, are acknowledged but not highlighted. This distinction supports the views expressed by Baron-Cohen (2000) and Billington (2002) regarding the pathologising of those with AS.

Lee's comment, 'we need to cope being around normal people' (253-254) implies that his perceptions of himself as being abnormal have been reinforced over time and that it is he who has to learn how to fit in with others. This is at odds with the social constructionist principles which underpin the *Social Model of Disability* in which it would be suggested that the difficulties experienced by pupils with AS are caused by barriers within society rather than their own impairments (British Council of Disabled People, 1981). This model is in contrast with, and in response to, the more traditional medical model which empowered medical professionals to make decisions about how people with disabilities should be treated. However, Lee seems to have found his diagnosis of AS supportive as it has enabled him to better understand why he feels so different and it is for this reason that Jordan (2007) has supported the use of a diagnostic label when referring to people with ASDs.

The penultimate sub-ordinate theme to have emerged which was related to perceptions of self was that of Altered Identity. This is similar to themes found in other qualitative studies with individuals with AS. For example, 'masquerading' was a theme identified by Carrington and Graham (2001), and Humphrey and Lewis (*ibid.*) refer to 'negotiating difference' as one of the

ways in which pupils with AS attempt to assimilate themselves into the school environment. In the present study, two of the boys had adopted the strategy of altering their identities as a means of coping with the pressures that they encountered. Lee suppressed his emotions and presented a 'blank expression' on his face while Neil transformed himself into 'who [he] wanted to be' (572). This may be because, as Adreon and Stella (2001) suggest, at high school there is a greater pressure for pupils to conform as adolescent peers are more likely to be less tolerant of differences. Therefore, altering one's identity either through the suppression of true feelings or through the presentation of another self, may be a means of diminishing the likelihood of being perceived as 'different' and, in turn may reduce the teasing and bullying that may be encountered. Alternatively, Williams (1996) states that, for her, it was a means of meeting others' 'stubborn and persistent expectations':

> My answers ... to the problem of expectations were to learn to feign the emotions I was expected to have but didn't feel safe with, to feign the interest I didn't have, to communicate with a copied voice and to move with mirrored movements in the absence of personal connection to my own and to learn to look as if I understood even if I didn't.

(p. 2)

The finding that all participants had difficulty recalling many of their earlier experiences of school was one of the first themes to be identified during the analysis. This is compatible with the findings of several earlier studies (e.g. Happé, 1999; Millward et al., 2000; Bennett, 2005; Tanweer et al., 2010) many of which propose that there is a neurological basis for difficulties recalling autobiographical events. However, Bennet (*ibid.*) suggests that

such difficulties are a means of protection against highly emotional events and this is certainly consistent with the views expressed by Neil in this study who attributed his failure to recall his early years at school to it being 'such a stressful time' (279). This also supports the views expressed by Hall (2001) whose impaired memories of primary school were that it was 'very traumatic' (p. 20). However, difficulties recalling early experiences are not confined to only those with AS and, in this study, it may have been related to participants' interpretation of the question being asked of them. Nevertheless, whatever the reasons underlying this difficulty, it clearly has a bearing on how pupils with AS recall and express their views.

**Views Related to Peers and Others**

Many of the sub-ordinate themes that emerged from the analysis are inter-related and where connections or convergence between themes exists, they will be described below. Whereas the first theme, discussed above, may be regarded as based on within-child factors, this theme, *Views Related to Peers and Others,* takes account of the effects of others on how experiences are perceived by the participants.

A dominant theme throughout all literature related to ASD is that of the difficulties that youngsters encounter with social interactions. All the participants in this study found their relationships with others to be problematic. Neil described how he had to specifically learn about non-verbal behaviours so that he could interpret social situations (487-491; 494-499) and Lee suffered severe physiological effects when mixing with others (178-179), an experience he described as 'traumatic' (212). John seemed to have

difficulties relating to others because of a lack of understanding of social cues (134-137; 143-148) and Mark's dislike of socialising meant that he spent lunch times wandering around in circles (115). Such difficulties comprise one of the core impairments of ASDs (Wing, 1996; 1981) and have been reported in almost all the studies cited herein. Lunch times and break times have been found to be particularly difficult for these pupils (Odegaard and Heath, 1992; Wainscot et al., 2008) and so too have PE lessons where students are expected to participate in team sports. Both John and Lee reported that they refuse to join in with football games, perhaps partly because of their inability to grasp the concept of 'team mentality' (Adreon and Stella, 2001), or because of a fear of having 'a mental car crash' (Neil: 395) by being near others.

Negative relationships with others, although related to the above theme regarding social interactions, was identified as a distinct theme as it pertains specifically to having been bullied. In this instance, bullying is viewed as 'the systematic abuse of power' (Smith and Sharp, 1994). Lee perceived himself to have been bullied by one of his teachers whom he considered to be uncaring about pupils with special educational needs (47). Gething (2003) reports that "pupils with AS may react badly to discipline and be unable to accept and acknowledge fault" (p. 3). Moreover, she suggests that authority figures may be viewed with little respect, perhaps because of difficulties recognising hierarchical relationships, and pupils may display unco-operative behaviour. Indeed, Robertson et al. (2003) report that poor relationships between teachers and pupils are associated with increased levels of behavioural difficulties and decreased levels of social inclusion for students

with ASD. Lee's belief that his teacher didn't care about his individual needs is supported by findings that teachers with specific training and experience in ASD are more likely to be positive about their inclusion and more confident about teaching pupils with these needs (McGregor and Campbell, 2001).

Neil was bullied by other pupils as he considered himself to be 'the most useable target' (668) and 'the odd one out' (667-668). It could be argued that being 'different' makes pupils with AS more vulnerable to being bullied. Indeed, Norwich and Kelly (2004) have already highlighted the fact that pupils with special educational needs are more likely to be bullied than other pupils and this, along with their difficulties with communication and social interactions probably places pupils with AS at an even greater risk of being singled out by others. Similar findings have been reported by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) and Wainscot et al. (2008).

In contrast with the negative relationships discussed above, all the participants discussed friendships, either as supportive or as confusing. Two of the boys had formed relationships with others with whom they felt they had a shared understanding.  Lee was able to 'understand' (265) another pupil with AS and Neil had two close friends with a shared love of rock music (86). This was an interesting finding as the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others is often considered to be an area of difficulty for most people with AS because of Theory of Mind impairments (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). However, it could be that the concept of 'friendship' is unclear to these pupils (Carrington and Graham, 2001) and this is possibly the case for John who found friendships confusing (134-137) and for Mark who found it 'dead pleasing' to have friends (231). Nevertheless, Wainscot et al. (2008) found

that, although social interactions were fewer in number for AS pupils, they were just as likely as their peers to have a best friend.

**Views Related to the Educational Context**

The final super-ordinate theme to emerge from the analysis was related to the educational context and how participants view adults within the educational system; it also includes a discussion of their perceptions related to the characteristics of schools within that system.

Perhaps the greatest influence on any pupil's educational experiences is the role of the teacher and their attitudes to students. Two criteria have been found when investigating factors contributing to the success of the integration of pupils with ASD into mainstream schools, namely teachers' willingness to support inclusion and appropriate training (McGregor and Campbell, 2001). In this study, participants were able to identify what they considered to be positive attitudes of teachers as well as negative ones. Almost all of them expressed the importance of adults being able to recognise their individual needs (Neil: 110; Lee: 227; John: 34), as well as their dependence on in-class support (John: 76-78; 205; Mark: 214-216; Neil: 110-116). However, Lee and John also had some negative memories of teachers at school. Lee's teacher, as discussed above, did not appear to understand his needs, at least in Lee's opinion and similarly, neither did the teacher whom John recalled as having made him feel angry by making him play football (159-166). Overall, participants' views towards adults were more positive than negative, suggesting that many teachers are now more aware of the needs that pupils with AS have and that their attitude towards inclusion is more

positive than it was ten years ago when McGregor and Campbell carried out their research.

A theme that was closely related to the perceived characteristics of school staff was the way in which the participants felt that they needed to be taught. Lee and Neil both described their need to understand what was expected of them in terms of outcomes or future events. Lee talked about being highly distressed when he did not understand what he was expected to do in class (90-92) and Neil talked about his dislike of surprises (856). Both of these incidents are consistent with Donna William's (1996) comments about the different learning needs of pupils with ASDs:

> ... new experiences, sometimes no matter how similar to previous experiences, get perceived as 'new', 'unfamiliar' and 'unpredictable'. This is like being trapped in an infant's perception yet with the capacity of a grown mind. . . . In other words, things generally don't get easier with time or learning.

<div align="right">(p. 143)</div>

It also illustrates the difficulties that Lee may have with receptive language and inferential language (Adreon and Stella, 2001; Colle et al., 2008) and the difficulties Neil may encounter when there is unpredictability (Attwood, 2002).

The final sub-ordinate theme relates to the participants' views about the ideal school for pupils with AS. There is little evidence in the literature to show which type of placement is best for pupils with ASD (Jones et al., 2008) and the review by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006) found that over 50% of parents of children with ASD were unhappy about the current educational placement of their child. However, the participants in this study were all clear about the type of school they would

prefer to attend, with three of them opting for mainstream and one for a 'special school with all the capabilities of a mainstream school' (Neil: 509-510). The reasons for these choices were all based on different reasons ranging from the geographical layout (Mark: 222-223) to the 'need to be with people who are normal, because in the real world everybody doesn't have Aspergers' (Lee: 253-255), emphasising again the fact that these pupils are unique individuals and so too are their unique and individual needs.

## Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the results of the interpretative analysis. It has provided an idiographic focus by exploring in detail the views of each individual participant about their educational experiences. As a qualitative study, it does not lend itself to generalisation in the way that can be achieved from positivist research involving large numbers of participants. It makes no claims about the certainty of the universality of the views provided by the four participants. However, several themes were shared by all participants and many themes seemed to reflect the characteristics of AS that were illustrated throughout the Literature Review in Chapter 1. On this basis, it is possible to suggest that the findings of this research, to an extent, are able to support current conceptualisations and theories related to AS, but they cannot directly be applied to further our understanding of *all* pupils with AS. As discussed in Chapter 2 on page 39, Eatough and Smith (2008) argue that, by focusing on the particular, we can gain a better understanding of the universal. Therefore, the 'wider applicability' (Willig,2001, p. 86) of research

such as this may potentially extend to other pupils with AS. With this in mind, the final chapter will consider the implications for EP practice and will outline the limitations of this study as well as making suggestions for future research.

# Chapter 5: Implications for Practice, Limitations and Conclusions

*Everyone with Aspergers is so different from everyone else with Aspergers*

*(Neil: 403-404)*

This chapter will consider some of the implications that this research has uncovered concerning educational practice and will suggest recommendations related to working with pupils with AS in both educational and research contexts. It will then discuss the limitations of the study prior to presenting some concluding thoughts.

## Implications and Recommendations

Although this research is based on the views of a small number of pupils, it has highlighted several areas which have implications for my developing professional practice as an educational psychologist and possible implications for other educational practitioners who work with pupils with AS. As the findings cannot be generalised, the following suggestions are made tentatively and may not be applicable for all professionals nor for all children and young people with AS.

- The single-most important factor to have emerged from the analysis is the fact that each pupil with AS is unique and individual. Therefore, it is likely that individualised, tailored, strengths-based approaches would be likely to benefit all pupils.

- Consideration needs to be given to the ways in which the views of pupils with AS are elicited. For example, open-ended, semi-structured questioning seems to have been very effective in this study, perhaps because the participants knew that they were being listened to in a non-judgemental way. Consideration might also be given to environmental factors such as seating arrangements (to reduce possible distress related to eye contact or physical proximity), and to the venue.

- By 'bracketing' any preconceptions, particularly those related to deficit models of understanding of AS, it will potentially enable a broader range of views to be ascertained, thus providing information related to several domains.

- The use of interpretative approaches can help to enable more sense to be made of the information given by pupils so that they can be better supported. This may be particularly relevant when working with young people who have speech and communication difficulties in addition to ASD.

- As an Educational Psychologist, this research experience has provided me with a greater awareness of the individual needs of youngsters with AS, thus enhancing my ability to provide training for teachers and support assistants in schools. It would be likely to benefit pupils with AS if their peers were made aware of the differing needs of all pupils, particularly those who perceive themselves to be 'different', so that peer support can be harnessed to greater advantage. Training

would be more effective if offered to Early Years settings so that the difficulties encountered by younger pupils can be better understood and interventions can be implemented earlier before high levels of distress are experienced.

- Schools may consider deploying teachers and support staff who have an active interest and enjoyment in working with pupils with AS. In secondary schools, the use of a flexible approach and, if appropriate, a flexible curriculum may prove to be more supportive for some pupils with AS. For example, disapplication from some subjects (e.g. PE) may be advisable in some cases and will allow pupils to focus on alternative activities (subjects in which they excel) that will better equip them for the future.

- A regular part of the curriculum for pupils with AS might be the discrete teaching of personal and social skills. One-to-one teaching / support was found to be beneficial in this research with clear, explicit language enabling expectations to be more easily understood.

- It is likely that pupils with AS may benefit from therapeutic interventions, particularly at those times when they are encountering high levels of emotional distress.

- Educational Psychologists are well-placed to support schools in their endeavours to meet the individual needs of pupils by advising on the above and by reviewing and monitoring progress regularly rather than reactively. It may be beneficial if models of EP service delivery can be

modified so that EPs can be 'attached' to pupils rather than schools, as is often the case.

- There is a need for further qualitative research to be conducted to provide 'insider' views from pupils with AS so that, from an increasingly larger corpus of studies, a greater understanding of the challenges and difficulties faced by these youngsters can be drawn, thus enabling professionals to better understand and meet their special individual needs.

- Future studies would be informative if the views of the 'Team Around the Child', or all the professionals involved in supporting an individual pupil, were also included, thus giving a broader range of perspectives, whilst still giving the pupil a voice.

## Limitations

The limitations of using IPA as a research approach have been discussed in Chapter 2 where the use of this methodology was considered. However, several other limitations became apparent as the research progressed.

Firstly, the selection of a homogeneous group of participants was unexpectedly difficult. In attempting to avoid gaining any more knowledge than was necessary in order to reduce preconceptions at the time of analysis, I had no way of knowing whether the pupils with statements for ASD would fit the sampling criteria. I was, therefore, dependent upon the knowledge of 'gate-keepers'. I had hoped to rely on colleagues in the

Educational Psychology Service to recommend pupils whom they considered fulfilled the criteria. However, it seems that such pupils are rarely brought to the attention of EPs once their statement is in place and only one colleague was able to recommend such a pupil. I therefore relied on an Inclusion Teacher to 'select' pupils with AS whom she judged would meet the sampling criteria. As she was only able to name three pupils, the sample size of four was smaller than I had anticipated. Although this allowed me to focus more deeply on the participants' voices than would have been possible with a larger group, it may be difficult to find a publisher for a study involving only four participants.

Although I do not believe a truly homogeneous sample of any individuals exists, one criterion for sampling was a diagnosis of AS/HFA. This decision had been reached as I felt that such pupils would be able to articulate their thoughts and feelings and express their views more easily. Although this was true of Neil and Lee, and to a lesser extent, Mark, John's speech and language skills were less well developed. This meant that there were fewer opportunities to gain access to his views as his use of imagery, metaphor and reflection were less frequent, and it is these aspects that allow for greater access to particpants' views (Smith et al., 2009). IPA depends on a participant's narrative skills and, for this reason, Neil's contribution to the data was significantly greater than the others'. This meant that I was unable to include equal contributions from participants in presenting the results of the analysis. It also meant that a greater level of interpretation was required when considering the views of Mark and John. Moreover, it was very much easier to find commonalities and links between Neil's and Lee's views and I

felt as though I was constantly striving to 'do justice' to the other two participants.

The position in which I was placed thus raised issues about power which, though prevalent throughout the entire research process, was more pronounced at the writing-up stage. From the very start, when selecting participants, formulating interview questions and then interpreting the data, I have been placed in a position in which I have tried to gain access to experiences and to make sense of them through my own interpretations. Although I had expected the process of 'bracketing' preconceptions to be impossible, it was partially achievable but not possible to sustain for extended periods. Nevertheless, a power imbalance has existed throughout as the methodology did not allow for my interpretations to be checked with the views of the participants. Had I sought the views of the participants following the analysis of the data, it would not have been consistent with the hermeneutic aspect of IPA to have modified or change my original interpretations, had participants disagreed with the outcomes of my analysis. Possibly the only way that these issues could have been minimised would have been the choice of a research design in which the participants were co-researchers.

**Conclusions**

This IPA study aimed to explore the views of pupils with Asperger syndrome in mainstream high schools and, in so doing, was able to answer the research question: *How do Key stage 4 pupils with Asperger Syndrome in mainstream schools view their educational experiences?* Three themes were

identified suggesting that these pupils' views emanate from three different perspectives: those related to themselves, those related to others and those related to the educational context in general.

The interpretative analysis indicates that they each have a highly developed sense of self, a perception of themselves as being different and a history of incidences when they have experienced extremely difficult periods of emotionality. This has led to two of them feeling the need to alter their identities and to present themselves as something other than they naturally are.

All participants view themselves as having had experienced difficulties relating to, and interacting with, other people, the effects of which, for some, have been physiologically and emotionally devastating. However, all have benefited from the support of a friend.

Within the educational context, participants view teachers and support staff both positively and negatively and are able to identify those characteristics that help them to learn best.

The most dominant and overarching factor of the entire study was the finding that participants view themselves as different from all others, including those who may be considered to be most similar to them.

The results of the interpretative analysis were presented prior to the implications of this research being considered. Recommendations were then proposed, both for professional practice and for future research.

*Final reflections*

*Although this research is unable to generalise its findings and is, therefore, not able to further our understanding of* all *pupils with AS, I feel that it has demonstrated that, by listening to them and analysing, with an open mind, what they have to say, we can learn a great deal from their rich and informative narratives. My own practice as a Trainee EP has been enhanced immeasurably by this experience as I am now better able to* hear *the voices of those with whom I work.*

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**Appendix 1: Ethical Approval**

18 May 2010

Head of School
Professor Jackie Marsh

Department of Educational Studies
388 Glossop Road
Sheffield S10 2JA

Clare Rogan

**Telephone:** +44 (0114) 222 8087
**Fax:** +44 (0114) 2228105
**Email:** c.woodward@sheffield.ac.uk

Dear Clare

**Ethical Review Application: The educational experiences of pupils with Asperger Syndrome in mainstream schools.**

Thank you for your application for ethical review for the above project. The reviewers have now considered this and have agreed that you can go ahead with your research project. Any conditions will be shown on the Reviewers Comments attached.

This is subject to receipt of a signed hard copy of Part B (Declaration) of the School of Education Research Ethics application form which is available at http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/education/ethics. This hard copy is then held on file and ensures that we comply with university requirements for signatures.

Yours sincerely

Colleen Woodward
Departmental Secretary

**Appendix 2: Letter to parents**

The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Educational Psychology Service,
Civic Centre,
West Paddock,
Leyland
PR25 1DH
Tel: 01772 531597
Mob: 07775 221189

Dear Mr and Mrs B,

I am writing to you to ask whether you would be interested in allowing your son to participate in some research that I am conducting about the views of pupils with Asperger Syndrome about their educational experiences. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist and your son has been recommended to me by one of my colleagues from the Educational Inclusion / Psychology Service who believes that he would be able to talk confidently about his school experiences. I have enclosed some information about this research and, once you have had a chance to consider this request, I will telephone you on Saturday 3$^{rd}$ July between 10 and 11 am to ask whether you are interested in permitting your son to take part. If so, I will then contact your son and will send a consent form for you to sign.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Yours faithfully,

Clare Rogan
Trainee Educational Psychologist.

The
University
Of
Sheffield.

# Participant Information Sheet

## The educational experiences of pupils with Asperger Syndrome in mainstream schools.

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The aims of this project are:
- To find out how Key Stage 4 male pupils with Asperger Syndrome (AS) feel about, and make sense of, their educational experiences in mainstream schools.
- To find out, if possible, the extent to which the accounts of pupils with AS can inform more effective educational practice for pupils with AS.

## Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you have been recommended by one of my colleagues as someone who might be willing to talk freely about your mainstream school experiences. As well as yourself, three other pupils will be taking part in this research.

## Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form and you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

## What will happen to me if I take part?

If you do decide to take part, you will be interviewed by me for approximately one hour during the summer term. You will be asked a few open-ended questions to help you to talk about your experiences of your education. If possible, I would like you to talk at some length and in some depth about how you felt or how you feel now about the schools you have attended. I would be interested to hear about both good and bad experiences.

## Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The interviews will be recorded on a Dictaphone, stored on a CD and will then be transcribed. I will analyse what has been said and will try to find some common themes among all the interviews. I will want to discuss my thoughts with you and check that you are happy with any conclusions I reach.

The audio recordings of the interviews carried out during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

**Are there any risks?**
Because I will be asking you about past experiences, there is a small chance that you may remember some unhappy events and this may cause you some upset. However, it is up to you to decide what you want to tell me.

**What are the possible benefits?**
Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will be able to help educational professionals to understand how to make educational experiences better for pupils with Asperger Syndrome.

**What if something goes wrong?**
If you feel at any time that you need to make a complaint about any aspect of the research, then you may contact my supervisor at the following address:
Dr Pat Bennett,
University of Sheffield,
Department of Educational Studies,
388 Glossop Road,
Sheffield S10 2JA.

Tel: 0114 222 8129

If you do make a complaint and are not happy with the way it is handled, you may contact the University's Registrar and Secretary at the same address as above.

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**
All the information that I collect from you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. However, I may need to discuss my analysis of your interview with my supervisor but you will remain anonymous during these discussions.

**What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?**
I am interested in trying to understand how you feel about and make sense of your experiences of mainstream schools. Most research is conducted *on*

rather than *with* people with Asperger Syndrome by people who do not have AS. Your information will help me to inform others about what pupils with AS need in terms of their educational provision.

**What will happen to the results of the research project?**
The results of this research will form part of my thesis and some aspects of this may be published in an academic journal. It will also be shared with other students at the University of Sheffield. However, you will not be identified by name in any report, publication or lecture.

**Who has ethically reviewed the project?**
This project has been ethically approved via the Department of Education's ethics review procedure.

**Contact for further information**

Mrs Clare Rogan,
Educational Psychology Service,
Civic Centre,
West Paddock,
Leyland
PR25 1DH
Tel: 01772 531597
Mob: 07775 221189

Dr Pat Bennett,
University of Sheffield,
Department of Educational Studies,
388 Glossop Road,
Sheffield
S10 2JA.

Tel: 0114 222 8129

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

**Thank you for taking part in the project.**

**Appendix 4: Letter to participants**

The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Educational Psychology Service,
Civic Centre,
West Paddock,
Leyland
PR25 1DH
Tel: 01772 531597
Mob: 07775 221189

Dear Mark,


I am writing to you to ask whether you would be interested in participating in some research that I am conducting about the views of pupils with Asperger Syndrome. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist and you have been recommended to me by one of my colleagues who believes that you would be able to talk confidently about your educational experiences. I am also enclosing an information sheet to provide you with further details about this research

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. Your parents have given consent for you to take part so please discuss it with them before making a decision.


Yours faithfully,


Clare Rogan
Trainee Educational Psychologist.

| The University Of Sheffield. |
|---|

# **Participant Consent Form**

Title of Research Project: **The educational experiences of pupils with Asperger Syndrome in mainstream schools.**

Name of Researcher: Clare Rogan

**Participant Identification Number for this project:** _____
**Please initial each box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up to the point at which the data is analysed without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
(Tel: 07775 221189)

3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

4. I understand that my responses will be digitally recorded and stored on a CD which will be kept in a safe location until the research is successfully completed, at which point it will be destroyed.

5. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____      _____      _____

Name of Participant          Date               Signature

_____      _____      _____

Name of Parent             Date               Signature
(*or legal representative*)

_____      _____      _____

Lead Researcher            Date               Signature

*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*
Copies:
*Once this has been signed by all parties the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form will be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which will be kept in a secure location.*

**Appendix 6: Sample page of interview transcript with coding**

| Code | Line | Transcript | Annotation |
|---|---|---|---|
| used (coffut) Dislike of others behaving Dislike of social interaction in lessons Importance of adherence to rules. | 240 241 242 243 244 245 | class, would swear or blasphemise, that's just pointless, I don't know why people do that. You know, they go to class, they do the work. They go out of class, then they socialise, they socialise during dinner. They do what they're supposed to do basically, and not disobey the rules. | Dislike of socialising, swearing, disobedience Can't understand behaviour of those who swear or shout Needs rules — they should be obeyed The classroom should not be a social environment. Adherence to rules is important |
| | 246 247 248 249 250 | *Would there be a cross range of pupils in the school with varying difficulties? Or would everybody have Aspergers?* No everybody's different, everyone deserves to be different | Everyone is unique Recognition of differences among all people |
| Self as different (abnormal) Necessity of adapting | 251 252 253 254 255 256 257 258 259 260 | *Do you think it's right for you to be in mainstream school?* I think to be honest, we need to be with people who are normal, because in the real world everybody doesn't have Aspergers. We need to learn to cope being around normal people. It would be nice to be around only other people with Aspergers, but we need to learn to cope with being around people who might make fun at you or … get annoyed that you are different, things like that. | We/them? Need to be with 'normal' people – reflects society Need to live with typical people, not just those with AS Mainstream provides opportunity for AS to We need to learn, not often? them has to cope Need to cope with others in society App – people make fun and get need to cope. annoyed by these differences of people with AS – Is it just teachers who get annoyed? |
| AS as a means of shared understanding Diff with social interactions | 261 262 263 264 265 266 | *Why would it be good to be around others with Aspergers?* To be honest, people with Aspergers much better understand other people with Aspergers. There would be a socialising problem, people with Aspergers can't socialise very well, but we understand each other | Mutual understanding of people with AS Recognition that segregation may not work because of lack of socialising skills Recognises that social interactions are needed |

**Appendix 7: Extract from a chronological list of emergent themes**

Knowledge of self

Reflective thinking

Emotional triggers

Importance of task completion

Ability to identify positive characteristics in others

Music as impetus for social interaction

Importance of creativity / art

Ruminative /reflective thinking

Risktaking

Open mindedness

Importance of creativity

Emotional self

Self as resistant to criticism

Need for control

Perception of self

Emotional expression / anger

Self as perfectionist

Determination to achieve

Impaired memory

Difficulty recalling negative life events

Self as failure

Determination to achieve

Self-control

Impaired memory

Self-hatred

Life as a battle

**Appendix 8: Photograph to show how connections across themes were organised**

**Appendix 9: Master table of sub- and super-ordinate themes for the group**

**Master Table of Themes for the Group**

**Views Related to Self**

| Sub-ordinate theme | Neil | Lee | Mark | John |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self as a learner | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Self as emotional | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X |
| Self as different | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Altered identity | ✓ | ✓ | X | X |
| Impaired memory | ✓ | ✓ | X | X |

**Views Related to Peers and Others**

| Sub-ordinate theme | Neil | Lee | Mark | John |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Difficulties with social skills / interactions | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Negative relationships with others (self as victim) | ✓ | ✓ | X | X |
| Friendships | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

**Views Related to Educational Context**

| Sub-ordinate theme | Neil | Lee | Mark | John |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher / adult as a positive influence | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Teacher / adult as a negative influence | X | ✓ | X | ✓ |
| Need to understand expectations | ✓ | ✓ | X | X |
| Characteristics of school | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

**Appendix 10: Table to organise transcript extracts from each participant**

**Super-ordinate theme: Views Related to Self**

| Theme | Page/ Line | Transcript |
|---|---|---|
| **Self as a learner** <br> Lee | 1/18-19 | I just really liked messing around on computers, making programs and..(?) |
| | 2/25-26 | I'm always the quiet one in the corner who everyone thinks is weird |
| | 2/32 | people around me never influence me really |
| | 5/105 | I'm very bad at listening |
| | 7/150-151 | my grades aren't brilliant in any one subject, I'm not particularly intelligent at all |
| | 7/157 | I don't enormously excel at anything |
| | 8/170-173 | Something that's basically just writing down, them telling me what I need to do and then doing it. Nothing social, just me sitting down and writing the answers to questions. Something like maths |
| | 8/218-219 | it's mathematics, it doesn't differentiate or change, its just mathematics, end of. |
| | 5/97-102 | it's just er very stressing when someone asks me to do something that I don't understand. You know, if people aren't clear, if they aren't er very very direct, just point at something and say, 'do that,' like I have no idea what they're talking about. |
| | 13/302-306 | it's when people are nondescriptive of what they want me to do, it's just er, you know, I get really confused, and that's when all these emotions I've been suppressing in all this time suddenly burst out and er find a way out |

| Mark | 2/26-27 | *year 7 because everything was so flipping simple it was unreal. The work was really easy* |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | 4/71-72 | *Harder lessons are more like theory, er sometimes er mostly like writing up reports for English* |
| | 4/76-78 | *Just the bare amount of stuff you had to come up with on the spot, just so much pressure and I couldn't think of anything to come up with* |
| | 4/80-81 | *my handwriting is a disgrace, that's why I'd prefer to use a computer* |
| | 2/29-30 | *I must say I like ICT; it has been my life's work really, and I really do like ICT* |
| | 6/125-130 | *Year 9, you could choose your choices which then narrowed down some subjects you do, which then made it a lot easier. You could do then do your subject that you're doing most and you're most good at, instead of doing the ones you're not so good at and you're not really interested in learning in life* |
| | 8/162-171 | *year 7 through to 8, 8 was simple really, I mean we didn't have a care in the world erm because it's not really GCSEs, ... well saying that it does impact on your GCSE 'cause you get sets don't you? Then again you could slack off quite a bit then, and then just pay attention in year 9,10,11. Which, I must say, quite a lot of us did. We didn't really pay a lot of attention till them years. And then erm, I mean Year 9. Year 8 and 7 was very easy. Year 9 was getting quite a lot harder. Year 10 and 11 was very hard* |
| | 9/192 | *I'm a kinaesthetic learner* |
| | 5/91-94 | *I've just not been able to fully grasp handwriting really. I haven't been able to learn how to handwrite really well. But I* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | *have been given multiple learning sheets, but it's done nothing for me really* |
| | 7/148-156 | *sometimes my English, I needed guidance because I don't understand some of the questions. Mostly maths, cause I mean some of the algebra in there just drove me bonkers. And er, but to counteract that, oh but to counteract that, I did stay behind, I ended up staying behind and I never did homework here ever since I started staying behind. So I just stayed behind till 4 'cause we broke up at 10 past 3. So I'd just stay behind till 4 and get all my homework done and come home.* |
| | 8/176-181 | *Probably cause the shock of just the exams. You only get a couple of shots at life to do, if you don't do it right the first couple of times then really there isn't much you can do about it. So I just piled on a lot of things, you've got to do lots of revision, you've got to have to do lots of homework, and with that, revision* |
| | 9/185-190 | *I think I learned more generally from any specific lessons. If they do, what is it? practicals, I definitely can remember every single one of my practicals in comparison to theory. Which I can't remember as much but it stays in there, but I definitely know my practicals more than I do my theories* |
| | 9/195-198 | *everyone really enjoyed practicals, whether it be simple or advanced. It was just plain fun really, at least it got you away from heads down in books all day* |
| | 9/203-7 | *I myself wasn't a distraction at all, I just keep to my own business, but some of the pupils were just general distractions, whether it be arguments, someone doing something stupid or funny, stuff like that distracted me* |
| | 3/54-55 | *sometimes I've had piles of homework,* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | *and it's just so stressful to get through. Absolutely piles* |
| | 6-7/133-142 | *The worst part of it was probably just the sheer amount of homework. I mean, fair do's I should have kept on top of it but some of the homeworks were just really hard, to say the least. I struggled and struggled and I sometimes just played hours on it. I couldn't get it. And er, I mean I got it done in the end, but just the sheer amount of homework going from primary school, which you only used to get pieces of homework from one or two pieces a month, to getting that much in a day, it's quite a shock.* |
| | 8/179-181 | *So I just piled on a lot of things, you've got to do lots of revision, you've got to have to do lots of homework, and with that, revision* |
| Neil | 4/80-81 | nothing was going to stop me from achieving what I wanted |
| | 6-7/151-162 | knowing that there was something that I've done wrong at school, say in behaviours, or in class and tests, that would usually sort of like put me in a bit of a bad mood, not in an absolute state of depression, but in a bit of a bad mood - that would be the case. I think the last thing I can remember that put me in a baddish mood in school, was in the end of the year I'd just finished, when I found out that one of my science tests was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I didn't manage to finish it all, I got to the last question and then I ran out of time. I know it might sound silly to some people, but just knowing that I hadn't been able to get everything done leaves me feeling like there's just something incomplete. |
| | 7/176-180 | One subject that I enjoyed doing and had a bit of a knack for from the start was maths. And the teacher that I had for most of time I was at Breckfield was Mr. Carrol, and he was fantastic, in a |

| | | word, at what he did. |
|---|---|---|
| | 8/201-204 | Art was something that was very close to me, so that's obviously when I took that I was quite worried that it was going to be sort of like something stressful that would eventually break me. |
| | 8/223-226 | I put it down into how I feel at that moment, and then on it goes, it's like a lasting impression, so it's bringing up those parts of me that I might have either forgotten or I can still feel inside me |
| | 10/244-7 | to look at my own work and think, right this can be better, that can be better, how can I tackle that,. In a way, it helped me to sort of like become a lot more aware of what I was capable of. |
| | 10/256-8 | I feel a bit regretful that I haven't been able to do the absolute best, I'll never be able to get there, but I always strive to do the best possible |
| | 11/282-4 | It just felt that like there was so *very* little that I was doing right. It felt like erm it felt like that whenever I got a question wrong, it was a deep failure for me |
| | 12/295-6 | If I was at the SATs level, and I got that wrong, it really would have seared deeply |
| | 9/232-6 | I was very very resistant to criticism, because I always wanted to do my best, so finishing a piece of art work, or thinking that I'd finished it, and then someone telling me that I still had to continue further with it was quite tough. |
| | 10/240-1 | ... that was something that was quite hard for me to handle at first |
| | 7/176-180 | One subject that I enjoyed doing and had a bit of a knack for from the start was maths. And the teacher that I had for most of time I was at Breckfield was |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | Mr. Carrol, and he was fantastic, in a word, at what he did. |
| | 20/512-518 | the one thing that we tend to pick up on very well is one on one sort of like attitudes. For example, if I asked Mr. Carrol for help for Maths, he would go straight over it, and explain in detail each little bit, so that it all sort of like slotted in well and it would really stick in my mind because I'd know that he was explaining this to me and I would remember every little detail. |
| John | 6/108-9 | *When I got my exam results in English I was really upset cause I got a G.* |
| | 6/111 | *I was expecting a D at least.* |
| | 10/207-211 | *It was horrible [without support]. At one time in science, not science, somewhere, he told me to write it down, but he was too quick, when I was about to finish it, he rubbed it off and I couldn't remember what.* |
| **Self as emotional** Neil | 13/311-4 | I was looking at myself, and almost wanting to spit at myself. I'd really gotten to a level of self-hatred that I honestly erm.. I can't even put it into words how much I'd begun to hate myself at that point |
| | 12/299-300 | I was almost out of control at some points. I can remember there was an incident where I'd thrown a chair across the room |
| | 12/304 | I accidently blacked a teacher's eye in primary school |
| | 24/621 | I'd literally had enough of him and I snapped |
| | 24/625-9 | I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and slammed him head first straight into the technology room wall. Straight after that I just went on with fists clenched |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | getting him at the head, anywhere that I knew would hurt him |
| | 27/721-3 | I did the only thing I could think of at that point which was to just get up while he was looking the other way, and smack, and get him right across the jaw |
| | 5/124-8 | throughout all the times I'd been into what doctors would say was depression, throughout all the times when I'd been in and out of depression, throughout all the tantrums, throughout all the bits where all the bits had been piled on top of me |
| | 6/133-6 | Well if I was getting into a depressive state, I would probably talk with a little bit more of an edge to it, I would still be very careful of what I said to people, but it would almost be as if I was almost slightly vacant er sometimes |
| | 6/146-7 | after my grandma died, as I mentioned earlier, that put me in a bit of depressive state for a bit |
| Lee | 3/49-50 | I sometimes got stressed, and back then I overreacted all the time and was very emotional |
| | 4/72-74 | I sometimes go up to my room and you know once they (emotions) came out for a couple of minutes and I ended up yelling really loudly at my little brother |
| | 4/78-79 | Crying once, I once burst into tears in class for absolutely no reason |
| | 4/84-85 | I burst into tears again, a few more times during the day and then I went home |
| | 4/87-88 | it was all just emotional problems |
| | 4-5/92-94 | when she (LSA) got annoyed that I hadn't been doing anything for half an hour, that just, you know, made me go |

| | | that's when all these emotions I've been suppressing in all this time suddenly burst out and er find a way out |
|---|---|---|
| Mark | 13/304-6 | *I went away with school to Italy as a geography trip, and the first day there we didn't eat or anything until about roughly 11oclock, and we hadn't eaten anything since like 5. And I just had terrible, terrible home sickness, and I was er constantly texting my mum I wanted to go home. So that was just terrible.* |
| **Self as different from others** | | |
| Neil | 2/47-52 | there was something about me that made me sort of like quite sensitive, but they just picked that up as sort of like me having either too much pride or too much self confidence or something like that. It was erm definitely a time when I was very misunderstood |
| | 1/10-14 | no two Aspergers people are the same that's for certain |
| | 5/107-8 | the biggest thing a primary teacher can learn from a secondary is to have that attitude of treating everyone as an individual |
| | 13/331-3 | she'll treat them all as if they're some sort of mannequin with a different face painted on the front. Erm, I think the biggest thing that they can learn is to treat them all differently, knowing that they're individuals rather than they're all just developing .. treating them as individuals rather than members of one big group |
| | 13-14/336-342 | everyone with Aspergers is so different from everyone else with Aspergers |
| | 16/403-4 | I was so removed from what people thought was normal |
| | 17/429-430 | a special school for special people |

| Lee | 17/447-8 | I actually matured a heck of a lot faster than most people. For example in year 8 while everyone was going on about Xboxes and all of that or Playstations and new games that were coming out, I was actually going over the meaning of my life, life after death, attitudes towards things |
|---|---|---|
| | 22/563-8 | I had a different way of talking, different way of doing things right from the start, and simply because I was the odd one out |
| | 25/665-667 | I've always been a social recluse in a way |
| | 28/750 | we're all what you'd call misfits |
| | 28/763-764 | we're all that bit misunderstood |
| | 29/769 | all of us had been what you'd call pushed to the side a bit |
| | 29/782 | here we were, 3 misfits in mainstream secondary school, erm not many people even knew we existed for the most part, there were only a small group of people who even talked to us for the most part |
| | 30/809-811 | we're a lot more sensitive than most people would think, we take things a lot more personally er than most people would |
| | 31/822 | I'm always the quiet one in the corner who everyone thinks is weird, and the teachers just preferred me for some reason |
| | 2/25-27 | because I acted differently to everyone |
| | 3/48 | it's stopped me from wondering why I'm so different *(AS diagnosis)* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 6/123-4 | It's very obvious that I act differently from other people |
| | 6/127-8 | I think a lot of people expect me to be very intelligent, to be honest, to know things and be very good at at least one thing, cause I have Aspergers and that's the way they normally are |
| | 7/146-9 | He *(teacher)* doesn't get angry with me because I'm different |
| | 9/199 | *(Perfect teacher)* doesn't tell the class 'hey be careful with that kid, he's not mentally normal'. Someone who knows I've got it and is considerate of that fact but doesn't treat me different |
| | 9/205-8 | everyone deserves to be different |
| | 11/249-250 | we need to be with people who are normal |
| | 11/253-4 | We need to learn to cope being around normal people |
| | 11/255-6 | we need to learn to cope with being around people who might make fun at you or ... get annoyed that you are different |
| Nick | 11/257-260 | always had this attitude of a bit of a recluse |
| | 2/33 | I've always been a social recluse in a way |
| Mark | 28/733 | *All people with er obviously learning disabilities went to this other place* |
| John | 1/11-12 | *I think she knew me, and she was very kind.* |
| **Transformation of self/ altered identity** Neil | 3/58-9 | I'd really sort of like managed to make myself into what I wanted to be |
| | 3/62-4 | it always felt like that there was a sort of second version of me inside that was just |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Lee | | that little bit below the surface, a version of me that I didn't like at that point |
| | 3/66-7 | I learned to change that other person and myself into what I wanted to be |
| | 22/569-574 | I was reinventing myself. At the end of year 7 I'd taken a look back at myself and thought, I've had enough, I don't want to be this person anymore so I'm going to change. And I changed practically everything about myself to change into the person I'd always wanted to be |
| | 22/576-577 | I saw myself as something I physically I wasn't, so I decided to turn that all around |
| | 26/665-6 | At this point in year 10 I'd already reinvented myself a large amount of the way |
| | 26/667-9 | I was er learning how to control myself, I knew how to act around other people, and I'd really found a lot more of that peace of mind than I had before |
| | 3/55-56 | When I left primary school, I just stopped being emotional, I stopped showing emotion |
| | 3/68 | I just forced them all down |
| | 4/71 | they almost never came out |
| | 8/181-182 | I'm always just drawing a blank expression on my face at school |
| | 8/184 | I concentrate on keeping a blank expression |
| | 8/187 | I never tell anyone about my emotions |
| | 12/281-82 | I suppress my emotions |
| **Impaired memory** Neil | 1/3-5 | The one thing that's always been a problem is sort of like remembering sort |

|  |  |  |
|---|---|---|
|  |  | of like primary school years because that was a very difficult time |
|  | 2/44-47 | My younger life at school, if I were to compare it to my memory of my secondary school life, it feels a little bit patchy. I can remember the big events of what happened, but for the most part it is quite hard to think of it |
|  | 11/279-282 | To be honest it was such a stressful time that I can't remember it that well. But erm from what I can remember, I really was about as bad as a student could have got for that |
|  | 12/302-5 | I can remember there was an incident where I'd thrown a chair across the room, I think that got me banned from somewhere, and ... I'm not sure if it did or not, I honestly can't remember. |
| Lee **Impaired memory** | 1/5-6  1/12  5/117-8  2/43-44 | frankly I can only remember at most, year 4.  my memories don't go back very far  my memory wasn't working properly back then  I'd say I have some very bad memories of primary school. |
| Mark **Impaired memory** | 1/5-8 | *I was given a support teacher er on the first day, and I think that's just it, mainly the activities, that's all I can remember* |
| **Sensory sensitivity** Neil | 15-15/ 367-371 | Shouting and loud noises just cuts through everything that's been put down beforehand, ... and being shouted at, no matter what, always feels like you're on the receiving end of someone just really having a go at you, and that in itself just really upsets people |
|  | 16/407-410 | people with Aspergers can be a bit more sensitive than other people and shouting obviously alerts them to the fact that there's tension being done to them And that with an Aspergers person is almost as wounding as someone being like slapped |

**Super-ordinate Theme: Views Related to Peers and Others**

| Themes | Page/ Line | Transcript |
|---|---|---|
| **Learning social skills** Neil | 16-17/ 417-428 | the biggest problem that I had as I was going on, is that I didn't understand sort of what was wrong and right about a lot of things, people would always say that's wrong and that's right, I'd have to wonder and think why that was wrong or why isn't that right. And that would be one of the main barriers that I'd have to overcome. You see when someone comes up to me and says 'Oh you mustn't do that', I'd look at it and I wouldn't be able to see what was wrong or right with it. Just someone sitting down and explaining why something is wrong or right or explaining why it upsets other people would be that big a help |
| | 17/432-7 | it wasn't until I was probably in the last or year before the last at Poolside that I even knew that staring was impolite. I didn't know how long I could keep eye contact with someone before it was considered as staring, and just knowing that really makes a bit difference when communicating with people. |
| | 17/443-5 | I knew it was like rude to punch someone, and I knew generally what was rude and impolite, but I genuinely did need help understanding what was wrong or right |
| | 19/487-491 | this is how I learned to socially interact, because practically everything from body language to how I should talk to people, how my tone of voice changes to keep people more or less interested, everything that I'm using to talk to you now I probably learned from Poolside |
| | 19/495-500 | Telling me what things gave out certain impressions, and they'd show me how certain body language would show I'm relaxed, they'd show me how certain |

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| | 26/647-9 | she taught us everything from, you know, what was right and wrong to things like how social things can get out of hand |
|---|---|---|
| | | actions would give the impression that I'm preoccupied or not or would give the impression that I'm preoccupied, and, as such, that's why I'm generally nervous-appearing to some people |
| | 26/665-6 | I was er learning how to control myself, I knew how to act around other people |
| | 27/705-7 | I'd told him to go away, I'd literally given him all the things I'd been taught, teaching how you back someone off, right you're getting on my nerves |
| | 28/730 | I'd got much more deeper insight into how people worked |
| Neil<br><br>**Difficulties interpreting social situations** | 19/479-483 | that was a big problem was sort of like all the different attitudes I had to get used to, all the different ways students and pupils would talk to each other, or how they thought should talk to each other, more or less, and getting used to that attitude was quite tricky |
| **Recognition of others as a conscious act** | 25/613-4 | I always look at someone and make sure I know them so I know who I'm talking to |
| Lee<br>**Difficulties with social interactions** | 6/136-137 | I can never just walk up and talk to someone |
| | 6/140-141 | I really just can't bring myself to talk to someone else |
| | 8/172-174 | Nothing social, just me sitting down and writing the answers to questions. Something like maths, not something |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | that's social |
| | 8/175-179 | *How do the social type of lessons make you feel?*<br>Terrified, frankly.<br>*In what way?*<br>Heartbeat gets faster, my heart rate increases. Get shaky, and just generally really really scared |
| | 8-9/190-194 | *What would be the lesson from hell?*<br>PE definitely. Have to run about with everyone, play football, work together with people. That's why I'm always in the corner of the pitch doing absolutely nothing.<br>*So you don't participate?*<br>No I don't participate. |
| | 9/212-213 | It would be very traumatic if they were trying to force me to get involved |
| | 10/220-224 | *What would be the sort of lesson where you'd learn the least?*<br>Ermm When we're in groups, working together, talk with each other, and figure out solving problems together. |
| | 10/231 | I get scared round other people |
| | 11/265-266 | a socialising problem, people with Aspergers can't socialise very well |
| | 12/271 | we really just don't like socialising with people |
| Neil | 392-395 | By always putting people into pairs, you'd find that someone with Aspergers like me would often have sort of like erm a mental car crash with someone else sometimes. |
| Mark<br><br>**Difficulty forming relationships** | 2/34-36 | *I got a different support teacher and it took me a while to get used to her one way or another* |

| Dislike of social interactions | 6/113-114; 116 | *I couldn't cope with anything else. I just walked around in circles around the school ... I just didn't feel like socialising* |
|---|---|---|
| Friendships as confusing<br>John | 7/134-137 | *Well, there was someone called Toni, who was part my friend and part not, because one minute she was nice to me, the next not, sort of thing* |
| Social interactions as negative<br><br>John | 6/116-121 | *I used to make a rumour about someone who I thought that was true, about someone who shoved his penis towards me which is not very pleasant. It was true, but he says there isn't* |
| | 7/130-131 | *Were some people unkind to you? Yeah, but not all people* |
| Difficulties with social understanding / interactions | 7/143-148 | *There was once someone had a fight with her, and then someone swore to her, saying words like 'shut the fuck up,' and she said 'I dare you to say that,' and I don't. And she also denied that she calls me a Paki* |
| Negative relationships with others / Self as victim<br>Neil | 15/370-2 | being shouted at, no matter what, always feels like you're on the receiving end of someone just really having a go at you |
| | 16/413-4 | we feel with loads of attention being drawn to us it feels like there's that many more people having a go at us. |
| | 23/567 | he'd been bullying me for a bit |
| | 24/579-580 | And he went by me kicking all these out of my pockets and heard some people laughing beside me. |
| | 25/628-9 | I was the odd one out I was the most ... the most useable target really |
| | 26/663-5 | he, for some reason, had decided to follow John Brown and start having a crack at me |
| | 27/696-7 | I look at him standing over me trying to |

| | | have a good laugh at me |
|---|---|---|
| | 16/405-412 | *[the ideal school]* would be a place where teachers don't have to use shouting as a method of discipline because generally people with Aspergers can be a bit more sensitive than other people and shouting obviously alerts them to the fact that there's tension being done to them And that with an Aspergers person is almost as wounding as someone being like slapped, because we feel with loads of attention being drawn to us it feels like there's that many more people having a go at us. |
| Lee (Teacher as negative influence) | 3/46-53 | I had a teacher called Mr. Reilly, who didn't care at all about special needs in any way so, you know, because I acted differently to everyone because I sometimes got stressed, and back then I overreacted all the time and was very emotional. So, when I didn't do work right he put it up in front of the class and yelled at me. Sat me on a table with a bunch of girls so they could just watch me cry. |
| | 6/119-120 | I thought she *(LSA)* was just there to protect me from bullies |
| Neil **Friendship through shared interest / experiences** | 4/84-89 | but being with Mike and Charles, who are sort of like friends who play with me in this band we've got together, being able to create something between us, and have something that all 3 of us can share and work together at was such a nice feeling |
| | 8/188-9 | They said that if you were a good player, people would pick up on that and then they would talk to you |
| | 28/733-740 | When I actually bumped into Charles, he'd never even picked up a bass guitar before. He had no idea how to play |

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| | | bass, after I'd started learning the guitar and started learning the drums, Charles thought, 'Oh hang on, I think I'll learn how to play bass', and, after a while he was getting pretty good, and Mike came up and mentioned, 'Oh I play the drums as well', and when we put it all together, for some reason, it clicked. |
| | 29/781-787 | I think the best way to describe the feeling that I got from me Mike and Charles is that all of us had been what you'd call pushed to the side a bit. Charles was more or less silent all the time, so nobody really took much notice of him, but I really just clicked with him. He's probably the closest friend I have now. There's also Mike who's got a real penchant for cookery as well as drumming |
| | 31/816-8 | Talking to Charles came easily because we seemed to automatically just click with each other |
| | 31/846-851 | He's a quiet person, but he is undoubtedly one of the nicest guys I've ever met. In all the times I've known him, in all the times when I've broken down and had upset days, he's never once let me down, and probably never will. I think that's probably why I've clicked into him so well, we're both very good listeners |
| | 30/810-818 | here we were, 3 misfits in mainstream secondary school, erm not many people even knew we existed for the most part, there were only a small group of people who even talked to us for the most part, but yet, at the end of the year, we could go up in front of the entire school, and give everyone a big grin and make them all clap, that to me, knowing that we've had probably the worst run of luck, but still just done the best we possibly could with it makes me feel proud of it I think. |

| Lee | 9/200-202 | It is very lucky there's another person with Aspergers, and he does the same thing so I've got some backing |
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| | 12/275 | he's a very good friend |
| | 11/263-4 | people with Aspergers much better understand other people with Aspergers |
| | 11-12/ 265-272 | we understand each other much better because we all have those little things that we really really dislike and we all understand emotionally what the other person is going through. We understand why they'd obsess over one thing or why we really just don't like socialising with people, we understand each other much better |
| | 12/277-279 | he spends too much time talking about violent video games to think about any of that stuff, he's quite obsessed with that |
| | 12/282-284 | he can't suppress his emotions. When he came into school he was throwing chairs across the classroom because he just couldn't control himself |
| | 12/286-288 | I understand why the emotions inside him would cause him to do those sort of things, if he's under pressure or something |
| | 13/292-296 | I understand emotionally what he's going through because I go through the same things he goes through, you know obviously I feel it less than him because I don't throw chairs across the classroom |
| Lee | | |

**Super-ordinate Theme: Views Related to Educational Context**

| Theme | Page/Line | |
|---|---|---|
| Neil<br>**Positive effects of adults** | 4/97-101 | The biggest thing that school did to help me though, was erm they tried to learn who I was. There was erm a nice lady who erm to this day, I only know as Mrs Hill, but she really really just spent the time with me and she really clicked with the way I do things |
| | 5/110-16 | she really learned what my pattern was and learnt to follow it, so that she could recognise when I was getting sort of like to the point of sort of like bursting, she could recognise sort of like what would make me more productive in lessons. She could really help me focus myself, and that was really something that I needed at that point. |
| | 5/120-130 | The only person who was with me throughout secondary school was Mrs Hobs and she was absolutely wonderful. She was erm she was a very softly spoken lady. She made sure that everyone understood what she was saying when she talked to them, and throughout all the times I'd been into what doctors would say was depression, throughout all the times when I'd been in and out of depression, throughout all the tantrums, throughout all the bits where all the bits had been piled on top of me, she'd always somehow given me the belief that there was some way out of it, and every single time she was right. |
| | 7/171-180 | at the school I went to, Breckfield, the teachers were very very polite, very very nice to you, and they had a nice erm laid back but serious attitude towards you. They taught you everything you needed to know without having to erm force it down. They definitely had a good sense of humour, and the teachers that I had were incredibly capable. One subject that I enjoyed doing and had a bit of a knack for from the start was maths. And the teacher that I had for most of time I was at Breckfield was Mr. |

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| | | Carrol, and he was fantastic, in a word, at what he did. |
| | 12/288-290 | A lot of the support workers, as I grew up sorry, picked up on what was making me agitated. And actually found a way of softening the impact, so that next time I would be able to do better |
| | 13/323-7 | The best thing they can learn is to be flexible, the biggest erm difference between primary and secondary school teachers is that secondary school teachers have a different attitude towards the pupils, they look at each pupil and they can see them becoming more individual and they can see them sort of like growing up and starting expressing themselves |
| | 13/330-331 | the biggest thing a primary teacher can learn from a secondary is to have that attitude of treating everyone as an individual |
| | 13-14/ 338-342 | I think the biggest thing that they can learn is to treat them all differently, knowing that they're individuals rather than they're all just developing .. treating them as individuals rather than members of one big group ...that would be a big step |
| | 14/351-8 | my ideal lesson would be with a teacher whose got a nice .. a good attitude towards the students, I'll use Mr. Carrol as an example because all the time he was with me, teaching me, he never gave a bad maths lesson. He said from the beginning that he would not shout at the pupils, but also that if they did not want to listen, then they would be quiet so they wouldn't interrupt other people. His attitude was if you didn't want to learn, then that is your problem |
| | 15/381-3 | I think the best way to describe this would be having erm having the option sometimes to work in a pair, but not always in a lesson, I think that's the best thing to put forward |

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| | 16/413-417 | Definitely a school where people don't shout would be good. Also a place where people are still disciplined and all that, as in a normal school, but also where ... I think also where students are more ... helped along the way, rather than being told what's wrong and right all the time |
| | 17-18/447-453 | it was definitely a special school for special people. It was very small. The best way I could describe it is that it wasn't such a school as a family in a way, and that was the thing I loved about being there, and I think that would really describe how Aspergers people tend to work. They were very very personal there. It always felt like if they were talking to you, it wasn't as a teacher would talk to a pupil almost, it was probably as a parent would talk to a child almost |
| | 18/456-462 | The headteacher was called Mrs Smith. She literally had treated us like we were her own children, she came into see how we were doing, always giving commendations on what we'd done well, seeing what we were doing in our spare time, giving us all of the credits that we could when we needed them. It just fit so well with what we needed, it was just a wonderful feeling to be there |
| | 20/508-509 | a special school with all the capabilities of a mainstream school then that would probably be the best |
| | 20/513-518 | if I asked Mr. Carrol for help for Maths, he would go straight over it, and explain in detail each little bit, so that it all sort of like slotted in well and it would really stick in my mind because I'd know that he was explaining this to me and I would remember every little detail. |
| | 20/523-4 | we generally do tend to pick up on things very well if it's one on one |

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| | 25/638-640 | she didn't talk to people or pupils as beneath her, she talked to them like friends that she would talk to of an evening |
| | 25/644-6 | Mrs Brierley really was exceptional in the way she treated us as equals. She never once talked down on us. |
| Lee<br>**Teacher as a positive influence** | 9/198-9 | He's very concerned about my Aspergers I think. He doesn't get angry with me because I'm different |
| | 10/227 | I think they're considerate of my problem |
| Mark | 2/28 | *All the teachers were still being nice to you* |
| | 2/34 | *They were nice [Y7 teachers]* |
| John | 10/214-216 | *my support teacher did an awful lot for me, and I don't think I could have got the grades I could if it wasn't for her* |
| | 2/29-32 | *I liked Year 5 because my favourite teacher was there, Mrs. Parrot. Well it wasn't Mrs Parrot, but it might have been someone else.* |
| | 2/34-35 | *I think she knew me, and she was very kind* |
| | 11/227-228 | *The teachers would be very nice, and understanding [in ideal school]* |
| | 4/76-78 | *They help me understand about which bit I did not get, start by saying words I didn't know what they mean* |
| **Teacher as a negative influence**<br>John | 8/159-166 | *Did some teachers make you feel angry?*<br>[Long pause] *There was one called Mr. Baker, who's a PE teacher, who had to make me play football and all that, and* |

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| | | *he said that I'm not trying, he said 'you're not trying,' and I said 'I do not like football.'* |
| | 10/203-5 | *A teacher (stopped me from learning / put me off), because at year 8 in a few weeks I did not get any support, and it was a struggle* |
| | 10/207-211 | *It was horrible. At one time in science, not science, somewhere, he told me to write it down, but he was too quick, when I was about to finish it, he rubbed it off and I couldn't remember what* |
| Neil<br>**Need to understand expectations** | 31/812-815 | That's one thing I had a big problem with, I wouldn't do anything unless I knew exactly what was going to go right, and exactly what was going to go wrong |
| | 32/834-8 | You've gotta make sure the person with Aspergers is *aware* of what's going on. The best way I can describe it is that we don't like surprises. Having a surprise for someone who's Aspergers, it feels like there's something going wrong |
| Lee<br>**Need to understand expectations** | 4/90-92 | she was asking me to do something that I didn't understand |
| | 5/97-99 | it's just er very stressing when someone asks me to do something that I don't understand |
| | 14/316-318 | when they talk to people with Aspergers they need to know that we need to completely understand what it is that we're doing |
| Lee<br>**Need for explicit instructions** | 5/99-102 | if people aren't clear, if they aren't er very, very direct, just point at something and say, 'do that,' like I have no idea what they're talking about |
| | 10/217-219 | Just the fact that it's very simple, direct. There's not...it's mathematics, it doesn't differentiate or change, it's just mathematics, end of |
| | 14/319-322 | you need to be very very descriptive of what they want the person to do. |

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| | | Because if you're not there's a chance that they're gonna get really really upset. If we get confused, we're in big trouble |
| | 14/325-326 | it's because they're not descriptive enough |
| | 14/328 | just not enough information |
| **Importance of familiar environment** Mark | 5/98-103 | *well laid out, easy to get round. I mean I learnt, I used to struggle learning places, I still don't know Redmond [college] and I've gone there about 5 days and still don't know the place fully. And er I must have been there a couple of days, and I was on my own to do it* |
| **Ideal school** | 10/222-3 | *My ideal school would have to be set out in such a way that it was easy to get around, memorisable locations* |
| | 2/41-42 | *I was a little worried about where I had to go next and what I was supposed to do* |
| **Ideal School** Nick | 504-510 | a mix between the two. One obviously you need to know everything that you want, you need to be able to know everything that you have to know (yawn) and a specialist school is not really going to be able to provide that all the time, but it can more or less go all the way some of the time. I think that if it were a special school with all the capabilities of a mainstream school then that would probably be the best |
| Lee | 238-245 | where everyone just goes to school they could socialise at break. People wouldn't talk in class, wouldn't swear or blasphemise, that's just pointless, I don't know why people do that. You know, they go to class, they do the work. They go out of class, then they socialise, they socialise during dinner. They do what they're supposed to do basically, and not disobey the rules. |
| | 253-255 | we need to be with people who are |

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| | | normal, because in the real world everybody doesn't have Aspergers |
| John | 231 | *I think a main kind of school.* |
| Mark<br>**Inability to cope at unstructured times** | 5/110-111 | *I just wandered around. Literally went around in circles* |
| | 6/112-114 | Throughout lunchtime, free times?<br>*Yeah. I couldn't cope with anything else. I just walked around in circles around the school* |

## Additional themes, omitted from final report

## Supportive factors

| Theme | Page/ Line | Transcript |
|---|---|---|
| Neil<br>Importance of Art and Music | 4/83-85 | that I have this sort of like this creative desire, I like to make things, whether its visual or sound or whatever |
| | 8/201-4 | Art was something that was very close to me, so that's obviously when I took that I was quite worried that it was going to be sort of like something stressful that would eventually break me |
| | 8/208-214 | That was one thing Art really did for me, it helped me be a lot more open minded to things. For example before art, Id really sort of liked, loved doing pencil and pen arts and all that. I'd never done a 3D piece, never put paint to canvas, that sort of stuff. By the end I was just ready to up and go for all of it. It really came out a lot better... |
| | 9/218-226 | there are a couple of things that I keep quite close to me, things that I love doing things, that I try and express myself through. Music is one of them, and art is the other main thing. Sort of like sight and sound sort of aspect of it. Erm, now music, I can do pretty much myself and |

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| | | express myself however I like. With art, I put it down into how I feel at that moment, and then on it goes, it's like a lasting impression, so it's bringing up those parts of me that I might have either forgotten or I can still feel inside me... |
| | 9/229-231 | I don't feel like there's any sort of rules about what art can and can't be, I think as long as someone's done their best and tried to put what they feel into it, then it can be art |
| | 22/581-8 | It was also then that I started playing the guitar. I'd loved rock music for a long time but I really really just set off listening to it at that point. The best thing about rock music is that it just seemed so in touch with what my attitude was, a lot of it was darker, a lot of it was heavier, but it always seemed that there was that bit of hope in it in a way. I mean sure enough a lot of it might have been about the world ending, but in the end there is that little bit of hope that was survivable. |
| | 26/663-7 | At this point in year 10 I'd already reinvented myself a large amount of the way, I was getting better at playing guitar and drums, I was er learning how to control myself, I knew how to act around other people, and I'd really found a lot more of that peace of mind than I had before |
| | 27-8/718-724 | As far as the best thing in school have gone, I'd say two things really stand out. One was when we got to play in front of the whole school, me and the band. Me, Neil and Charles managed to play some songs that we'd actually written ourselves in front of the school, and the feeling of everyone cheering after we'd done that was just wonderful, knowing that we'd made someone happy by our music was very good. |
| | 29/755-761 | I find that a lot of people who have an interest in rock music have a much deeper insight because a lot of the |

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| | | elements of rock have a lot more deeper lyrics, deeper insights.  A lot of things that rock musicians or singers play or sing about is either things that have gone wrong in their life, or deep issues that have troubled them over the years |
| | 29-30/774-6 | I actually love painting, that I really like sort of painting really bright landscapes or seas and sun and that sort of stuff |
| Neil **Life as a battle** | 4/73-6 | it sort of renewed that part of me that had sort of like said never give in. So I'd always had this attitude that, no matter what, I'd never stop, I'd never surrender |
| | 13/318-320 | I'd tried being nice to people, but as it got on through primary school, it just felt ... harder, every step forward felt like I'd been put backwards again |
| | 21/557-560 | I had never had the belief that I would make it to the end of secondary school, it had just become sort of like a bit of a cynical attitude that I'm never gonna make it through there |
| | 22/590 | but in the end there is that little bit of hope that was survivable |
| **Disrupted education** | 1/14-15 | I didn't spend too much time at my first primary school, not very much at all |
| | 1/20-21 | I had 5 school moves erm within primary school years |
| | 1/23-25 | at my last school I spent an extra year at; I did an extra year on primary school things |

## Appendix 11: 'Mini-biographies' of the participants[7]

**Lee**

Lee, aged 14 years 11 months, is in Year 10 at a high school in my 'patch', although I have never worked with him professionally. He lives with his parents, his two brothers and his two sisters. He was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome when he was 8 years old and was living in another part of the country. It is understood that his father also has Asperger Syndrome. A year after receiving his diagnosis, his teachers had requested EP involvement as part of the Statutory Assessment process. Concerns were documented about his violent behaviour, his dislike of change or of intrusion into 'his world', his need for lots of reassurance and his 'deep, lengthy' conversations. He was also described as having several strengths which included excellent logic skills, an astute understanding of maths, particularly mental calculations, and his memory was 'excellent' in that he needed to be given information only once. His cognitive abilities were assessed by the EP using the British Ability Scales, 2$^{nd}$ Edition (BAS ll) and his General Conceptual Ability was found to be very high and in the 93$^{rd}$ percentile. At this time, his interests included model-making and using a computer. However, he was encountering difficulties with socialising and he tended to wander around the school field at play time and lunch time. Lee's teacher reported that, although in class, Lee would refuse to talk, particularly at times when changes occurred, Lee himself did not believe he had any 'problems' and that he felt his peers were the ones with incomprehensible difficulties.

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[7] All names used are pseudonyms. Information is based on contents of files held by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS).

Lee's parents' contribution to the Statutory Assessment also included a description of his strengths and weaknesses. They noted that he excels in constructing models and his drawing skills are also good but his handwriting is 'atrocious'. He enjoys his own company, preferring to play on the computer or the Play Station. He can be obsessively tidy but will help with chores at home, even though when initially asked, he may have a 'tantrum'. His parents describe him as being moody and sulky yet affectionate and responsible.

Lee was issued with a statement of special educational needs for ASD when he was nine which enabled him to be appropriately supported in school. He and his family moved to their present home when Lee was in Year 6. His statement was amended shortly afterwards to reflect his changing needs at the time of his transition to secondary education.

At high school, Lee was supported for 24.5 hours per week by a Teaching Assistant and he received termly input from a specialist teacher for ASD. The remainder of the information in Lee's file comprises reports written by the specialist teacher for Annual Reviews of his statement. Each of these reports documents the progress he has made academically. They also describe the difficulties he continues to encounter with peer interactions and with organisational skills, particularly the management of his homework.

**Neil**

At the time this research was conducted, Neil was aged 16 years 10 months and was, therefore, the oldest participant. His first involvement with the EPS was when he was in Year 1. His mainstream primary school had requested that an EP assess his needs so that they might be better able to support him with his 'extreme behavioural problems'. He was also described as having rigidity of thought, aggression and an intense interest in some subjects, particularly space and skeletons. His 'extreme behavioural problems' were exhibited by his hitting and kicking members of staff (including the Head Teacher) seemingly in response to simple requests.

The EP assessment was carried out at the end of Neil's time in Year 1. His General Conceptual Ability (GCA), as measured by the BAS ll, was found to be in the very high range, placing him in the 99.7$^{th}$ percentile. His attainments in Literacy and Numeracy were also assessed and, although his scores were in excess of his chronological age, they were below what might be expected in relation to his GCA.

At the start of Year 2, Neil was offered a place in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) for three days per week. While there, he is reported to have made 'some progress'. However, he appeared to be tense and anxious and continued to have difficulties with self-control. He was also described as being terrified of failure, of having difficulties with transitions between activities, repetitive behaviours and rigidities of thought. Whilst at the PRU, he had several psychotherapeutic sessions with a specialist EP.

The following year, as Neil started Year 2, he was reintegrated into his mainstream primary school but was temporarily excluded after only two days following a 'very violent incident' towards a member of staff. He returned to the PRU where his behaviour again caused him to be excluded for three days. The Statutory Assessment process was immediately initiated and, at the end of the academic year, a statement of special educational needs was issued for Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD). A special school for BESD within the Local Authority was named on his statement and Neil was due to start his Year 3 education at that school. However, great concerns were expressed very strongly by the EP who had assessed Neil about how this school would be able to meet the learning needs of such a highly able child. Nevertheless, he was placed in the special school throughout that academic year.

Although reports indicate that he was making progress, he continued to display high levels of anxiety and he also refused to do homework and was reluctant to do any writing. The EP referred him to a specialist EP for Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) who conducted a very lengthy assessment which concluded that he had Asperger Syndrome. Neil was then offered a place at an independent special school which was located out of county. As he started in Year 4, his statement was amended to reflect this change of placement.

Neil settled in very well and began to make progress in all areas. Documentation from an Annual Review of his statement when he was in Year 6 and to which he contributed indicates that this placement was the most successful. Neil described himself as being in "a world of learning,

experience, knowledge and happiness! I love it here!" at this Review, it was decided that he continue to attend the school for an extra year, thus repeating Year 6. The aim of this was 'to further develop resilience and social skills prior to reintegrating into mainstream'.

The following year, Neil started at a local mainstream high school and although he had several fixed-term exclusions for refusing to follow instructions or for using offensive language, and even though his behaviour continued to be described as 'challenging', he remained at that school until he had completed his GCSEs.

**Mark**

Mark, aged 16 years 1 month, had just completed Year 11 at a local mainstream high school when he was interviewed for this research. His difficulties were first noticed by his mother when he was aged two, shortly after the birth of Mark's younger brother. She later reported that he seemed to change after having the MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella) vaccination. These difficulties were related to his speech and understanding of language, poor concentration and behaviour in the form of tantrums. She also felt that he was not very affectionate towards her. An assessment by a Clinical Medical Officer noted the following observations: Mark showed a reluctance to make eye contact and appeared to be in his own world; he did not play with any of the toys in the room and his receptive and expressive language skills were delayed; his diet was limited and he had a dislike of noise. However, his cognitive and motor development was described as 'normal'.

The medical officer advised that he be referred to a Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) and an Educational Psychologist.

A request for EP involvement was made by staff at the nursery Mark attended at the age of three. They described him as having several 'unusual' behaviours which included nonsensical talk, physical aggression such as biting, hitting and throwing toys and appearing to be excited for no apparent reason or screaming or shaking his head while speaking to himself. He also had difficulties with toileting. They emphasised the need for one-to-one support. For reasons that are not clear, Mark did not see an EP until after he had started school and he therefore joined his Reception class with no support in place.

Following a consultation meeting with an EP, several strategies were put into place to support Mark. He was also referred to the Pupil Referral Service (PRS) for advice on how to manage his behaviour and, during the summer term, he attended a placement within the PRS every afternoon.

At the age of five, Mark was also assessed by a Clinical Psychologist who concluded that, although he had behavioural difficulties, was sensitive to noise and would retreat into himself in noisy environments, and had toileting issues triggered by anxiety, there was nothing that the Clinical Psychology service could do for him.

During the summer term of his Reception class year, following his parents' separation, Mark and his brother moved to their present county of residence with their mother. He was immediately assessed by a SALT who reported that he had difficulties associated with the social and pragmatic use of

language. He was also referred to the EPS upon starting at his new school as his teachers required some advice on how best to meet his social and language-related difficulties. The PRS in that area also became involved.

Whilst in Year 1, an EP consultation led to a request being made for a Statutory Assessment. The EP Advice for this Assessment mentioned the possibility of Mark having an Autistic Spectrum Disorder and the EP suggested that further investigation was required. The medical Advice also suggested that a referral be made to a Consultant Paediatric Psychiatrist so that the possibility of Mark having Aspergers syndrome be further explored. However, Mark's initial statement was for Language and Communication and Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties; this was issued when Mark was six.

Mark had a lengthy wait before being assessed by an Occupational Therapist from CAMHS when he was almost eight. Her report stated that he had an Autistic Spectrum Disorder, although no formal ASD assessment had been carried out. He continued to have speech therapy, both on an individual basis and within a group and was making good progress. He was also progressing in school with the support of a Teaching Assistant. By Year 4, it was becoming recognised that his computer skills were very good and he was beginning to interact more with his peers. However, his attainments in Literacy and Numeracy were low and he had great difficulties with handwriting and spelling. At about this time, he was prescribed tinted lenses as they had been found to have a positive effect on his reading.

Settling in to Year 5 was challenging for Mark and he had several 'temper tantrums' and exhibited challenging behaviour. He also refused to do any tasks that he found difficult. However, Year 6 was 'an excellent year' and he made progress in all areas, particularly reading.

Very little information could be found regarding Mark's transition to a mainstream high school although, by the age of 13, his statement had been updated four times. Throughout his time at high school, he was supported by a TA and by a specialist teacher for ASD. Her final report states that Mark was looking forward to attending college the following year and that he was receiving extra support such as attendance at a Homework Club and extra maths lessons in preparation for his GCSEs.

**John**

John, now aged 16, has a twin sister and was first assessed by a paediatrician at a Child Development Centre (CDC) when he was 2 ½. His mother had become concerned about his development in comparison with his sister's, particularly in relation to his expressive language skills. The CDC assessment indicated that he also had some delay in the development of communication and social interaction skills. He was described as making only fleeting eye contact, it was difficult to engage him in any tasks, and he tended to 'interact on his own terms'. The staff at his nursery had also made the same observations and they had also noticed that he had a love of computers and was more proficient at using them than were his peers. He was referred to the SALT service and was accepted.

At the age of three, John was further assessed by a specialist EP for ASD. In addition to the difficulties noted in the earlier assessment, the EP also commented on several other characteristics that he was exhibiting, namely a tendency to throw toys on the floor if they did not interest him, and to have 'tantrums' in response requests from adults. She noted that he likes to 'set his own agenda' and she concluded that he was delayed in the development of flexibility of thinking and in imaginative play. In addition, he also had difficulties with attention skills and imitation and his cognitive skills were also delayed. She felt that he met the criteria for a diagnosis of ASD and a request for a statutory assessment was submitted shortly thereafter.

John started school with his statement in place and he was supported by a Special Support Assistant (SSA) during each morning. Several strategies were put into place, such as the use of visual cues, and he settled in well, quickly becoming familiar with the class room routines. He continued to have SALT and, although he interacted with peers, he seemed to prefer his own company. His behaviour could be quite challenging at times and his mother informed the Annual Review meeting that he 'goes from being no problem at all to being a total nightmare'.

By the time John entered Year 1, his teachers found it very difficult to manage his behaviour when his SSA was not there and requested further funding from the Local Authority so that he could be supported on a full-time basis. Without adult support, he would refuse to comply with requests, have tantrums and throw items around the room. However, he was happy to go to school and was beginning to play with other children at playtime. It was reported that he was finding writing very difficult. He was also affected by

traffic noise, wind and rain and he found it hard to adapt to changes in his routine.

No information could be found about the remainder of John's time in primary school until the time of his transitional review in Year 6. His Mum had requested that he be re-assessed by the specialist EP who assessed him when he was at nursery. The EP conducted a cognitive assessment and found him to be performing below the average range. His reading ability was above average and his reading comprehension skills were just below average. This indicated that he had a literal understanding of language and could not make inferences related to a text but, overall, his progress in Literacy had been 'excellent'. He had very good computer skills and had developed a friendship with a girl in his class. On the day of the assessment, she was absent and John spent playtime running around on his own. Because of continued SALT, his speech had improved greatly. However, he continued to encounter difficulties with social understanding, communication and he lacked flexibility of thinking and behaviour.

John's transition to a local high school was very carefully planned and managed and he settled in very well. His peers were very supportive and he was gradually becoming more independent. Indeed, throughout his high school years, he continued to make progress although peer relationships continued to be problematic. He developed an interest in Drama and he joined the school choir. By Year 11, he was following a modified curriculum and a reduced timetable to allow him to work with a support teacher on homework and reinforcement work. He had made progress in all areas and was beginning to initiate interactions with others. As he was hoping to attend

college after his GCSEs, plans were made to establish links with staff from the college he was planning to attend.

**Appendix 11: Transcript of Interview with Nick**

*Do you remember your very first day at school.., reception, when you were probably four?*

Erm, not really. The one thing that's always been a problem is sort of like remembering sort of like primary school years because that was a very difficult time. That was before I was diagnosed with autism so people used to think I was quite a problem child.

*What made them think you were a problem child?*

I think it was because, erm, they didn't pick up on what set me off. They knew that there was something about me that made me sort of like quite sensitive, but they just picked that up as sort of like me having either too much pride or too much self confidence or something like that. It was erm definitely a time when I was very misunderstood. As far as I can remember I didn't spend too much time at my first primary school, not very much at all, I don't think I even got through my first two years.

*You mean that you didn't attend very much, or you weren't at that particular school for a long time?*

I wasn't at that particular school for a long time. I think that all in all, if the truth were to be told, I had 5 school moves erm within primary school years.

*That's a lot isn't it!?*

Yes. And that isn't taking into account that at my last school I spent an extra year at; I did an extra year on primary school things, because the last school was the best place for me to go.

*You said about the teachers not recognising what the triggers were that upset you. What were the triggers that set you off?*

Well the first thing to say is that they didn't know I had autism then or aspergers, so it would have been pretty hard for them to notice that about me. But generally things that set me off I think were either personal insults or generally just people getting too close. I think for as long as I can remember, I always had this attitude of a bit of a recluse, so people getting too close was always a big trigger. Very early on, before I'd sort of like learned to control myself better, I used to, for lack of a better word, explode. I'd be lashing out at things that were closest to me, shouting at the top of my voice, just doing everything I possibly could that I knew would get people away from me I think.

*Did it work?*

For the most part, but it just really really didn't give that good a feeling inside of me afterwards though.

*Your memories aren't happy then of your younger life at school?*

Nah. My younger life at school, if I were to compare it to my memory of my secondary school life, it feels a little bit patchy. I can remember the big events of what happened, but for the most part it is quite hard to think of it.

*Thanks for telling me that. Can you tell me which class or year group throughout your education you enjoyed the most?*

In primary or secondary?

*No throughout your whole education.*

Throughout my whole education, I would have thought that it would be this last year, year 11. Not because it was the last year of school, or that I knew I was moving on. Moving on to college, that's the next big thing, that will be tough that will be like starting again. Erm, but it just felt in year 11 that after I'd gotten through all of the major steps in each year before that I'd really sort of like managed to make myself into what I wanted to be, it felt like I knew myself better. That really made a big difference, because for the most part, the biggest danger that I had, sorry the biggest danger to me was essentially myself, it always felt like that there was a sort of second version of me inside that was just that little bit below the surface, a version of me that I didn't like at that point.

*And then you became yourself, or you learned to adapt?*

I learned to change that other person and myself into what I wanted to be.

*That's great, really good! Did anything at school help that to happen, or did it all come from you?*

I think it was a bit of both, erm, ... round about year 10, sadly my, halfway through year 10 actually, sadly my grandma passed away. I think it was roundabout that and after I sort of like er what she'd said to me as she was passing away, it sort of renewed that part of me that had sort of like said never give in. So I'd always had this attitude that, no matter what, I'd never stop, I'd never surrender, I know that sounds a bit corny to some people, but that was sort of like the only thing that had kept me going for a long time. After that it sort of really really bolstered though, it was like I got a new determination that sort of like nothing was going to stop me from achieving

what I wanted. I was learning to play music a lot more, obviously, and it just felt *so* nice to be able to create something again. One thing you would probably like to know is that I have this sort of like this creative desire, I like to make things, whether its visual or sound or whatever, but being with N and C, who are sort of like friends who play with me in this band we've got together, being able to create something between us, and have something that all 3 of us can share and work together at was such a nice feeling.

*Brilliant, did school help you, did they facilitate you to set up your group?*

For the most part, the special needs department was erm quite supportive. The music dept the head of the music dept rather, was not supportive as he was sort of like a more classically oriented man, and didn't see what you'd probably refer to as fringe music as essential, but we still persevered outside of school as well and that helped. The biggest thing that school did to help me though, was erm they tried to learn who I was. There was erm a nice lady who erm to this day, I only know as Mrs Hill, but she really really just spent the time with me and she really clicked with the way I do things.

*What role did she have?*

She was a support worker, she was with the special needs dept. It's kind of hard to describe what it felt like, but this is the best I can do… With most people who have Aspergers, we all have a certain pattern that we do things. From person to person that pattern is always different, no two Aspergers people are the same that's for certain. It's even more sort of like different than between normal people, I mean normal as in typical people, I don't mean that as an insult. But erm she really learned what my pattern was and learnt to follow it, so that she could recognise when I was getting sort of like to the point of sort of like bursting, she could recognise sort of like what would make me more productive in lessons. She could really help me focus myself, and that was really something that I needed at that point.

*And was she with you throughout your secondary school?...*

She was only there at the end of year 10 and most of the way through year 11. Before that it was always like stop start and all that. The only person who was with me throughout secondary school was Mrs Hobs and she was absolutely wonderful. She was erm she was a very softly spoken lady. She made sure that everyone understood what she was saying when she talked to them, and throughout all the times I'd been into what doctors would say was depression, throughout all the times when I'd been in and out of depression, throughout all the tantrums, throughout all the bits where all the bits had been piled on top of me, she'd always somehow given me the belief that there was some way out of it, and every single time she was right.

*So when you talk about depression, or another word you used, was it stress? What would your behaviour be like then?*

Well if I was getting into a depressive state, I would probably talk with a little bit more of an edge to it, I would still be very careful of what I said to people, but it would almost be as if I was almost slightly vacant er sometimes, it would always be like there was always something going on at the back of my mind. When I went into these sort of like depressive states, what I would try to do would be to go in to myself, find out what was depressing me and then try and solve it just by thinking around it.

*Did it work?*

Yeah. The one thing I didn't want to do was attach myself to one thing so closely that I couldn't get out of it. So I always sort of like tried to think my way around things. Say for example after my grandma died, as I mentioned earlier, that put me in a bit of depressive state for a bit, but afterwards it gave me a new determination to get me where I was going.

*Was there anything at school that would put you into that depressive state?*

Erm knowing that there was something that I've done wrong at school, say in behaviours, or in class and tests, that would usually sort of like put me in a bit of a bad mood, not in an absolute state of depression, but in a bit of a bad mood - that would be the case. I think the last thing I can remember that put me in a baddish mood in school, was in the end of the year I'd just finished, when I found out that one of my science tests was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I didn't manage to finish it all, I got to the last question and then I ran out of time. I know it might sound silly to some people, but just knowing that I hadn't been able to get everything done leaves me feeling like there's just something incomplete.

*Is it important for you to get tasks completed to the end?*

Yes. I just don't like doing things halfway. That's the thing I'd say.

*Overall at school, these questions might sound repetitive, sorry about that, I just want to cover every possible angle that I can, but was there anything that you really liked best overall in all your school ..., was there anything that stood out as being the best experience/ best lesson/ best teacher?*

Erm... well, at the school I went to, Beacon, the teachers were very very polite, very very nice to you, and they had a nice erm laid back but serious attitude towards you. They taught you everything you needed to know without having to erm force it down. They definitely had a good sense of humour, and the teachers that I had were incredibly capable. One subject that I enjoyed doing and had a bit of a knack for from the start was maths.

And the teacher that I had for most of time I was at Breckfield was Mr. Carrol, and he was fantastic, in a word, at what he did.

*Were there any teachers who would be the opposite of fantastic?*

Erm I suppose that would be the music dept teacher. I dropped music at year 9 because I didn't want to pursue it as an option for two reasons. One: when I talked to the music teachers who were teaching me drums and guitar, both of them said that erm a piece of paper would be no good if you don't know how to play your instrument. They said that if you were a good player, people would pick up on that and then they would talk to you. If you have a piece of paper but you don't have the hands-on skill to do that then you're pretty much stuck in the water. So I decided that rather than having to endure sort of like that part of music, and that would probably kill off my interest which I didn't want to happen, I tried something else.

*What options did you take in the end?*

Graphics, history, I did science, which is by now that's compulsory, sorry, but I chose it anyway, and Art. Now Art sort of goes against the rule that I lay down earlier of sort of not choosing an option that I enjoyed. I chose all the options because basically I enjoyed doing them and because I had a real interest in them which helped. Art was something that was very close to me, so that's obviously when I took that I was quite worried that it was going to be sort of like something stressful that would eventually break me. At the beginning it *was* quite stressful. There was sort of like different mediums of art that I had to choose. Erm so that was really quite tough adapting to at the beginning but I managed to get through it just being a bit more open minded. That was one thing Art really did for me, it helped me be a lot more open minded to things. For example before art, Id really sort of liked, loved doing pencil and pen arts and all that. I'd never done a 3D piece, never put paint to canvas, that sort of stuff. By the end I was just ready to up and go for all of it. It really came out a lot better...

*By choosing art, you said it could have broken you,*

Yeah

*… what do you mean by that?*

Well generally, erm there are a couple of things that I keep quite close to me, things that I love doing things, that I try and express myself through. Music is one of them, and art is the other main thing. Sort of like sight and sound sort of aspect of it. Erm, now music, I can do pretty much myself and express myself however I like. With art, I put it down into how I feel at that moment, and then on it goes, it's like a lasting impression, so it's bringing up those parts of me that I might have either forgotten or I can still feel inside me...

*Wow …that sounds great - that's true art isn't it .. expressing yourself and recording something for posterity?*

I don't feel like there's any sort of rules about what art can and can't be, I think as long as someone's done their best and tried to put what they feel into it, then it can be art. But in general, the worry I had with art, is that at the beginning of it, I was very very resistant to criticism, because I always wanted to do my best, so finishing a piece of art work, or thinking that I'd finished it, and then someone telling me that I still had to continue further with it was quite tough.

*That was the teacher telling you to do more? How would that make you feel?*

It would make me feel like there was something I'd missed or forgotten, and that was something that was quite hard for me to handle at first. But generally, having someone else to help me and tell me when I wasn't on track was a big help to be honest. It really erm ..., it really gave me a second view of myself, it allowed me to look at my own work and think, right this can be better, that can be better, how can I tackle that,. In a way, it helped me to sort of like become a lot more aware of what I was capable of.

*Did it help you in other subjects as well? To take criticism without it having a negative effect?*

Yeah, definitely.

*Are you the sort of person who, if you get crosses on your work, would that upset you or have upset you in the past?*

I still feel that bit of regret that I haven't done better, but rather than have sort of like having that anger and it flying outwards, like it would have done earlier in my life, instead I have a tiny twinge of anger go inwards instead, I feel a bit regretful that I haven't been able to do the absolute best, I'll never be able to get there, but I always strive to do the best possible.

*Are you a perfectionist then? (laughs)*

Yes, I think that's the best way to describing it! (laughing)

*You're always going to be upset in that case. I suppose you've just got to live with reality...?*

The thing I like about being a perfectionist though, is that although I'll never get to that bit of perfection, I find that having that determination to go forwards, that determination to strive for something better, means that you're actually gonna come out with something pretty decent in the long run.

*It's an interesting journey then?*

It's not the destination that's important all of the time.

*When you were younger you mentioned that criticism was a lot more difficult for you to accept …*

Definitely

*… did that affect you at school in your younger years? What would happen if you were so affected?*

Erm in my younger years, with criticism, erm sort of like in early secondary school years, or even primary?

*In either … whatever you can remember.*

Well early years which is like from Y7. Y8 backwards, I would guess, that it really affected me quite badly. To be honest it was such a stressful time that I can't remember it that well. But erm from what I can remember, I really was about as bad as a student could have got for that. It just felt that like there was so *very* little that I was doing right. It felt like erm it felt like that whenever I got a question wrong, it was a deep failure for me and for everything that was going on around me. It felt like the little things were actually sort of like superimposed.

*Was there a way that teachers gave you criticism without you being offended by it?*

Yes. A lot of the support workers, as I grew up sorry, picked up on what was making me agitated. And actually found a way of softening the impact, so that next time I would be able to do better. I think the thing that erm was very important to me, seeing as I was in earlier years, meaning that I wasn't at a crucial stage, so getting questions wrong didn't have a huge impact. If I was at the SATs level, and I got that wrong, it really would have seared deeply. But erm I think the fact that I knew I could do better next time was a big help.

*When you say 'it seared deeply', were you the only one who would be wounded by that, or would you hurt others, or show anger or throw furniture or...?*

Erm both. I think it had gotten to the point where I was almost out of control at some points. I can remember there was an incident where I'd thrown a chair across the room, I think that got me banned from somewhere, and … I'm not sure if it did or not, I honestly can't remember. I can remember that at one point I accidently blacked a teacher's eye in primary school, and I've felt bad about that ever since, and he lives round near here, but he's actually keeping on asking how I'm doing, we're on good terms.

*So he's not as upset as you are, you feel bad, but he's moved on?*

Yeah. Honestly I felt like, in primary school, sorry, in primary school after I felt that, it was almost as if I was looking at myself, and almost wanting to spit at myself. I'd really gotten to a level of self-hatred that I honestly erm.. I can't even put it into words how much I'd begun to hate myself at that point.

*Is that why you hurt other people?*

Not especially, I'd tried being nice to people, but as it got on through primary school, it just felt … harder, every step forward felt like I'd been put backwards again, I just didn't really like it.

*So what can primary school teachers and staff learn from secondary school teachers?*

The best thing they can learn is to be flexible, the biggest erm difference between primary and secondary school teachers is that secondary school teachers have a different attitude towards the pupils, they look at each pupil and they can see them becoming more individual and they can see them sort of like growing up and starting expressing themselves, I mean by the time of year 9 every single person looks different from the rest, whereas in year 7 they might look reasonably similar. But the biggest thing a primary teacher can learn from a secondary is to have that attitude of treating everyone as an individual.  A primary school teacher will look at all the class of people, he or she will know their name, but she'll treat all of them with the same attitude, she'll see them all more or less at the same stage of development, having all the same outlook, she'll treat them all as if, and I know this will sound discerning, but she'll treat them all as if they're some sort of mannequin with a different face painted on the front. Erm, I think the biggest thing that they can learn is to treat them all differently, knowing that they're individuals rather than they're all just developing .. treating them as individuals rather than members of one big group …that would be a big step. I think that was erm what set me off a lot in primary school.

*I don't know if we've covered this before, but what would the ideal lesson be like for you that would enable you to learn the most from?*

Erm, that's a tricky one. The best way that I could answer that question is that there is no ideal. There's no sort of like one lesson that you can sort of like copy and paste and erm that would be right for every single subject in every single lesson. But in general, erm my ideal lesson would be with a teacher whose got a nice .. a good attitude towards the students, I'll use Mr. Carrol as an example because all the time he was with me, teaching me, he never gave a bad maths lesson. He said from the beginning that he would not shout at the pupils, but also that if they did not want to listen, then they

would be quiet so they wouldn't interrupt other people. His attitude was if you didn't want to learn, then that is your problem, and you'll eventually sort of like pay the price for that. And although that sounds like quite a full-on attitude to be telling his pupils at the beginning of the year, it stuck, and a lot of pupils in our class got very high grades. We were all expected As or A*s in our set.

*Were you in the top set?*

Yeah, yeah. His attitude was, he didn't shout at anyone sort of like erm, erm to tell them off, and I think that really makes a huge difference. Shouting and loud noises just cuts through everything that's been put down beforehand, … and being shouted at, no matter what, always feels like you're on the receiving end of someone just really having a go at you, and that in itself just really upsets people and then that makes them all the more resistant to what everyone else is telling them.

*Would that upset <u>you</u> more than others, or someone with asperger syndrome, would they be more affected by shouting and noise than other people?*

I would think so yeah.

*Okay....*

Erm, sorry

*Keep talking!*

Another thing would be.. is erm... I think the best way to describe this would be having erm having the option sometimes to work in a pair, but not always in a lesson, I think that's the best thing to put forward. Mr Carrol never put us in pairs unless he *absolutely* had to, you know like to sort of like get a point across. There was a person who sat next to me who was also a very mathematically minded person, so I always had a good conversation with him as well. He went by the name of Anthony. And the way that that would work for someone with Aspergers is that generally we like to be able to, well I like to be able to think alone and just get through questions by concentrating hard enough. By always putting people into pairs, you'd find that someone with Aspergers like me would often have sort of like erm a mental car crash with someone else sometimes.

*So it would interfere with your concentration?*

Yeah. I do get on well with some people working in pairs, but generally I preferred to work alone, unless it was with someone who was quite close to me.

*That's the ideal lesson, could you describe the ideal school for people with Asperger Syndrome?*

Ermm, like I said again, there's never gonna be an ideal school as such, because everyone with Aspergers is so different from everyone else with Aspergers, that it is literally impossible to have any sort of common ground for everyone. But in general, I would say one would be a place where teachers don't have to use shouting as a method of discipline because generally people with Aspergers can be a bit more sensitive than other people and shouting obviously alerts them to the fact that there's tension being done to them And that with an Aspergers person is almost as wounding as someone being like slapped, because we feel with loads of attention being drawn to us it feels like there's that many more people having a go at us. Definitely a school where people don't shout would be good. Also a place where people are still disciplined and all that, as in a normal school, but also where … I think also where students are more … helped along the way, rather than being told what's wrong and right all the time. I mean, for example, the biggest problem that I had as I was going on, is that I didn't understand sort of what was wrong and right about a lot of things, people would always say that's wrong and that's right, I'd have to wonder and think why that was wrong or why isn't that right. And that would be one of the main barriers that I'd have to overcome. You see when someone comes up to me and says 'Oh you mustn't do that', I'd look at it and I wouldn't be able to see what was wrong or right with it. Just someone sitting down and explaining why something is wrong or right or explaining why it upsets other people would be that big a help. In fact I was so removed from what people thought was normal, that it wasn't until I was actually in Poolside (*a Special School for ASD)*, it was one of my last years of primary school, and this was a long time considering I hadn't known it since I was in year 4, it wasn't until I was probably in the last or year before the last at Poolside that I even knew that staring was impolite. I didn't know how long I could keep eye contact with someone before it was considered as staring, and just knowing that really makes a bit difference when communicating with people.

*Do you think learning social skills could be taught verbally, or did you have visual help as well? Did you benefit from visual pictures to help you to remember things about the way to behave with others?*

Both. I knew it was like rude to punch someone, and I knew generally what was rude and impolite, but I genuinely did need help understanding what was wrong or right.

*Was Poolside a special school for autism?*

Yeah, I think so, it was definitely a special school for special people. It was very small. The best way I could describe it is that it wasn't such a school as a family in a way, and that was the thing I loved about being there, and I think that would really describe how Aspergers people tend to work. They were very very personal there. It always felt like if they were talking to you, it wasn't as a teacher would talk to a pupil almost, it was probably as a parent would talk to a child almost. I think that this would be emphasised and how much it worked was that sadly in year 9, the teacher at Poolside, who I hadn't seen in a while, passed away. The headteacher was called Mrs Smith. She literally had treated us like we were her own children, she came into see how we were doing, always giving commendations on what we'd done well, seeing what we were doing in our spare time, giving us all of the credits that we could when we needed them. It just fit so well with what we needed, it was just a wonderful feeling to be there.

*Do you think that would be the ideal school for Key Stage 2 pupils?*

Well obviously there's gonna be quite a lot of trouble, you know, with some people with Aspergers, because some people with Aspergers generally don't like emotional contact and so they generally try to distance themselves from it. And obviously a lot of them are like very wary of people getting close to them, and so they probably much prefer their personal space, and that's what a lot of Aspergers people would like to have. Of all the Aspergers people that I've known, the one thing almost all of them have in common is erm a genuine dislike of physical contact.

*And was that one of the problems at high school for you, given that there'd be so many people milling around?*

Yeah that was a big step at High School. And the other thing I would say is erm (yawn) sorry... that was a big problem was sort of like all the different attitudes I had to get used to, all the different ways students and pupils would talk to each other, or how they thought should talk to each other, more or less, and getting used to that attitude was quite tricky. But I think the best way to understand the relationship between pupils and students, sorry pupils and teachers rather, is the teachers were there to try and help the pupils, but the pupils didn't always know that. The best thing about Poolside, that helped me get around that and this is how I learned to socially interact, because practically everything from body language to how I should talk to people, how my tone of voice changes to keep people more or less interested, everything that I'm using to talk to you now I probably learned from Poolside. All they did to help was to literally sit down and talk to each other and discuss why things weren't going well and which things were going well. Telling me what things

gave out certain impressions, and they'd show me how certain body language would show I'm relaxed, they'd show me how certain actions would give the impression that I'm preoccupied or not or would give the impression that I'm preoccupied, and, as such, that's why I'm generally nervous-appearing to some people.

*So the ideal school then for pupils with Asperger Syndrome, would it be a special school or a mainstream school?*

I think the best thing to erm ... I think the best way to describe it is it would be a mix between the two. One obviously you need to know everything that you want, you need to be able to know everything that you have to know (yawn) and a specialist school is not really going to be able to provide that all the time, but it can more or less go all the way some of the time. I think that if it were a special school with all the capabilities of a mainstream school then that would probably be the best. The one thing that Aspergers people, well, using myself as an example, the one thing that we tend to pick up on very well is one on one sort of like attitudes. For example, if I asked Mr. Carrol for help for Maths, he would go straight over it, and explain in detail each little bit, so that it all sort of like slotted in well and it would really stick in my mind because I'd know that he was explaining this to me and I would remember every little detail.

*So teachers need to take the time to spend individually with those students?*

Yeah, obviously we can still pick up well in class lessons, but we generally do tend to pick up on things very well if it's one on one.

*Is that where a support assistant might come in?*

Yes definitely. That definitely helps.

*So if you don't have a teacher of Mr Carrol's exceptional ability, you'd need to have a support assistant?*

Yeah.

*Did you have support in all lessons?*

Yeah, there was support in all lessons, but in some of them, they would have to either just come in and check how I was just some of the time, or they would have to leave once or twice because some lessons sometimes they didn't come at all because of other things going on, like tests, other goings on and quite a lot of the time there was sort of like a bit of trouble with some Aspergers people. But in general, it went okay. I think the best thing the support teachers did for me was to teach me how to control myself more. I think, from what I can remember, was my first year was very hectic at

secondary school. There was erm …  well it had gotten to the point where I'd actually gotten into this er sort of like attitude where I thought it was normal to get a certain number of incidents per month or per term, that's how out of hand it had gone.

*Behavioural incidents*?

Yeah. It felt like I should either get 2 or 3 incidents per term, and that was sort of like the norm. It had just fallen into this pattern where there would be so long then there would be an incident, and it just seemed normal to me, I didn't like it.

*Had it become a target for you to get those 3 incidents per term?*

No it never became a target, but it never surprised me. I think that was the spookiest feeling. I think right up to the very last day of secondary school, that was actually when we were going and getting our shirts signed. I had right up until then, right up until the bell went at the end of that day, I had never had the belief that I would make it to the end of secondary school, it had just become sort of like a bit of a cynical attitude that I'm never gonna make it through there, but that I'd make the best of it while I got there.

*In what year did things change for you? Or what made things change? Did you just mature or...?*

Bit of both. One I was maturing, I actually matured a heck of a lot faster than most people. For example in year 8 while everyone was going on about Xboxes and all of that or Playstations and new games that were coming out, I was actually going over the meaning of my life, life after death, attitudes towards things, I was literally in year 8 I was reinventing myself. At the end of year 7 I'd taken a look back at myself and thought, I've had enough, I don't want to be this person anymore so I'm going to change. And I changed practically everything about myself to change into the person I'd always wanted to be. And this is sort of literally, … literally how I see myself almost now, what you're looking at. You see I think almost that erm back then, I saw myself as something I physically I wasn't, so I decided  to turn that all around. I went from eating all crisps and chocolates and all of that, Id sort of got into comfort eating, I don't know how, but it had become that, so I gave that up, almost overnight, and almost immediately started to lose weight. I started playing tennis and sport, and was just determined more and more to become fit and get more stamina. It was also then that I started playing the guitar. I'd loved rock music for a long time but I really really just set off listening to it at that point. The best thing about rock music is that it just seemed so in touch with what my attitude was, a lot of it was darker, a lot of it was heavier, but it always seemed that there was that bit of hope in it in a

way. I mean sure enough a lot of it might have been about the world ending, but in the end there is that little bit of hope that was survivable.

*That's brought us almost full circle because you started off talking about how important music has been for you and we've come all the way back to that now....is there anything you can tell me Nick, or that you want to tell me, about your educational experiences before we finish?*

Definitely, there are a couple of incidents that I want to go over because obviously a lot of people will listen erm to this and think that's the general scale of things, but there are a few serious instances and serious breakdowns that I've had that I think we really need to go over. I think the biggest serious breakdown I had once was when this boy who was, for lack of a better word, unlikable, by all the teachers and students,

*An unpopular boy?*

Oh he wasn't unpopular, that was the problem, he was what you'd call overly sociable, he was arrogant, self centred and liked to pick on others. He'd been known to bully others and he'd been bullying me for a bit. The thing was both students and teachers both said he was a problem. Now he was getting on me at that point, and I didn't know the teachers had this attitude to him, and he'd been picking on me for a bit and er at one point he just went straight by me and erm he slapped the side of my coat pocket. Now one thing you would probably need to know is that I kept a large bunch of pencils and pens in that pocket because I never wanted to forget them, and because my pencil case had been getting all sooty on the inside, so I thought if I kept them in my pocket with all the pencils facing one way pointing straight upwards, so I wouldn't get all the rust on the inside so they'd keep clean and I'd be able to get them quickly. And he went by me kicking all these out of my pockets and heard some people laughing beside me. At that point I'd literally had enough of him and I snapped, and it was at that point that I went in to this sort of darker side of myself, and it literally is like someone else inside me said 'you've had your chance now it's my turn', and at that point I ran up straight behind him and just as he was turning round I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and slammed him head first straight into the technology room wall. Straight after that I just went on with fists clenched getting him at the head, anywhere that I knew would hurt him. At that point, Brown, his name was John Brown, at that point he seemed to be just more or less quite, you know, shocked because I'd generally been sort of like just the sit-down-be-quiet sort of boy, but at that point I'd had enough, it was at that point that I'd started to try to  grow my hair long, I think, and he was what you'd call a chav, you know short hair, fake jewellery, the whole sort of like half-price-out-of-a-skip look. But literally I'd had enough, and so some students that were by me, and the teacher that was in there managed to stop the fight. As I was sitting

down, I was looking at my hands, literally shaking, because of all of that and more than anything I was scared myself. All I could do was just sit there in a chair that someone had somehow put behind me and say that I didn't mean to start a fight, I didn't want to hurt anyone, which is true, I didn't want to hurt him. And erm in the end, what happened was I got a cautioning and I got some detentions to go with it, but the teachers agreed to this, and the pupils, that John Brown had been a problem with quite a lot of the people for a while, and if it wasn't me who'd snapped, it would've most likely been someone else, and he'd had it coming for a bit. I didn't get any sense of pride out of that, but the only thing I got is the fact that I didn't hurt somebody who was well meaning. The thing that was actually quite spooky about that, you know, the way I judged my characters, because one thing that I make sure is that I *never* get against someone who's likable. I always look at someone and make sure I know them so I know who I'm talking to. The thing was that in year 10, that was two years after the incident, John Brown was in fact expelled from Beacon because he was caught dealing cannabis on the school grounds. He'd actually put one kid in hospital because he'd forced him to ingest it. His school life and probably his future life and getting a job will probably have been ruined by that, but I think that when he's done something as bad as that he probably will get what he deserved.

*Do you think he picked on you deliberately because you might be a bit different from other people?*

Yeah, I had a different way of talking, different way of doing things right from the start, and simply because I was the odd one out I was the most … the most useable target really. The other thing is that, obviously there are a couple of other incidents coming up, but erm just to make sure that I get a bit of a lighter bit towards the end, I'm going to tell you now about a couple of things that really say 'Yes' about it. One teacher I'd like to mention was Mrs Brierley. She wasn't a support worker, but she was utterly a fantastic teacher. She literally was what some people might call dotty because she had like a certain way of doing things, she had a bob cuttish hair, she was a fan of all the older music like me, but more than anything, she didn't talk to people or pupils as beneath her, she talked to them like friends that she would talk to of an evening. And whenever I talked to her, you know how some teachers sort of like have a sort of look that says, 'Oh right, you've come to me to help, I'll see what I can do to help but in the end I know I know better than you so I'm gonna be right, erm Mrs Brierley really was exceptional in the way she treated us as equals. She never once talked down on us.

*What lesson did she teach?*

She taught history and PSE. So she taught us everything from, you know, what was right and wrong to things like how social things can get out of hand.

*Is PSE a good way for you to learn?*

Yeah learning about looks and how all that sort of stuff can get out of hand. There are I think there are only a few other major instances that ever happened. Obviously one was with John Brown, I can't remember when the next one was after that, but I can remember that at some point, there was another boy called Rob Mills, I think, and he was almost even worse than Brown was. He, right from the word go, was what you'd call a nutcase. He would pick on people, have this arrogant way of doing things, he would get right up close and push people about because he thought it was funny, and erm he would basically just do things for the sake of getting noticed, and he, for some reason, had decided to follow John Brown and start having a crack at me. At this point in year 10 I'd already reinvented myself a large amount of the way, I was getting better at playing guitar and drums, I was er learning how to control myself, I knew how to act around other people, and I'd really found a lot more of that peace of mind than I had before. Nowhere near the stage where I'm at now, but I'd definitely learned more by then, so I had a lot more resistance to it. It came to a head right in a PE lesson really. We were all getting changed after a lesson, might have been after, might have been before, but Rob decides he wants to have a another crack at me, so while I'm sitting down either getting in or getting out of  PE slacks, I look at him standing over me trying to have a good laugh at me. Charles is a friend of mine, is also quite silent, he's a man of few words but means what he says, is sitting next to me. Charles doesn't get involved in things like that, that's one thing he's definitely got above most people, he's just got this unbelievably natural calmness about him. But erm Rob decides to have another crack at me, so while he was laughing, I did the only thing I could think of at that point which was to just get up while he was looking the other way, and smack, and get him right across the jaw. I know this is focussing on violence, but that was the only way I could see of getting him off, I'd told him to go away,  I'd literally given him all the things I'd been taught, teaching how you back someone off, right you're getting on my nerves but he just took that as almost an encouragement. One other note, is that he's actually been expelled as well before the end of school. He got right up to the exams but got caught smoking on the campus twice. Although I'm not the sort of person who wants to flatter my ego or anything like that, but the one thing I make sure I do I'd never want to get someone innocent. I never do anything out of something selfish, I would only ever do something if it was gonna hurt someone else.

*You've reacted to situations haven't you?*

Yeah, yeah.

As far as the best thing in school have gone, I'd say two things really stand out. One was when we got to play in front of the whole school, me and the band. Me, Chris and Charles managed to play some songs that we'd actually written ourselves in front of the school, and the feeling of everyone cheering after we'd done that was just wonderful, knowing that we'd made someone happy by our music was very good.

*I bet you felt like Iron Maiden?*

They were actually my first concert!

*I thought they might be with your T-shirt!*

The other thing that I'd say is that I think the best thing in school, sorry, the best thing that came out of school, was with I'd got much more deeper insight into how people worked. You see I've always been a social recluse in a way, and that means things like talking to people, meeting new friends was literally unheard of for me. When I actually bumped into Charles, he'd never even picked up a bass guitar before. He had no idea how to play bass, after I'd started learning the guitar and started learning the drums, Charles thought, 'Oh hang on, I think I'll learn how to play bass', and, after a while he was getting pretty good, and Neil came up and mentioned, 'Oh I play the drums as well', and when we put it all together, for some reason, it clicked.

*Who sings?*

We don't have a singer at the moment but we're looking round for one. But it really does just sit quite well with us, because the one thing I'd like to point out is that we're all what you'd call misfits.

*That's a good name for a group!*

There's already one that have got that.

*Has that helped you through school?*

Yeah definitely, because the one thing me Chris and Charles have in common is that we're all that bit misunderstood. If someone looks at me, they'd probably see like erm I dunno like .. a sort of Guy Fawkes lookalike in camouflage pants. But people, the biggest thing that people would look at me and misunderstand would think that people like me who wear band t-shirts are just out for a bar fight, but we're not. I find that a lot of people who have an interest in rock music have a much deeper insight because a lot of the elements of rock have a lot more deeper lyrics, deeper insights.  A lot of

things that rock musicians or singers play or sing about is either things that have gone wrong in their life, or deep issues that have troubled them over the years. Erm I think the best way to describe the feeling that I got from me Chris and Charles is that all of us had been what you'd call pushed to the side a bit. Charles was more or less silent all the time, so nobody really took much notice of him, but I really just clicked with him. He's probably the closest friend I have now. There's also Neil who's got a real penchant for cookery as well as drumming. We all have a little bit of a dark side and a light side to us. We have a dark side that some people might have thought, 'Oh yeah all right, and for the light side, people have thought, 'Oh I didn't know you'd do that.' I mean, for example, erm if someone was to look at me they probably think that it was pretty obvious that I'd play guitar or drums, but, if someone was to look at me, they probably wouldn't get it straight away that I actually love painting, that I really like sort of painting really bright landscapes or seas and sun and that sort of stuff. Just like with Charles, they probably understand why he'd want to play bass, but they probably wouldn't get it looking at him that he's really not that much of an outgoing person. I mean obviously he's got longish black hair, and he's quite sound but they would have thought that he's got sort of like an inner rage inside of some sort, but he's really just a quiet calm person.

*Do you feel that it's only you three that have those sort of dimensions to your character?*

Oh no, the one thing I've definitely learned more is accepting other people more. The best feeling that I got out of us 3 was knowing that we got on somewhere with it because to be perfectly honest, we looked at other people posing, being showy and all that, just doing things to try and get what they call street cred, I think, and that sort of thing. But here we were, 3 misfits in mainstream secondary school, erm not many people even knew we existed for the most part, there were only a small group of people who even talked to us for the most part, but yet, at the end of the year, we could go up in front of the entire school, and give everyone a big grin and make them all clap, that to me, knowing that we've had probably the worst run of luck, but still just done the best we possibly could with it makes me feel proud of it I think.

*Well done, well done. Ok, are you all talked out?*

I think, yeah. I think the last thing that I'll mention is that if anyone is going to be dealing with anyone with Aspergers, the two main things they'll have to remember is that one, we're a lot more sensitive than most people would think, we take things a lot more personally er than most people would. Say for example if someone says to me, 'Oh but you've done a little bit rubbish there,' as in sort of like a joke, I would take that quite seriously, unless they took the joke back. It's something that just doesn't go away from us, we're a

lot more sensitive. The other thing I'd remember for someone with Aspergers is that we're generally inclined to go within ourselves unless people talks to us. Unless like someone else tends to make the first move we can generally be quite cautious. That's one thing I had a big problem with, I wouldn't do anything unless I knew exactly what was going to go right, and exactly what was going to go wrong. That was probably the biggest reason why I didn't have that many friends at the beginning of school. Talking to Charles came easily because we seemed to automatically just click with each other.

*Is he Aspergers as well?*

I've honestly got no idea, he's never been checked for Aspergers, he's very quiet, he only says things in either very short word sentences, like for example, erm he'll say things like yeah you mean the fiddly bit like in a song, he say things in either very short sentences or very short phrases. He never has a sort of like long winded conversation, everything he says is short and to the point. He's a quiet person, but he is undoubtedly one of the nicest guys I've ever met. In all the times I've known him, in all the times when I've broken down and had upset days, he's never once let me down, and probably never will. I think that's probably why I've clicked into him so well, we're both very good listeners.

*Has having a friend helped you all the way through?*

Yeah, yeah. I think that's the biggest step that anyone's gotta take with someone with Aspergers. You've gotta make sure the person with Aspergers is *aware* of what's going on. The best way I can describe it is that we don't like surprises. Having a surprise for someone who's Aspergers, it feels like there's something going wrong. Having something coming up out of nowhere is the same way as having, I dunno, a piece of work that you'd thought you'd done pop out of nowhere. They haven't had time to mentally prepare themselves, so it's like flinging them into a new situation very quickly and that really unsettles us quite a bit. I think that's probably about all I could say about someone with Asperger's because I obviously don't know about everyone else.

*Well thank you very much indeed.*