**Moving to secondary school: Combining IPA and focus groups to explore the experiences of pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research study is set within the context of the increasing numbers of pupils diagnosed as having autism spectrum disorder attending mainstream schools. The move from primary to secondary school is often regarded as a challenging time for pupils, particularly for those with autism spectrum disorder. The aim of this study was to explore the views and experiences of pupils with autism spectrum disorder, or Asperger Syndrome during this period of their education. The study adopted a mixed methods approach to investigating the personal experiences of a small group of five pupils during their transition from a mainstream primary school to a mainstream secondary school. An interpretative phenomenological analysis stance was combined with the use of focus group methodology as a means of accessing pupils’ perceptions and experiences.

Focus groups were conducted both prior to and following the pupils’ transition to secondary school and resulting discussions were recorded and transcribed. A range of inter-related themes emerged from the analysis and interpretation of pupils’ narratives and discussions during the focus groups. Emerging themes were structured into superordinate themes relating to anxiety, hopes and expectations, and pupils’ perceptions of available support. In addition to themes specifically concerned with their experience of school and transition, broader themes also emerged relating to pupils’ personal experiences of autism and their relationships with others. Some personal or ‘insider’ views and experiences contributing to the emerging themes concurred with widely accepted professional knowledge and understanding of autism spectrum disorder, and of the process of primary to secondary school transition, whilst others served to challenge accepted views and expose existing tensions.

The findings of the study suggest several implications for future practice regarding the transition to secondary school for this group of pupils. The study also adds to the growing evidence illustrating the contribution and challenge that the experiences of those with ASD can make to professional knowledge, and suggests that the use of focus groups may be a valuable means of eliciting their views.

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

This study aimed to explore the experience of transition from mainstream primary to mainstream secondary school for a small group of pupils diagnosed as having either Asperger Syndrome (AS) or high functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD). I was drawn to this area of research through my current role as a practising educational psychologist with a specialist role in the field of autism, and through my experiences in my former role as manager of the autism outreach service in a city local authority. Throughout my work in the field of education, first as a teacher and then as an educational psychologist, I have developed and sustained an interest in issues relating to inclusive education. My interest has focused in particular on inclusion in mainstream education for children with autism, and this formed the basis for my early doctoral studies. My experience of working with children with autism, and their families, has suggested that the move from primary to secondary school can raise significant challenges and barriers to their continued inclusion in mainstream school, and it is recognised that parental confidence in mainstream education tends to decline at this time (Barnard et al 2000). Therefore, from both an academic and professional perspective, this transition period presented as a valuable area of research.

Until recently the voices of professionals have dominated the research and discourse surrounding autism. The emergence of increasing numbers of autobiographical accounts written by those with autism (Jackson 2002, Lawson 2001, Grandin 2011) has begun to challenge the professional view on many counts. Increasingly researchers are recognising the valuable contribution that such personal perspectives can make to professional knowledge (Billington 2006 a), and potentially to professional practice. This study aims to focus on the personal experiences of children with ASD or AS during this period of transition in order to help extend our professional awareness of the barriers they face to inclusion in their mainstream secondary schools. The potential challenge their experiences and views provide to the power of professional voices will also be explored.

1.2 LOCAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH

Both locally and nationally the number of children diagnosed as having ASD is increasing and the prevalence of autism is now believed by researchers to be approaching 1 in 100 (Baird et al 2006). Over recent years, as the agenda for inclusive education has been increasingly adopted across local authorities, there has been an increased expectation that many children who have a diagnosis of ASD will be educated in a mainstream school setting (Jones 2002). Within the context of the local authority in which this research is based there is an expectation that the majority of children who have a diagnosis of ASD, and who have been successfully included in a mainstream primary school, will transfer to a mainstream secondary school. However it is at this time that many parents, carers, teachers and other adults involved in the child’s education express increasing anxiety about the challenges they may face in a mainstream school. Subsequently a largely negative discourse often dominates discussions and plans for pupils’ primary to secondary school transition. Locally an indication of the intensity of parental anxiety relating to transition is evident in the number of parental requests for more specialist school placements at this juncture, at times culminating in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal process.

Consequently, as pupils begin to prepare for secondary transition, they are often surrounded by adults who have mounting anxieties and concerns for their future. However, the views and perceptions of the pupils themselves are not always actively sought and their preparation for, and support during, the move from primary to secondary school is most often based on the professional, ‘expert’ view. Within this research I aimed to explore the, often marginalised, views of pupils identified as having ASD on their personal experiences during this period of transition. Their hopes and anxieties prior to moving to secondary school were explored, together with their early experiences of their new school, and personal perceptions of support and interventions which aimed to facilitate their learning and participation. The purpose was therefore, as suggested by Carrington and Graham (2001), to provide an in-depth exploration of the ‘real-life’ experiences of pupils with ASD from their own perspective.

1.3 CURRENT RESEARCH CONTEXT

Much research concerning ASD remains in the domain of the professional or expert view (Billington 2006 a) and the on-going debate on the effectiveness of mainstream educational inclusion for children diagnosed with ASD remains a much debated issue (Wing 2007, Jordan 2008). The emerging bank of literature providing ‘insider perspectives’, although valuable and illuminating, consists largely of personal anecdotal accounts from individuals having this diagnosis (Sainsbury 2000, Jackson 2002). Rarely are those with ASD considered by professionals to be the ‘experts’ within the research process. This study aims to position the participating pupils firmly in the ‘expert’ role through a detailed exploration of their personal views.

A range of research literature relating to primary to secondary school transition is available, which most often focuses primarily on pupils not identified as having additional educational needs (Ashton 2008, Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008, Evangelou 2008). Other studies relate to pupils with a range of special educational needs (Maras and Aveling 2006). Although several recent research studies have provided an account of the views and perceptions of pupils with ASD on the experience of secondary school in a wider context (Humphrey and Lewis 2008, Tobias 2009) until recently little research has specifically addressed the issue of their transition to secondary school. The emerging studies which seek to address this apparent gap in the research (Dann 2011) have sought the views of a variety of stakeholders in the process, including parents, pupils and school staff. The present study, however, aims to explore the experience of transition to secondary school entirely from the personal perspective of pupils involved, allowing for reflection on their hopes and anxieties prior to their change of school and their subsequent experiences of their new school.

1.4 THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This study aims to explore and interpret the views and experiences of pupils described as having ASD using qualitative research methods. Following consideration of a range of approaches to the research I chose to employ an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) stance (Smith 1996). I was drawn to this approach for various reasons including its appropriateness for use with broad research questions (Smith and Osborn 2008), which aim to understand how participants understand and make sense of experiences that hold particular significance for them. The idiographic commitment of IPA makes it suitable for research studies with a small number of participants, also reinforcing its appropriateness for use in the current study in which the experiences of five pupils were explored. A further factor influencing my choice of IPA lay in its acknowledgement of the active role of the researcher in the research process (Larkin et al 2006) and, in view of my professional experiences as described above, I was aware that these may influence my interpretation of pupils’ accounts.

Accessing the perspectives of children with ASD can be understood as a challenging concept, due to their social and communication differences. This research builds upon my earlier experiences, and research evidence (Dunn 2000, Charles 2004), by exploring the potential of social interaction with, and prompts from, other children in eliciting pupils’ narratives on their experiences within a focus group context. The research therefore adopts a mixed methods approach, and the combination of IPA with focus groups presented as a further challenge in this study. However evidence is emerging within recent research literature (Tompkins and Eatough 2010) to support the feasibility of this combination of methods and to offer advice on how this might best be approached.

### This small scale research study aims therefore to adopt a qualitative mixed methods approach to the following broad research questions:

**What are the experiences of children diagnosed as having autism spectrum disorder during their transition to secondary school?**

**How can these experiences be used to inform professional knowledge and practice?**

It is hoped that, by exploring the experiences and perceptions voiced by this small group of pupils diagnosed as having ASD, and ultimately sharing this information with professionals, an acknowledgment of pupils as ‘experts’ on their personal experiences might be encouraged. This would allow us, as professionals, the opportunity to reflect on our practices and procedures relating to this transition period and to develop and improve these in the light of the personal experiences of the pupils involved.

In this chapter I have provided the background and context for the current research study, together with a brief outline of the motivation to employ my chosen methodological approach. The following chapter explores and reviews the current pertinent literature relating to educational inclusion and primary to secondary school transition for pupils described as having ASD.

In chapter 3 I describe in more detail the methodological approach adopted for the research, together with the rationale for my choice. The thesis then moves on to provide an account of the process of data collection, including planning and conducting focus groups and addressing ethical considerations.

My analysis and interpretation of emerging data, including the approach taken to employing IPA and combining this with focus group methodology, is contained within chapter 5 of my account, in which superordinate and emerging themes resulting from analysis are presented and illustrated by transcript extracts. Chapter 6 considers the themes emerging from analysis of data in the light of existing literature. It also reflects upon the choice of methodological approach and possible limitations to the research. Finally any implications for future professional practice are considered.

**CHAPTER 2: REVIEWING THE LITERATURE**

2.1 INTRODUCTION

When considering the broad research issue for this study I felt it would be appropriate to firstly explore the literature relating to the educational inclusion of pupils described as having ASD. The potential barriers to their inclusion, from both a professional and an ‘insider’ view are then considered. I next move on to review existing literature concerned with the transition of pupils from primary to secondary school, both for pupils in general and the recently emerging accounts relating to children with special educational needs including ASD. As this study involves the exploration of children’s experiences and perceptions, literature relating to methods of accessing and researching their views and experiences is also considered.

Although autism itself is a major focus of the research study, it must be acknowledged that this is an extremely broad area of research in itself and it is neither possible, nor wholly relevant, to include lengthy descriptions of the wide range of current literature relating to autism in this thesis. However the emerging body of literature written by those with ASD is reflected upon in relation to their experience and understanding of their diagnosis.

2.2 SETTING THE RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

Both nationally and locally the numbers of children identified as having difficulties relating in some way to autism is increasing and it is believed that the prevalence rate for ASD is approaching one per a hundred of the population (Baird et al 2006). It is currently estimated that 93,400 children and young people in the United Kingdom are diagnosed as having difficulties that characterise AS or high functioning autism (Humphrey and Lewis 2008) and it is this group of children to whom the current study relates. Children with this diagnosis are most likely to be placed in a mainstream school (Wainscot et al 2008), as they usually develop adequate functional language skills and have cognitive skills within a normal range (Attwood 2007).

It is suggested that research into ASD is currently at an all-time high (Humphrey and Ralph 2010) and that much previous research involving the educational implications of ASD focused on children with more severe, or ‘classic’ autism (Humphrey and Parkinson 2006). However it is notable that, over more recent years, children and young people with AS or high functioning autism have increasingly become a focus for educational research (Humphrey and Lewis 2008, Locke et al 2010, Tobias 2009). Such studies, alongside the autobiographical accounts of those with ASD, provide a richer knowledge of their experiences of life and education which can, at times, be seen as a challenge to the professional adherence to an understanding of autism, as based on the ‘triad of impairments’ (Wing 1996).

2.3 INCLUSION AND AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Inclusion has been in the forefront of educational policy since the 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Statement helped to shift the focus of special education from integration to inclusion (Cigman 2007). The issue of inclusion in mainstream schools for children with special educational needs has been, and remains, a topic of intense debate amongst academics, those involved in education, and parents, with the question arising as to whether inclusion has become more about the child’s rights as opposed to what actually works for them educationally (Norwich 2007, Lindsay 2007).

As Armstrong (2011) suggests, inclusion remains an ‘*elusive concept’* (p.7), as it is the subject of many interpretations, depending on those using the term, the context in which it is used, and the purpose for which it is being used. Ravet (2011) summarises the apparent dominant, but contradictory, perspectives on inclusion that arise within the literature. These are described as a ‘rights-based perspective’ (CSIE 2008, Armstrong 2011, Rieser 2011), which focuses on the right of all children and young people to inclusion in their local mainstream school, including the expectation that schools should change in order to accommodate them, and the ‘needs-based perspective’ (Lindsay 2007, Low 2007), which argues for a range of provision, including mainstream and special schools, to meet the individual needs of pupils. Ravet (2011) suggests that these perspectives are underpinned by differing interpretations of inclusion and of how it should be enacted. Several writers now refer to the necessity to develop a flexible education system that can be more responsive to the diverse needs of all learners (Norwich 2007, Thompson and Holt 2007, Wedell 2008). However Rieser (2011) suggests that, although in the UK we have moved some way towards inclusive education, attitudes reliant on the ‘medical model’, which views problems as residing within the child rather than within the system and its need for restructure, continue to form a barrier to the development of a fully inclusive education system.

As the drive for inclusive education has gained momentum, the number of pupils with ASD being educated in mainstream schools has continued to increase, with an estimated 70% of those diagnosed having mainstream placements (DCSF 2008). Inspite of these increasing numbers the discourse within the literature relating to educational inclusion for pupils with ASD, as presented within this review, constructs this as largely problematic and this group of children continue to be considered as ‘*notably hard to reach, hard to understand and hard to include’* (Willis 2007 p 144).

There is a growing bank of research evidence on the potential efficacy of mainstream inclusion for children with autism. Some accounts focus on inclusion facilitated through the provision of a specialist resource base in a mainstream school (Hesmondhalgh and Breakey 2001), which for some writers would be viewed as ‘integration’ as opposed to ‘inclusion’ (Rieser 2011), creating a relatively positive and encouraging picture. Others focus on issues relating to purely mainstream settings (Connor 2000, Humphrey 2008, Morewood et al 2011), at times highlighting less favourable outcomes for pupils. In 2000 the National Autistic Society published the results of a survey into inclusion and autism (Barnard et al 2000), which supported a mixed range of views. Of relevance to the current study it found that parents were happier with early years and primary provision, but that secondary schools were less able to meet the needs of children with ASD and AS, resulting in decreasing parental satisfaction with mainstream placements as children become older. The report also found that exclusions from mainstream schools increase during these years, with 21% of children with ASD being excluded from school at least once. Although the more recent report on good practice in education for those with autism commissioned by the Autism Education Trust (Charman et al 2011) presents a much more favourable picture, it must be noted that this report is based on provision across a range of schools, both specialist and mainstream, and also it is acknowledged that some gaps do remain.

In 2005 a pamphlet by Baroness Warnock, published by the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (Warnock 2005), served to intensify the debate around inclusive education by questioning the commitment to placing children with special educational needs into mainstream schools. This publication prompted much debate (Barton 2005, Cigman 2007) and in a later response Warnock (2007) makes particular reference to children with ASD, further problematizing the issue of their educational inclusion by stating that:

It is essential that we raise the question of what their inclusion in mainstream school amounts to and whether it is experienced by them as good. The reality seems to be, in many cases, that it is experienced as a painful kind of exclusion (p.43)

It is clear therefore that the debate on inclusion continues and remains, as suggested by Lindsay (2003), a *‘complex and contested concept’* (p.3).

2.4 INCLUSION AND AUTISM: PROFESSIONAL AND ‘INSIDER’ VIEWS

Jordan (2008) poses the question *‘What is so special about autistic spectrum disorders?*’ (p.11) leading to consideration of why the educational inclusion of pupils with ASD prompts such debate. As professionals, much of our current understanding of autism spectrum disorders remains based upon the ‘triad of impairments’ (Wing 1996), and Wing (2007) continues to describe the triad as *‘the major determinant of educational needs’* (p.26). This common core of difficulties relate to social and emotional understanding, communication, and flexibility of thinking and behaviour. However, over the past two decades the increasing emergence of personal accounts of individuals with autism (Williams 1992, Grandin 2011) have suggested that this is a simplistic interpretation of ASD and have emphasised other issues, including variations in sensory perception, as a further crucial areas of difference.

For some time researchers have been aware of the value of such ‘insider perspectives’ (Moore 2000, Billington 2006 b) and the challenge they can present to our accepted professional understanding, so often based within research and theory. Billington (2002), proposes that the location of knowledge is changing and, in discussing the differences in discourse seen in ‘user’ versus ‘expert’ accounts, considers the consequences of permitting the ‘pathologised’ to become experts in their own pathology and suggests that:

At the very least, however, as professionals we might consider the usefulness of such accounts or indeed consider whether the pathologised might actually provide insights into ways of being upon which we can develop new professional practices. (2002 p.39)

Over recent years further insights in to the experience of those having ASD have emerged through the field of disability studies research (Alldred 2009, Moloney 2010, Wheeler 2011). Such writers seek to challenge the commonly held deficit view of ASD and suggest that through listening to the voices of those diagnosed strengths rather than weaknesses can be identified. Despite these emerging personal insights and challenges to the largely negative professional representations of ASD, the literature exploring issues around inclusion for pupils having ASD suggests that some professionals continue to view barriers and challenges as residing within the child and relating to perceived deficits associated with their autism. As Wing (2007) suggests:

Factors within the child that are the most crucial in determining success or failure in mainstream placement (p.32)

In recognising this Jordan (2008) suggests that *‘If inclusion failed it was usually the child who was blamed’* (p 12), as the mainstream school system remained oblivious to their diversities. The accounts of individuals with ASD, referred to above, challenge us to consider whether this view of the barriers to inclusive education concurs with their ‘insider perspective.’

2.5 POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

The need therefore remains to investigate and acknowledge the barriers to inclusion which children with ASD face, and to consider approaches to help overcome these as far as is realistically possible. As Humphrey and Lewis (2008) highlight:

Whilst pupils with AS may be increasingly enrolled at mainstream schools, they face a number of barriers that may prevent them from making the most of their education (p.24)

I would argue that there is also a necessity to consider the question of where the expert knowledge of these barriers lies, whether in our experience as professionals working with those with ASD, or in their personal experiences and perceptions. The potential barriers to the successful inclusion for pupils with ASD into mainstream schools, most particularly mainstream secondary schools, are considered below from both the perspective of professional and research literature and from the personal accounts of those with ASD.

**2.5.1 Social challenges and relationships**

The social and behavioural challenges experienced by children with ASD are widely documented, particularly in reference to their ability to form and sustain relationships and friendships (Knott et al 2006, Bauminger et al 2003, Howard et al 2006). The barrier to successful inclusion in school created by such social differences and difficulties is an issue frequently raised in the literature (Chamberlain et al 2007) and in some instances it is presented as the most intransigent. For example Wainscot et al (2008) express the view that, with some extra support to assist their learning, most pupils with ASD cope with the academic demands of mainstream school but do not cope well with the social demands. As Jones and Frederickson (2010) suggest ‘*one of the greatest challenges for an individual with ASD is navigating the social world’* (p.1094).

The ability to develop positive relationships with peers is described as a key element in determining the success of inclusion for pupils with ASD (Humphrey and Symes 2011). The authors specifically researched the social interactions of secondary school pupils with ASD with their mainstream peers, as they suggest that peer relationships between these groups decline with age, a view supported by Reiter and Vitani (2007). Also the secondary school environment provides a less stable base for the development of new friendships, as the existing social differences of the children with ASD may be accentuated here. Although accepting the social and communication difficulties inherent in children with ASD as a major determinant in restricting interactions with their peers, Humphrey and Symes (2011) also recognise lack of understanding amongst mainstream pupils as an influential factor, therefore acknowledging that the success of inclusion for pupils with ASD does not rest with within child factors alone.

In concurrence with accepted professional views (Attwood 2007, Wing 2007), the accounts referred to above all describe the difficulties pupils with ASD encounter when attempting to cope with the social aspects of school. This is supported by research studies that specifically seek the views of students with ASD (Connor 2000, Humphrey and Lewis 2008). The adolescent boys with Asperger Syndrome involved in the study carried out by Carrington and Graham (2001) helped to identify some of the specific difficulties they experience in the school setting. These included difficulties in understanding and coping with social situations alongside the pressures created by an increasing awareness of ‘not fitting in’ with their peers. A feeling of not belonging, which is not always evident in the writing of professionals, is also described in the accounts of those with ASD including Williams (1992) who describes her mostly negative experiences in several schools during her childhood.

**2.5.2 Isolation and loneliness**

A traditional view of ASD, based wholly on diagnostic criteria, includes a failure to develop social relationships (DSM-IV). However research studies in the literature, which include the views of those with ASD and those close to them, argue that this failure, if we accept it to be correct, should be distinguished from lack of interest in friendships and social interaction (Bauminger et al 2003, Howard et al 2006). After carrying out a case study of the understanding of friendships of one adolescent with AS Howard et al (2006) conclude that:

Tom’s understanding of friendship and desire for friends reminds us that although we may recognize deficits in social interaction skills and observe challenges related to social connection, we must separate these challenges from lack of interest. (p.625)

This view is supported by other personal accounts (Jackson 2002) and further studies indicate that, although children with high–functioning autism or AS are often socially isolated relative to typically developing peers, they are capable of spontaneously engaging with other children (Mackintosh and Dissanayake 2006) and experience feelings of loneliness if not able to take part in satisfying social interactions with others (Bauminger et al 2003).

A prevalent view within research studies which take into account the views of those with ASD, acknowledges their interest in social relationships and friendships, suggesting that they are capable of forming friendships and can be as likely to have a ‘best friend’ in school as their mainstream peers (Wainscott et al 2008). However it is suggested that they often lack an understanding of the subtleties and nuances of social interactions necessary to help them develop and sustain reciprocal friendships, leading to increased social isolation and feelings of loneliness (Locke et al 2010). Consequently this impacts on pupils’ full inclusion in school life, as they remain on the periphery of the classroom social structure. In their study of friendships amongst adolescents with high functioning ASD in mainstream schools Locke et al (2010) also draw attention to the tension between the poor social understanding and social naivety they experience and their awareness of their difficulties:

Adolescents with ASD, particularly those that are higher functioning, are tremendously aware of their social status and often desire a reciprocal, high quality friendship. When these expectations are not met, feelings of loneliness and isolation may surface, perpetuating the cycle between these interrelated constructs (p.75)

If we acknowledge the importance of listening to the views of children with ASD we should be wary of accepting a wholly negative view of the social challenges they perceive in relation to school. In contrast to the views expressed above, there is some suggestion that children may see themselves as more socially included than their peers report (Chamberlain et al 2007) and may possess a degree of ‘*happy obliviousness*’ towards their social status (p. 240). Knott et al (2006) suggest that the views of young people with ASD on their own social competence are rarely considered. They also indicate that there is often a discrepancy between the difficulties reported by parents and children, as parents reported their children to have lower levels of social competence than they perceived themselves as possessing. They conclude that:

Attempts to equip children with the necessary skills to make and sustain relationships with others will not necessarily succeed if children’s beliefs about their skills are not taken into account. (p 616)

It should be recognised however that, particularly in the research carried out by Chamberlain et al (2007), the children involved were of primary school age and there is likely to be an increasing awareness of social difficulties as pupils reach adolescence (Lawson 2003). Humphrey and Lewis (2008) noted that pupils with ASD described having friendships with peers, and suggested that these served to support them against bullying and also facilitated a positive sense of self. They suggested therefore that peer relationships could be regarded as both a barrier to and enabler of effective inclusion and refer to the work of Bauminger and Kasarei (2000) and Ochs et al (2001) in suggesting that relationships with peers may have a greater influence on inclusion than relationships with teachers.

**2.5.3 Experience of bullying**

A range of research relating to the prevalence and impact of bullying in schools is available within existing literature (Sharp et al 2000, Smith, P 2004). Some studies (Norwich and Kelly 2004) focus on the relationship between bullying and special educational needs. The existence and consequences of increased incidents of bullying for pupils with ASD were examined by the National Autistic Society (Reid and Batten 2006) in their survey of 1400 families affected by ASD. This revealed that many families felt that bullying had damaged their child’s self-esteem, and had impacted on their social relationships and mental health. The results of this study suggested a bi-directional association between experience of bullying and social relationships for children with ASD, as bullying leads to damaged social relationships, making pupils with ASD more isolated, which in turn further increases their vulnerability to bullying, a view later confirmed by the work of Sofrondoff et al (2011).

I would argue that, when considering the impact of bullying on the inclusion of children with ASD, it is also important to consider incidents of physical exclusion from school due to their reaction to bullying. Children with ASD may be excluded from school due to challenging behaviour, which is related to a disproportionate reaction to continued low-level bullying (Reid and Batten 2006).

Symes and Humphrey (2010) investigated the views of secondary school pupils with ASD on their perception of social acceptance by their peer group. As predicted by the researchers, pupils with ASD were found to experience lower levels of social acceptance by their peers and were more likely to be rejected socially. Interestingly this study also included a comparison group of pupils with dyslexia, and was therefore able to demonstrate that it was not simply having special educational needs that contributed to levels of social acceptance but rather the specific difficulties associated with ASD. The study also investigated the incidence of bullying reported by pupils with ASD and, as previously demonstrated by Wainscot et al (2008), a significantly higher frequency of bullying towards pupils with ASD was found in comparison to their peers with differing special educational needs.

It appears therefore that both professional understanding and the experiences of those with ASD endorse to some extent the view that the complex social demands of the school environment, including the complexity of relationships with mainstream peers, forms a challenge to their inclusion. I would suggest however that literature illuminating the perceptions of those having ASD indicates the enormous extent to which social challenges impact on their experience of life in school.

**2.5.4 Learning and organisation**

Although some researchers suggest that children with ASD, particularly high functioning ASD, generally cope well with the academic demands of mainstream school (Wainscott et al 2008), personal accounts of those with ASD draw attention to problems they experience in accessing the academic curriculum. The learning style of children with autism and the implications of this in the classroom is referred to by Sainsbury (2000) and Lawson (2003). They stress the relevance of recognising learning strengths as well as deficits and the importance of working with, rather than against, idiosyncratic learning styles. This view is supported by Powell and Jordan (2012) who suggest that ways of addressing a pupil’s learning weaknesses by harnessing their strengths should be sought. The visual learning style of individuals with autism is now acknowledged and utilised in most classrooms, but it is valuable to have confirmation of the appropriateness of this approach from writers such as Grandin (2011) who describes in detail her visual approach to thinking and learning. Blackburn (2000) highlights a further aspect of learning for people with autism:

People with autism cannot learn by generalising, or by learning rules and then applying them to different situations. They need to learn from very specific rules to very specific situations. (p.3*)*

Rigidity of thought and behaviour, including the desire for sameness and resistance to change, is understood to be a major area of difficulty for individuals with ASD, presumed to relate to an attempt to reduce anxiety (Wing 2007, Attwood 2007). Paula Johnston (2005), an able woman diagnosed with AS in adulthood, describes her difficulties in coping with even the smallest changes to her daily routine and the challenges presented through her inflexibility in certain aspects of life, such as diet. This causes us to reflect on how many children with AS cope with the never-ending changes throughout the day in mainstream secondary school settings. Jackson (2002) provides a simple, but clear, description of his perception of school, which appears to summarise the confusion that we must assume is experienced by many children with autism:

Everything is so busy at school and everyone else, all the kids and all the teachers, seems to have a purpose and I have never quite fathomed out what that purpose is. I know we are there to learn but there seems to be so much more going on than that. It is like beginning a game without knowing any of the rules or passwords. (p114)

**2.5.5 The school environment**

In contrast to many professional views, autobiographical accounts of those with ASD tend not to focus primarily on ‘within child’ difficulties that may influence their life in school, but allow us insight into external factors that impact on their experience, including the school environment. One significant area in which the individual differences of those with ASD interact with the school environment in a potentially distressing manner rests with sensory processing differences and negative sensory experiences. Grandin (2011) describes the range and variability of sensory issues experienced by those with ASD and suggests that for some individuals with high functioning ASD, or AS, these form the ‘*primary challenge of autism in their daily lives’* (p.82),often causing pain and discomfort. Sainsbury (2000) vividly describes the impact of the school environment for those with sensory sensitivities:

The corridors and halls of almost any mainstream school are a constant tumult of noises echoing, fluorescent lights (a particular source of visual and auditory stress for people on the autistic spectrum), bells ringing, people bumping into each other, the smells of cleaning products and so on. For anyone with the sensory hyper-sensitivities and processing problems typical of an autistic spectrum condition, the result is that we often spend most of our day perilously close to sensory overload. (p 101)

Bogdashina (2003) implies a further potential obstacle for professionals wishing to minimise the barrier to mainstream inclusion caused by the sensory environment in indicating that no two autistic people have the same sensory perceptual experiences. This suggests that both a detailed knowledge of the sensory profile of each individual would be necessary together with a flexible approach to adapting the school environment in order to remove this barrier.

Grandin (2011) suggests that, although she has written about sensory problems for over twenty years, and that others with ASD are writing about them in great detail, professionals have ignored them because they *‘cannot imagine that an alternative sensory reality exists’* (p.82). However she acknowledges that research studies have provided evidence that sensory problems in autism are ‘*real*’. Such studies include that of Leekam et al (2007), which suggested that children with ASD are more affected by sensory abnormalities than children with other developmental disabilities, and that the frequency of these for children with high functioning ASD is particularly striking. The study also linked the distress caused by sensory differences to challenging behaviour, a connection supported by the work of Menzinger and Jackson (2009) who suggest that:

There is a fine line between an environment experienced as stimulating and one that can be too challenging for a pupil (p 170)

Further research studies also propose that, in addition to being a potential source of distress, sensory modulation differences can be a source of fascination and interest (Ben-Sasson et al 2009) and can be significantly correlated to obsessions and special interests (Wiggins et al 2009). These studies indicate that the descriptions of sensory processing difficulties evident in autobiographical accounts are now corroborated by clinical research. However, in spite of this increasing evidence, sensory differences have not until the recently proposed DSMV (American Psychiatric Association 2011) been included as a formal criterion for clinical diagnosis of ASD, possibly lending evidence to the reluctance of professionals to position those with ASD as experts on their experiences.

**2.5.6 Teacher attitudes**

The impact of positive teacher attitudes towards the presence of pupils with ASD in mainstream classrooms is emphasised both within research literature and within the autobiographical accounts of those with ASD and can be considered as either an enabler of, or a potential barrier to, their successful inclusion. For example, Wing (2007), although accentuating the influence of within child factors on inclusion, also acknowledges the role of empathetic teacher attitudes and knowledge of specialised teaching methods as an important factor. However it is recognised that relationships between teachers and pupils with ASD can be problematic. As Eman and Farrell (2009) suggest:

Contrary to teaching assistants (TAs) who tend to be more positive about pupils with ASD as a kind of commitment to their job, teachers may experience several tensions in their relationships with those pupils (p.408)

These tensions were found by Eman and Farrell to be linked to teacher anxiety relating to their confidence to successfully manage a class which includes children with ASD, and their ability to meet the specific needs of these pupils. The researchers found that teacher attitudes were affected by frustration caused by pupils’ difficulties inherently associated with their ASD including poor understanding of emotions, poorly developed theory of mind, difficulties in communication, and lack of ability to generalise learning. Arguably this again suggests that successful inclusion is viewed by teachers as dependent upon child-specific factors, or indeed deficits.

Direct contact with pupils having ASD is thought to be a significant influence on the attitudes of teachers towards them, with increased exposure being associated with the development of positive attitudes (Park et al 2010). It could be suggested that the decreased contact between individual teachers and pupils at secondary school, in contrast to the daily contact experienced at primary school, could impact negatively on teacher attitudes, as may the presence of teaching assistant (TA) support for individual pupils in the classroom. For, as Eman and Farrell (2009) suggest, the close proximity of TA can minimize contact between pupil and teacher and ‘*the existence of the TA implicitly meant to teachers that the pupil was not within their range of responsibility’* (p.416), and the TA came to be viewed as the person with expertise. Humphrey and Lewis (2008) also found that it was often unclear as to whether support or differentiation in lessons was the responsibility of the teacher or the TA. This has implications for the provision of training relating to ASD, for both teachers and TAs, as confidence in their ability to meet the needs of children with ASD can be linked to knowledge and training (Jones 2002). Although many teachers may be committed to the ideals of inclusion they do not feel that they have the necessary training or support to provide effective inclusion for pupils with ASD (McGregor and Campbell 2001, Robertson et al 2003). Jordan (2008) expresses this clearly in suggesting that:

Just as these [students with ASD] have no natural intuitive ways to understand their teachers, teachers, in turn have no natural intuitive ways of understanding students with ASD (p13)

However I would argue that teacher training and knowledge of appropriate approaches and teaching strategies alone are not sufficient to ensure a positive attitude to the inclusion of children with ASD. For as Humphrey (2008) suggests, no strategies are likely to be successful unless they are ‘*underpinned by core values and attitudes that include respect for (and celebration of) diversity, a commitment to reaching out to all learners’* (p.45)

Although teaching pupils with ASD is recognized as a potentially challenging task (Jordan 2008), the views of those with ASD offer a positive view of the impact made by teachers who demonstrate understanding of them as individuals and of their autism. One such positive message lies in Sainsbury’s (2000) descriptions of the encounters with ‘good teachers’ experienced by various people with autism. She comments that such good experiences *‘shone in people’s recollections with extraordinary vividness*.’ (p.97) therefore highlighting that, with an attitude based on tolerance, acceptance, and understanding and knowledge of autism, teachers and professionals can make the experience of school more positive for children with this diagnosis.

Grandin (2006) refers to her discovery that high functioning autistic and Asperger students who go on to have successful careers encountered teachers who motivated them to succeed. She reflects that recognition of the strengths and thinking style of students with ASD is a major factor in their future success. This is a view, which is now increasingly recognised by professionals, as the importance of teachers and adults adopting high expectations for those with ASD emerges as a prominent theme within the recent research into good practice carried out on behalf of the Autism Education Trust (Charman et al 2011). A view supported by Powell and Jordan (2012) who, whilst acknowledging the potential challenge of teaching children with ASD, draw attention to the need for teachers to have high expectations of pupils:

Good teaching can make a difference and high expectations (as long as they accept the child’s difficulties) are as important in the education of those with autism as for any other group. (p.2)

The above discussion indicates that the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream schools is an area of on-going research from which a variety of factors are emerging as influential in determining the level of success, or perception of success, for those involved, both professionals and students. More recently there appears to be an increasing recognition that the dilemmas faced by those seeking to improve the experience of inclusion for pupils with ASD include, not only their individual or autism related differences, but also external factors. This view is endorsed by Guldberg (2010), who also recognises the impact of external factors on the success of inclusion for children with autism suggesting that:

It does not suffice to look only at ‘within child’ factors when addressing how to educate a child on the autism spectrum, but that it is equally important to make adjustments to the learning environment or the way that staff work (p 168)

Such adjustments are perceived as necessary in the education system in the widest sense as Wedell (2008) recognises the structure of schooling as one of the major impediments to enabling inclusion, with rigidities that increase with the move from primary to secondary school. Powell and Jordan (2012) discuss the appropriateness of the educational curriculum, and the way in which it is delivered, for those with ASD and Moore (2007) advocates changes to the physical and sensory environment of school. Awareness and understanding of autism amongst both teaching staff and mainstream peers is also an area of acknowledged difficulty (McGregor and Campbell 2001).

However, although our knowledge and awareness of the potential barriers to educational inclusion for pupils with ASD is increasing there is, as Humphrey and Lewis (2008) suggest, a need for further research into these barriers, and it is clear that the views of those diagnosed as having ASD themselves have an essential contribution to make to this.

2.6 TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

As described below, the prevailing discourse in the literature concerning transition to secondary school generally presents as one of negativity and concern as the process is described as a challenging time for children, irrespective of any additional needs, with many unprepared for the enormity of the changes they will experience (Tobbell 2003). There is a need to attune to a highly complex new environment with different demands and an unfamiliar peer group. In addition pupils will encounter a large range of new teachers with differing expectations and varied teaching styles. Zeedyk et al (2003) suggest that this period can be regarded as one of the most difficult in a child’s educational career, affecting academic development and sense of well-being and impacting on mental health.

The emotional effect of a change in school is considered by Durkin (2000) who suggests that for some children this may be a trigger to re-experiencing the loss and pain arising from earlier experiences. Humphrey and Ainscow (2006) describe the transition to secondary school as a *‘crucial and often problematic period’* (p.320) and suggest that the success of the transition process has wide reaching implications for the policy of inclusive education. The impact of transition from primary to secondary school on children is also acknowledged in government legislation, with the Children’s Plan (DCSF 2007) calling for a reduction in the disruption caused by transition.

The level of concern relating to the experience of transition from primary to secondary school led to the commissioning of a DCFS report (Evengelou et al 2008). In contrast to the largely negative discourse surrounding transition, this report concluded that most children had a positive experience of transition, although a noticeable minority did not, and key influences on this process were identified. These included the need for ‘*social adjustments’*, that is addressing issues relating to friendships or reports of bullying; *‘institutional adjustments’* or changes to school environment and organisation; and ‘*curriculum interest and continuity’*, ensuring teachers understand the differences in teaching approach between primary and secondary schools and the importance of sustaining children’s motivation and interest as well as access to the curriculum.

Ashton (2008), when exploring the views of pupils on their forthcoming transition to secondary school, found that many children expressed mixed feelings about the move and that key concerns rested in the social and emotional aspects of transition, including forming and maintaining friendships, and knowing the specific practical details of life in their new school. These views appeared to support the wider perspectives gained by Evaneglou (2008) above. However Ashton found that some more positive views were also expressed by pupils including the expectation of having increased freedom and responsibility, and opportunities for more exciting lessons. There is some suggestion in the literature that, although schools are becoming increasingly aware of the challenges posed by transition, and increasingly proactive in preparing and supporting pupils through this change, they are more concerned with easing the organisational and administrative procedures than in addressing the social and emotional issues of pupils (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008).

Maras and Aveling (2006) provide an overview of research relating to the transition from primary school to secondary school with a specific focus on students with special educational needs and suggest that:

The potential impact of this transition on the young person may be a source of stress and concern for parents, teachers and the students themselves. Such difficulties can be exacerbated for students with special educational needs. (p 196)

**2.6.1 Secondary school transition for pupils with ASD**

For children diagnosed as having ASD the transition from primary school to secondary school is believed to be particularly challenging due both to the nature of their presumed difficulties, including inflexibility and resistance to change (Wing 1996), and the complexity of secondary schools themselves (Tobias 2009) to the extent that the experience is regarded by some as potentially *‘overwhelming, even terrifying’* (Nightingale 2010 p.1). Tobias (2009) identifies the implementation of good support over transition as a key example of inclusive practice. Warnock (2007) expresses the view that for children with AS inclusion into mainstream school becomes increasingly problematic on transition to secondary school:

For a child of ten with Asperger’s, the transition from primary to secondary school may be traumatic, even catastrophic. Such a child may no longer even pretend to keep up, feeling defeated by the inevitable demands of the school environment: the bustle and clamour, the pushing and shoving, the rushing from one classroom to another, the need for top speed whatever the activity, the teachers who are different every hour of the day, and many of whom are in the school only temporarily (2007 p.xii)

Despite these negative assumptions much transition research to date, including studies described above, focuses on ‘typically developing’ pupils. Although the experiences of pupils with ASD are included in some studies of children with a range of special educational needs (Maras and Aveling 2006), Dann (2011) argues that our understanding of transition issues relating specifically to pupils with ASD is based largely on autobiographical accounts (Jackson 2002, Mitchell 2005). Those few studies investigating the impact of transition for children with ASD appear to focus to a large extent on the practical and organisational aspects of this, including issues relating to school placements and delays in decision making, rather than the personal and emotional impact (Jindal-Snape et al 2006).

Although including only two pupils with ASD it is useful to consider the findings of Maras and Aveling (2006). They begin their study with an assumption that the stresses experienced by students making the transition into secondary school are primarily of a practical nature, including the move to a bigger school building and a more complex timetable. No reference was made to the increased social demands of the secondary school environment. Some discrepancy in views between professional expectations of stress evoking factors on transition and those expressed by pupils with ASD was suggested in the results of this study. These children, when interviewed following visits to their new schools, expressed anxiety about the social context of school, making new friends and the prospect of not knowing anyone. Maras and Aveling (2006) suggested that having special educational needs, including ASD, did not in itself necessarily increase the number or effects of *‘stressors’* (p.198) for pupils over the transition period, but that particular stressors had greater impact dependent upon the type of special educational need.

Similarly Dann’s (2011) study of transition to secondary school, focusing specifically on pupils with ASD, suggests that, although children with ASD may need more preparation than other pupils, their experience is not qualitatively different from that of their peers without ASD, as they share similar concerns and anxieties. However, it was acknowledged that due to their ASD related difficulties they *‘may experience a greater intensity of worry and difficulty’* (p.305). When considering these studies in relation to the current research it should be recognised that the pupils participating were not all transferring to mainstream schools.

The potential difficulties and anxieties for pupils with ASD as they transfer to secondary school has been acknowledged by professionals and this has generated a range of both published and locally available resources with the specific aim of preparing pupils diagnosed as having ASD for this transition (Al-Ghani et al 2009, Greater Merseyside Regional SEN Partnership 2003). In keeping with the studies described above, there appears to be a tendency for these to focus on the practical aspects of the transition, although some do address more social aspects such as friendships. Little published evidence of their success for pupils is available within the literature, although Tobias (2009) suggests that the provision of specific information on their new school reduced student anxiety.

Also acknowledging the additional preparation needed by those diagnosed as having ASD during the period of transition, Watson et al (2006) undertook a study using a planned transition programme. The programme included group sessions with both parents and children aimed at ascertaining and addressing their concerns and worries and visits and links with secondary school staff. The authors argued that group sessions for children had a positive influence in preparing them for transition. However an actual change in confidence levels for pupils was only observable after a period in the environment of the secondary school. I was particularly drawn to the outcomes of this research in terms of relevance to the current study, as it highlights the success of group sessions for children with ASD and also the importance of discussing the ‘real life’ situations they may encounter in secondary school and raising their awareness of strategies for coping with these.

2.7 LISTENING TO THOSE WITH ASD

**2.7.1 Why listen?**

Earlier, consideration was given to the valuable insights provided by the written accounts of those with ASD and in view of this, as Carrington and Graham (2001) identify that:

More qualitative research in the field of autism is necessary to achieve an in-depth exploration of the real-life experiences of those individuals from their own perspective. (p.47)

However, as MacLeod and Johnston (2007) comment, despite the evidence provided in such accounts, the voice of those with autism or AS is rarely heard directly within research. Research studies, such as that of Humphrey and Lewis (2008) which seeks the views of pupils with ASD in secondary school, suggest that professionals are beginning to acknowledge the perceptions of those with ASD as a valuable insight into their needs. This resonates with the view expressed by Thompson and Holt (2007):

Children’s views give a perspective on the ways in which service and institutions operate, which is complimentary but distinctly different from the perspectives of management and staff. (p 226)

Such powerful insights and comments could therefore be used to inform the provision of *‘high quality educational provision’* (Parsons et al 2011 p.58) and to influence policy and practice (Billington 2006 a). Wedell (2008) suggests that the current concepts of inclusion fail to address what those with special educational needs really want. The value of contributions from pupils in identifying barriers to inclusion is also suggested by Ainscow (2007) who discusses the ways in which the views of stakeholders can be used to move schools in a more inclusive direction. He refers to students who do not respond to existing arrangements in schools as ‘hidden voices’ and suggests that if the barriers to participation which they experience are analysed they can encourage the improvement of schools. He regards this approach as an ‘inclusive turn’, with those involved working together to address barriers, and suggests that *‘engaging with evidence, particularly the views of children, is a key strategy’* (p6).

Billington (2009) proposes that ‘*Insider accounts bring into question the accuracy or relevance of our professional representat*ions’ (p.5). We should therefore be aware that listening to the voices of those with ASD may challenge, and lead us to question, our accepted professional views. More recently there is an emerging discourse in the literature opposing the representation of autism as *‘transgressing normality’* and challenging the way in which ‘lay people’ conceptualise autism (Huws and Jones 2010). Several writers (Alldred 2009, O’Neil 2008) oppose the medicalization of ASD related differences arguing that although they may create problems in daily living for some, and are unquestionably associated with distress for others, they are *‘not tantamount to disease symptoms or a dysfunctional existence’* (Alldred 2009 p.344).

Although it is not possible within the confines of the current study to discuss at length the tensions between the medical and social models of disability through which the construct of ASD or AS can be viewed (Molloy and Vasil 2002), I feel that it is relevant to make reference to it in view of the narratives emerging from participants in this study relating to their developing individual identities and the impact of their diagnosis on the attitude of others towards them. When researching the experiences and views of children with AS and high functioning autism in mainstream secondary schools one of the emerging analytical themes identified by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) included the child’s understanding of, and engagement with, their diagnosis. Again this has particular relevance to the current study as discussions concerning diagnoses and ‘labels’, and participants’ understanding of and attitude towards these, formed an integral part of the information collected during the research process. The authors suggest that:

‘What Asperger Syndrome’ or high-functioning autism’ means to a pupil, and the extent to which this understanding is part of their developing identity, is likely to influence the way in which they make sense of their educational (and other) experiences’ (p.30)

**2.7.2 Enabling voices to be heard**

The nature of the social communication difficulties associated with ASD has arguably restricted the implementation of potentially emancipatory research based on their insider perpsectives. Linked closely with the following chapter, in which my choice of a mixed methods approach to the current research is described, is the question of how as professionals we can ‘give voice’ to pupils diagnosed as having ASD, permitting them to express their views and experiences of school, and furthermore, how we interpret and represent these views in the light of our own experiences. Over recent years researchers have focused on developing and using research approaches to enable those children with ASD to express their views and describe their experiences relating to school (Humphrey and Lewis 2008, Tobias 2009).

Charman et al (2011) suggest that developing and disseminating good practice in accessing the views of children with ASD in both mainstream and special schools remains a priority for future research. For all children and young people with whom we work as educational psychologists this requires consideration for as Hobbs et al (2000) suggest ‘*Children do not have the power to create the opportunities to make their voice heard’* (p.110). For pupils with autism spectrum disorders this can be particularly challenging. As Billington (2006 a) comments:

‘the very nature of the social communication of autistic young people renders difficult full implementation of emancipatory or democratising principles and practices’ (p.115)

Billington (2006 a) goes on to identify the disempowerment that conventional models of deficit and pathology which underpin our professional practice may cause for children due to the diminished capacity for thought and feeling which children with autism may be regarded to possess. He proposes that there is:

The need to search more vigorously for ways in which we can access the views of autistic children in order to identify how they currently manage their ‘worlds’ (p.127)

There is an emerging range of literature in which researchers seek to access the views of pupils with ASD. Humphrey and Lewis (2008) investigated the experiences of children on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools through the use of semi-structured interviews, pupil diaries and pupil drawings and it appears that the use of varied methods of data collection, chosen with a view to the sensitivity required when involving pupils with ASD, clearly contributed to the data provided. Other studies have utilised the visual structure and support of ‘Talking Mats’ (Dann 2011) with pupils whose communication skills are more restricted.

The current study suggests that as adults and professionals we may not necessarily be in the best position to elicit and interpret the views of children with ASD. This view originated with the work of Dunn (2000) who described her research with children with autism and their non-disabled siblings and suggested that the siblings of children with autism ‘*had strategies for facilitating easy and effective communication which had completely eluded adult facilitators’* (p.101). Previously, drawn to these ideas, I carried out a small scale action research project in a mainstream primary school (Charles 2004) in which the effectiveness of informal prompts from a supportive peer in eliciting the views of a child with autism on his experiences in the classroom, was considered. Such prompts enabled the child to reveal the sensory and social difficulties he was experiencing in specific situations which were leading to challenging behaviour. Changes to classroom strategies that were made in response to this clearly enabled him to take a more active part in lessons, but were in some ways contrary to those advised by teachers and other professionals. Although small in scale, for me this project illustrated further the value of accessing the child’s perspective and:

challenged the assumption of ‘who knows best’ with regard to the strategies and changes necessary to increase the participation of learning-disadvantaged children (Charles 2004 p.103)

In addition this study lent support to the view that children may have a role in enabling those diagnosed with ASD to express their views and describe their experiences. The role of peers in accessing the perspectives of children with ASD remains an under-researched area and it is the further development of this concept which provides the rationale for the use of focus group methodology in current study, as described in a later chapter. Further support for this was provided by the apparent success achieved by Tobias (2009) in employing focus groups with children having ASD.

The interpretation and presentation of children’s views is however, particularly in the context of research, likely to remain the preserve of the adult and as Thompson and Holt (2007) comment:

Even when researchers are attempting to present children’s views clearly and unambiguously, the process of interpretation and presentation itself through its selectivity and focus on certain issues can distort the actual meaning of the young people unless great care is taken to preserve the independence of their voices. (p 226)

2.8 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Here the current literature relating to inclusion into mainstream education for children described as having ASD has been considered, with particular reference to their transition from primary to secondary school. A range of literature has been reviewed, representing both professional and research findings and the growing bank of autobiographical accounts of those having ASD, including emerging views from the field of disability rights research. The chapter also draws attention to the necessity for professionals to listen to the ‘insider perspectives’ of those with ASD and acknowledge the value of their ‘expert’ knowledge. Finally it has considered the ways in which professionals might empower pupils to express their views and experiences and enable their voices to be heard within the research. The approach selected to encourage and enable this within the current study is described in the following chapter.

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Here I present my choice of methodological approach to the research question. My commitment to using focus group methodology as a means of generating and collecting data began at an early stage, based on the assumption that the interaction within the group would encourage and prompt participants to express their views and describe their experiences. I was also drawn to the methodological stance of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith 1996), which appeared to lend itself to the current research area due to its focus on the lived experience of participants and it’s acknowledgment of the active role of the researcher in the process. I was then faced with the challenge of combining IPA methodology with a focus group approach. Encouraged by recent contributions to the research literature by Tomkins and Eatough (2010) and Palmer et al (2010), which reflect on the use of IPA with focus group data, I chose to adopt a mixed methods approach to the current research study.

This chapter first describes my rationale for choosing a qualitative approach, together with epistemological perspectives. As my choice of methodology was not an easy or uncomplicated journey, I begin with a brief description of approaches I initially considered. The chapter moves on to outline my choice of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and considers the philosophical underpinnings of this methodological stance, together with the rational for its use in the current study. The challenges and limitations of IPA are also reflected upon. The use of focus group methods is then discussed, with reference to existing literature, including the theoretical background to the approach, its strengths and weaknesses, and its expanding use in research with children and young people. The rationale for using this approach in the current study is then presented. The challenges of combining IPA as a methodological stance with the use of focus groups as a means of data collection are considered in the light of recently emerging literature. Finally this chapter reflects upon ethical issues arising from the methodological approaches chosen.

3.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

As the research questions addressed by this study focus on participants’ experience, views and perceptions, it was evident that a qualitative methodological approach would be most appropriate. Qualitative research is concerned with ‘lived experience’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) and a focus on the experience of children diagnosed as having ASD underpins this study. Miller et al (2008) argue that, despite the expansion of qualitative methods in psychological research, academic research in educational psychology has continued to be dominated by quantitative approaches and the contribution of qualitative research to mainstream educational psychology remains *‘rather limited’* (p. 472). The authors move on to consider the contribution that qualitative research can make to the field stating that:

Critical qualitative research methodologies can allow educational psychologists to grapple with contests between knowledge and experience, overcome barriers between research and practice and better equip the practitioner to work with young people (p. 484)

The relevance of this view to the current study was evident, as in seeking to explore the experiences of children described as having ASD and examining these in the light of so-called professional knowledge, differences and barriers between these may be discovered which may help to inform future practice.

Qualitative designs are often associated with an interpretative paradigm (Silverman 2004), which is characterised by a concern for the individual and an attempt to understand their subjective world and how they interpret their environment. This contrasts to epistemological perspectives based within positivism or empiricism, as these view reality as universal, objective and quantifiable, with the researcher acting as an observer of social reality. It is suggested that with this growing focus on interpretation researchers aim to gain a better understanding of phenomena than those who experience it themselves (Willig and Stainton- Rogers 2008). In adopting this interpretative stance it is assumed that theory does not precede research but rather emerges from particular situations and data generated. As the aim of the current research is based on the concept of accessing the thoughts and perceptions of the participants and using these to gain an understanding of their subjective experiences the approach seemed wholly relevant. The flexibility of a qualitative design was appropriate for the current research, as it was essential to allow for the development of themes most important to the participants to emerge in order to fully address the key research questions.

Silverman (2004) suggests that qualitative researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of assessing the quality of their work. He argues that quality of methods, data and of data analysis are all areas that researchers need to consider. It was therefore valuable to have access to the guidelines suggested by Smith (2011) to assist in evaluating the quality of IPA research. It was also important to ensure that the methodological approach selected for data collection would be the most effective in gathering appropriate amounts of detailed, high quality data from pupils participating in the research and that the participant’s views were represented in an accurate and meaningful way.

3.3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES CONSIDERED

As I began to formulate my ideas on possible approaches to the research questions the concept of employing a focus group methodology to collect data was uppermost in my thoughts, as this linked to my previous interest in the role of other children in supporting and encouraging those with ASD to express their views and experiences. Initially I considered adopting discourse analysis as a methodological approach to interpreting and analysing data emerging from the focus groups as, in our professional practice as educational psychologists, I feel that we are becoming increasingly aware of the power of language, particularly where it relates to the ‘pathologising’ of pupils (Billington 2000) and the implications that this can have for the way pupils are perceived or understood within the education system. I had become interested in the differing discourses surrounding autism during earlier doctoral studies, when considering tensions between the so-called ‘expert’, or professional, view of autism and the increasing number of autobiographical accounts now available in the literature (Lawson 2007, Grandin 2011).

Taking the view that language is both constructed and constructive, and that the same phenomenon can be described in a number of ways, (Potter and Wetherell 1987), I felt that discourse analysis would enable an exploration of the ways in which children diagnosed as having ASD describe and construct an understanding of the label given to them or of other terms used routinely by themselves or the adults around them, such as ‘transition’ or ‘bullying’. It would also highlight the tensions resulting from professional understanding of these constructs. Following extensive reading on discourse analysis, it was clear that the approach would have much to offer in terms of exploring the differing discourses that surround autism and the process of transition to secondary school. It could also provide an opportunity to explore the potential power issues that our largely negative professional constructions of transition for this group of pupils may create in terms of influencing the hope and expectations of pupils. However, attractive as the methodology appeared in enabling exploration of these issues, I was forced to consider whether it would be the preferred or most appropriate approach to fully address the current research questions which focus on the lived experience of pupils with ASD.

### 3.4 INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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As the research question seeks to explore in depth the experiences of the pupils participating, I was drawn to the approach offered by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith 1996), which sits within a qualitative research framework and provides a meaning-focused method, or stance, for understanding personal lived experience.

IPA aims to explore the research participant’s experience from their own perspective, therefore providing an ‘insider perspective’, while recognising that this cannot be approached directly and hence exploration must also involve the researcher’s own view of the world, and the nature of the interaction between participant and researcher. Larkin et al (2006) suggest that the phrase *‘insider perspective’* may now be over used in IPA studies and that it has contributed to a misconception that the approach is *‘simply descriptive’* (p103). However, as Heffron and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) indicate, researchers should not lose sight of the fact that *‘IPA is primarily an interpretative approach’* (p.756). IPA involves a commitment to investigating experience and how people, both participants and researchers, make sense of experience. It investigates this lived experience through careful systematic procedures involving detailed multi-level interpretation of transcripts of participant accounts.

The main objectives of IPA research, as described by Larkin et al (2006), are twofold. Firstly IPA tries to understand the participant’s world and to describe what it is like for them. It is recognised that this knowledge may only ever be partial, as access to experience is complex. It is also accepted that the account may be co-constructed by the researcher and participant, but that it is important to remain as close to the participant’s view as possible. Secondly IPA aims to develop an interpretative analysis, a second order account, in which the initial descriptive account is positioned in a social, cultural and theoretical context. It is at this stage that the researcher may take a more speculative approach to the data, ‘*to think about what it means for the participants to have made these claims and to have expressed these feelings and concerns in this particular situation’* (p.104)*.* IPA studies usually focus on experience which is of particularsignificance to the person (Smith et al 2009), often that bringing change and therefore demanding reflection.

Smith (2004) describes the characteristic features of IPA as idiographic, inductive, and interrogative and in considering these features I was able to relate each of them to the current study, which served to encourage my use of the approach. The ‘*strongly idiographic’* (p.41) nature of IPAsuggests its suitability for use with a small number of participants, as included here. Although I was aware that combining IPA with focus group data, as discussed in more detail later in this chapter, would require a somewhat modified approach to that suggested by Smith, I felt that emerging themes could present both individual and group experiences. Although an inductive nature is not claimed to be unique to IPA, but rather a feature of much qualitative methodology, IPA is described as *‘flexible enough to allow unanticipated topics or themes to emerge during analysis’* (p.43). In terms of this study using IPA would allow for the emergence of any unexpected themes alongside themes relating directly to transition. Smith suggests that IPA shares concepts and constructs with mainstream psychology and aims to make a contribution to this through *‘interrogating or illuminating existing research*’ (p.43) as results of studies are discussed in relation to existing literature. This interrogative stance appeared relevant to the current study, as some emerging themes may serve to challenge aspects of the current research literature.

### 3.4.1 Background to IPA

IPA was first described as a specific approach to data analysis in the mid-1990s by Smith (1996) who observed the need for *‘a qualitative approach to psychology which was grounded in psychology’* (Eatough and Smith 2008 p.180) and, as such, is a relatively recent approach. Over recent years IPA has become one of the most commonly used qualitative methodologies in psychological research (Smith 2011). The majority of published research using IPA has been in the field of health psychology (Brocki and Weardon 2006) but more recently it has been used increasingly across a wide range of psychological enquiry (Reid, Flowers and Larkin 2005), including educational psychology (Humphrey and Lewis 2008). The term interpretative phenomenological analysis is used to signify the dual facets of the approach, phenomenology, or experience, and interpretation.

IPA draws on three main areas of philosophy; phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

*Phenomenology*

Phenomenology is the philosophical approach to the study of being or experience, the ways in which we as human beings gain knowledge of the world around us, and the phenomena that appear in our conscious engagement with the world. It involves the examination and comprehension of lived experience, the way things appear to us in our experience, or our experiential reality (Langdridge 2007, Eatough and Smith 2006).

The approach draws upon the work of phenomenological philosophers, including Husserl and his focus on experience and perception. Husserl was concerned with *‘the experiences in which something comes to be grasped as known*’ (Moran 2000 p.108) and famously argues that we should ‘return to the things themselves’, the ‘things’ being lived experiences, focusing on each and everything in its own right (Smith et al 2009). Husserl focused on transcendental approaches, a belief that the essential features of an object would transcend the circumstances of their appearance and therefore allow this to be illuminated to others (Willig 2008). He sought to use experience as a means of understanding consciousness itself. Husserl raised ideas which were pertinent to IPA in emphasising experience as worthy of understanding and, through the concept of *‘bracketing’*, described a process of reduction by which preconceptions can be removed so that experience itself can be explored. Husserl distinguished that which is experienced from the manner in which it is experienced and used the term *‘intentionality’* to describe the relationship between the conscious process of experiencing something and the object itself. Husserl emphasises the importance of reflecting on things or experiences in order to focus on our perceptions of these rather than the objects themselves. This involves stepping out of every day experience, our *‘natural attitude’* (Husserl 1970 p. 145), in order to examine our perception of that experience by adopting a ‘phenomenological attitude’. IPA is therefore phenomenological in that it is concerned with the subjective reports of individuals’ experiences rather than the formulation of objective accounts.

Phenomenology, although conceived as a philosophical system, has implications for psychology in its focus on the content of consciousness and the individual’s experience of the world (Willig 2008). Although IPA, as a methodological stance, draws heavily on phenomenology, it is suggested that it is *‘more interpretive than phenomenological’* (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008 p.168).It should be recognised that IPA is one approach to phenomenological psychology and that other methods also exist. Descriptive phenomenology remains firmly within the tradition of transcendental phenomenology, as described by Husserl (1970), and differs from interpretative phenomenological approaches in, whilst acknowledging the role of interpretation in peoples’ perception and experience of the world, believing it is possible to minimise this and adopt a stance in which all past knowledge of the phenomena under investigation can be ‘bracketed’ (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008). The focus of the research becomes the phenomena as experienced by the participant rather than the researcher’s interpretation of it. Larkin (2012) suggests that a unifying feature of phenomenological approaches may be a shared dissatisfaction with the models used in natural science which attempt to provide a detached, objective view of the world.

*Hermeneutics*

Heidegger, a contemporary and student of Husserl, introduced the key concept of hermeneutics which influenced the development of IPA. Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation and Smith et al (2009) draw on Heidegger’s ideas in suggesting that phenomenological inquiry is *‘basically interpretative’.* Therefore *‘Both Husserl and Heidegger agree that both description and interpretation are legitimate methods, but they disagree with respect to which is primary’* (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008 p.167) Heidegger suggests that when studying experience it is never possible to achieve the *‘bracketing’* described by Husserl, as our observations are always made from our own view point. He refers to ‘*daisen*’ (Heidegger 1962), or being there, to describe the fact that we are always involved in the world and relationships with others and cannot therefore step into an objective stance (Langdridge 2007 p.29). Therefore the best that can be achieved is an interpretation of experience. The analysis involved in IPA approaches always involves interpretation and attempts to understand lived experience from the participant’s point of view. The notion of ‘appearing’ as suggested by Heidegger is described by Smith et al (2009) as exemplifying the interpretation which forms the basis of IPA in that the phenomena is there and the researcher facilitates its emergence and then makes sense of it once it appears. IPA employs a double hermeneutic, as the participant is trying to make sense of their experience and the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant’s sense -making.

Smith et al (2009) refer to a further way in which IPA uses a double hermeneutic, in combining a hermeneutic of ‘questioning’ with a hermeneutic of ‘empathy’. The analyst may take different interpretative stances throughout the analysis. An empathetic stance in attempts to appreciate what the experience is like from the point of view of the participant, as the researcher attempts to identify with the participants and to make sense of and understand their views. A questioning stance may also be taken, asking critical questions of participants’ responses, thus moving towards presenting the more interpretative work of the researcher. Smith suggests that engaging in both aspects of the enquiry allows for totality of representation for the participant.

Within hermeneutic theory lies the concept of the hermeneutic cycle in the research process. Although IPA is a linear process, where the researcher moves through the stages of research and analysis step by step, it can also be seen as an iterative process, in which the researcher moves backwards and forwards, engaging with the data in different ways rather completing one step at a time. This combination of phemonenology and hermeneutics within IPA is clearly conceptualised by Smith et al (2009) who state that:

It is phenomenological in attempting to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant, but recognises that this inevitably becomes an interpretative endeavour for both participant and researcher. Without the phenomenology there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomena would not be seen. (p.37)

*Idiography*

A third major influence on IPA is idiography, as it is an approach *‘committed to the detailed examination of a phenomenon as it is experienced and given meaning in the lifeworld of a person’* (Eatough and Smith 2006 p.485). In this aspect the approach differs from nomothetic approaches which are concerned with making claims at a group or population level (Smith et al 2009). IPA is idiographic in its focus on the particular rather than the universal and this may be viewed at different levels. Firstly in its commitment to understanding experience from the perspective of particular people in a particular context, and secondly in its focus on particular detail gained through its detailed examination of individual cases prior to moving on to make any more universal claims.

### 3.4.2 Links with other approaches

Links have been made between IPA, discursive psychology and narrative approaches (Smith 1996) as all are committed to qualitative methodology and the importance of language, and entail in depth qualitative analysis. Some studies have combined IPA with Foucauldian discourse analysis (Johnson et al 2004), suggesting that the two approaches share a number of important features which make them compatible, including the fact that both are constructionist in assuming that *‘the same phenomena can be constructed in different ways and we can learn something through analysing these differing constructions’* (p.364). Also Smith et al (2009) suggest that both IPA and Foucauldian discourse analysis share concerns with how context influences the experiences of the individual.

However IPA can be described as experiential research rather than discursive research (Eatough and Smith 2006, Larkin et al 2006), as its focus lies more in understanding and making sense of the participants thoughts, motivations and actions whereas the focus of discourse analysis lies in the ways in which language constructs peoples’ worlds. Although IPA recognises the influence of language on how people make sense of their lived experiences and then on how researchers make sense of the participants’ sense making, here language is described as having a light constructionist stance in contrast to the strong constructionism of discourse analysis.

A focus on cognition marks a further contrast between IPA and discourse analysis, as IPA assumes a relationship between people’s talk, thinking, behaviour and emotional state. Although contested in the literature (Langdridge 2007), cognition can be said to be a central analytic concern of IPA and its focus on meaning or sense making, both by the participant and the researcher, links it to cognitive psychology and social cognition approaches (Smith and Osborn 2008). Cognition is *‘a vital aspect of human existence for phenomenological thinkers’* (Eatough and Smith 2006 p 486) and IPA researchers try to bridge the gap between personal accounts and an individual’s underlying cognitions. In contrast discourse analysis approaches (Potter and Wetherell 1987) dispute the assumption that an individual’s verbal reports reflect their underlying thought processes and suggest that what people say is situation dependent.

IPA clearly has close links with Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin1990), as both offer a clear, systematic and sequential approach to the analysis of data. However Grounded Theory is most often used with large scale studies whose aim is to create a theoretical level account of a research area in which the researcher seeks to illustrate a theoretical claim through the use of individual accounts. In contrast IPA provides a more detailed analysis of individual experiences and focuses on convergence and divergence between individual accounts.

**3.4.3 Rational for using IPA**

*Research questions*

IPA methodology appeared to lend itself to the current research for several reasons. In contrast to the suggestion made by Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) that students tend to choose IPA methodology in advance of developing research aims and questions and then ‘*shoehorn*’ (p 756) their project into the methodology, I made the choice of using IPA as it presented as the methodological approach most suited to my already formulated research questions:

**What are the experiences of children diagnosed as having autism spectrum disorder during their transition to secondary school?**

**How can these experiences be used to inform professional knowledge and practice?**

IPA is described as suitable for studies which involve broad and open research questions, such as those to be addressed here, where the aim of the study is to investigate an area of concern rather than to test a hypothesis (Smith and Osborn 2008).

*Research context*

I would suggest that the established links between IPA and health psychology also lends it to the study of issues involving ASD, as I would argue that ASD can be considered by some to transcend both education and health. It could be suggested that IPA is frequently used in health research as people have an innate need to learn about the lives and experiences of others and are interested in hearing the ‘illness narratives’ of other people. The proliferation of literature, newspaper and magazine articles, and television programmes which have appeared over recent years focusing on ASD suggests that this is also an area where people are interested in the individual narratives and life stories of others.

*Concern with personal experience*

This study focuses on the personal experience of the participants and their own perceptions of this, rather than attempting to provide an objective description of transition to secondary school that can be generalised across a wider population. The study positions the participants as ‘experts’ on their experience of school, secondary school transition in particular, and their ASD. As IPA does not aim, or attempt, to provide an objective view, it again lends itself to the study. Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest that IPA is particularly valuable when the research is concerned with *‘complexity, process or novelty’* (p.55) and most studies focus on experiences which have considerable importance for participants, those which bring change for their lives and demand a degree of reflection. For the participants here the experience of transition from primary to secondary school can be viewed as a process that involves change and complexity. For them it may be a point at which what has become the ordinary, everyday experience of living with ASD becomes an experience of importance, as they reflect on the significance of their differences, particularly in the context of school.

IPA assumes an existing universal inclination towards self-reflection (Smith 1996) and presupposes that participants try to interpret their experiences into a form that is understandable to them personally. This study would provide an opportunity for pupils to disengage from the active process of moving schools, or experiencing school as a child with ASD, and to reflect on their experience, considering that which is normally taken for granted. Hopefully pupils would be trying to make sense of their personal experiences of transition while also attempting to make sense of their autism and the difficulties and differences they experience as a result of this. In using IPA the study becomes concerned not with ASD or transition as such, but rather the participants’ experience and understanding of their autism and of their move to secondary school.

IPA is described as *‘resolutely idiographic’* (Eatough and Smith 2008 p.183) in its concern with understanding the meaning of the individual’s life or experience and focus on the particular rather than the universal. An idiographic approach, the study of specifics, may also be used to describe the study of a particular event or situation, in this case transition into secondary school for those with ASD. IPA can be seen to draw upon both of these meanings (Larkin et al 2006), as studies most often focus on the individual person’s experiences of specific events or situations. The detailed case by case analysis involved in the process of IPA lends the approach to the use of small sample sizes. The number of participants in this study falls within recommendations made by proponents of the approach (Smith and Osborn 2008) who suggest an ideal sample size of five or six participants. A fairly homogenous sample is also suggested, with a closely defined group of participants who will find the research question relevant, which again was pertinent to the sample used in the current study.

*Role of the researcher*

IPA emphasises the dynamic nature of the research process with the researcher playing an active part. Although the approach aims to access the insider perspective of participants it acknowledges that this is never completely possible (Larkin et al 2006) as access to these perspectives will always be complicated by the researcher’s own perceptions. It suggests that the researcher’s perceptions are in fact necessary in order to help make sense of the personal worlds and experiences of others through an interpretative process.

Access depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher’s own conceptions; indeed these are required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity. (Smith and Osborn 2008 p. 53)

I was drawn to the use of IPA as I was aware that, as a researcher, I would bring a range of perceptions and presuppositions on the issues surrounding transition to secondary school to the process of analysis, as an educational psychologist, former primary school teacher, and parent. In my current role and also in my former role as leader of an autism outreach service, my involvement is most frequently with pupils for whom transition to mainstream secondary schools had proved, or was likely to prove, challenging or problematic. I was aware therefore that these experiences had potentially influenced my perception of transition to secondary school for pupils with ASD, as had my professional knowledge of autism and the autobiographical accounts of difficulties experienced by those with autism in secondary school environments. As a parent myself I had experienced the move to secondary school for my own three sons who, although without the potential complications associated with ASD, all responded very differently to the change. Some of my own perceptions and experiences would be valuable in enabling me to make sense of the experiences of participants, but some may complicate my interpretation.

My role as moderator of the focus groups would allow me to make observations and begin to interpret responses and interactions with and between participants. My ‘interpretative stance’ would therefore potentially begin early in the research. My work with the local Autism Service had provided me with some knowledge of the participants and their past experiences of school. For these reasons I felt that my position and preconceptions were likely to influence both the collection and analysis of data and it was therefore preferable to adopt a methodological stance which acknowledges this.

Smith et al (2009) suggest that during interviews as researchers we should resist the urge to interpret data and *‘bracket our own pre-existing concerns and conceptions’* (p 64), focusing closely on the participant’s words and experiences. Within this study I also felt that it would be necessary to ‘bracket’ the accepted and often negative professional view, or construct, of ASD in order to focus on the subjective experiences of ASD as described by participants. In reflecting on my position in relation to the research I was drawn to the model suggested by Smith et al (2009) of positioning my preconceptions within the hermeneutic circle of the research process. Therefore I would start the research process at one point on the circle, shaped by my knowledge of working with children with ASD and with professional expertise and an awareness of the process of transition from primary to secondary school. In moving from this position I attempt to ‘bracket’, or acknowledge, my preconceptions as I meet the research participants on the other side of the circle. Here I focus on the participant rather than my own views, acknowledging their experiential expertise, attending closely to their story and facilitating the uncovering of their experiences. I then move back around the circle to where I started to analyse the data collected from my own perspective, acknowledging my preconceptions and prior experience, and yet irretrievably changed due to my meeting with the participants and their accounts.

Shaw (2010) emphasises the importance of a reflexive attitude, the willingness to explore our self and our relationship with the research, in interpretative phenomenological studies:

Through making ourselves aware of our own feelings about and expectations of the research, we can begin to fully appreciate the nature of our investigation, its relationship to us personally and professionally, and our relationship as a researcher and experiencer in the world to those with whom we wish to gather experiential data. (p 235)

I was aware then that my reflections on the research area and the influence of my own preconceptions should be made explicit throughout the research process, particularly during the interpretation of the data.

3.5 FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

This was the approach chosen to access the views and experiences of the participating pupils on their forthcoming transition to secondary school. The background to and rationale for using this approach is described below.

**3.5.1 Background to focus group research**

The use of focus groups as a qualitative approach in social science research is generally viewed to have emerged in the 1940s, when they were used by Paul Lazerfield, Robert Merton and colleagues at Columbia University to investigate the impact of media propaganda on peoples’ attitudes towards the involvement of the USA in World War II (Barbour 2007, Liamputtong 2010). Following this, focus groups were rarely employed as a method of data collection in academic research but were used extensively, as a more quantitative approach, for market research in the commercial world (Kidd and Parshall 2000).

Wilkinson (2004) suggests that since the 1990s there has been a ‘resurgence of interest’ in focus group methodology across a wide range of disciplines including education, sociology and social psychology. The flexibility of focus group methodology is widely proposed as a reason for its rise in popularity (Kruger and Casey 2009). Barbour (2007) describes the approach as continually evolving and utilized across a range of disciplines, including health service, organizational and social science research, and across a range of research topics, with each discipline choosing to use the method in a slightly different way (p 9).

*Theoretical background*

Wilkinson (2004) suggests that focus group methods can be used within an ‘essentialist’ or a ‘social constructionist’ research framework. An essentialist approach assumes that the research participants have ideas, views and understandings that can be accessed by the researcher. Within a focus group setting it is predicted that the presence of other participants is likely to stimulate debate and therefore lead to increased disclosure and more elaborated individual accounts. In contrast social constructionist approaches assume that meanings and sense-making are constructed through group discussion and interactions rather than pre-existing in the minds of participants.

Liamputtong (2010) suggests that focus group methodology can be situated in the theoretical frameworks of symbolic interactionism, feminism and critical pedagogy. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) suggest a comparable view but frame this as focus groups proliferating within three *‘overlapping domains’* (p.888), pedagogy, politics, and qualitative research practice.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the process of interaction and the active construction of meaning. It is concerned with *‘the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their activities and environments’* (Flick 2006 P.66) and suggests that individuals make sense of social phenomena through their interaction with others, rather than in isolation, through the reconstruction of different ways in which individuals invest the phenomena with meaning. Liamputtong (2010) proposes that *‘the social context of focus groups provides the researchers with the opportunity to directly witness the co-construction of meaning through the interactions of participants in the group’* (p18). There appears to be some tension within the literature as to the current position of symbolic interactionism in qualitative research. Barbour (2007) suggests that it has been ‘supplanted’ by phenomenological approaches with which it shares a focus on the process of interaction and active construction of meaning. Liamputtong however suggests that it continues to have a prominent influence on qualitative psychology as the use of focus groups continues to increase in popularity. For, as Bryman (2008) suggests, symbolic interactionism is the *‘central tenet’* on which theoretical position of focus groups is based (p.476).

The role of focus group methodology in feminist research is such that is has been regarded by some as a ‘feminist method’ (Wilkinson 1999) and has often been empowering for women (Kamberelis and Dimitiadis 2005). This is linked to the presumed shift in power away from the researcher due to number of participants in the group when compared to individual interview approaches. It is argued that, as the power of the researcher becomes decentralized, this provides women with a ‘*safe space***’** in which to talk about their own lives(Madriz 2000 p. 843). This view of focus groups as a place in which women could connect with each other and share their individual experiences resonated with the aim of the current study in which it was hoped that children with ASD would have a similar opportunity.

The role of focus groups as a pedagogical tool draws on the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and Jonathan Kozol in New York (Kamberilis and Dimitriadis 2008, Liamputtong 2010). As with the links to feminism, this view of focus group methodology again emphasizes its potential emancipatory role, as both Freire and Kozol worked with oppressed groups to develop and use literacy learning to begin social and political activism to change their lives for the better. Freire and Kozol *‘used focus groups for imagining and enacting the emancipatory political possibilities of collective work’* (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2008) and worked with people, not on them, again recognizing the importance of providing spaces in which marginalized groups could work together. In relating this theoretical underpinning with the current study, tentative links could be suggested between the current activism in the field of ASD, for example the Autistic Rights Movement. Also focus groups would potentially empower pupils to comment on and suggest changes to the policies and practices they experience in school.

**3.5.2 Principles and practicalities of focus groups**

Focus groups can be seen as providing an intermediate position between the individual semi-structured or open ended interview, and participant observation conducted in a group setting. In comparison to observational research it is the potential to apply a degree of structure to focus group research that gives it an ‘*edge*’ (Barbour 2007 p 36) as the setting and membership of the group, together with the insights it may be possible to gain, can be strategically considered in the planning process. Within the literature the differences between a group interview and a focus group interview are debated and it is suggested that ‘*Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, group interaction* (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999 p. 20). Liamputtong (2010) however clearly states that:

A focus group interview is not a group interview. It is a group of people gathered together to discuss a focused issue of concern. The emphasis is therefore on the interaction between participants in the group (p 31)

A key principle of the focus group lies in the fact that data is generated through the interaction between members of the group rather than with the researcher. These interactions are crucial and are thought to create a ‘synergistic effect’ (Stewart et al 2007), allowing participants to respond to the views and reactions of others, therefore revealing information that would not be elicited by other methods. Focus group participants may challenge each other’s point of view, or extend and develop statements, thereby generating rich data (Wilkinson 2004, Willig 2008) and potentially allowing the researcher to gain increased understanding by listening to the their discussions, challenges and disagreements with each other. Warr (2005) states that focus groups do not aim to generate multiple individual accounts or perspectives but it is the group and its interactions which form the focus of the research. However I would suggest that the focus group situation has the potential to encourage more elaborated accounts of individual experiences from participants which can become a focus of the research, particularly when an IPA stance is adopted.

Typically a focus group may have between six and twelve participants, although some researchers suggest a maximum of six in the group (Willig 2008), who are similar to each other in a way that is important for the research. Bloor et al (2001) suggest that utilising pre-existing groups for focus group research can be beneficial as participation is then less daunting for individuals. However Cohen et al (2001) suggest that focus groups with children are more successful if they are not conducted with established groups of friends. Participants here fulfilled each of these criteria, as they did not know each other prior to the research but they belonged to a pre-existing group defined by their diagnosis of ASD.

The success of the focus groups is assumed to depend on the skills and experience of the moderator (Kidd and Parshall 2000). Although similar skills are required to those needed when conducting individual interviews, including good listening skills, the aptitude to establish effective rapport with participants, and the ability to use prompts and probes appropriately, the focus group moderator must also be confident in managing group interactions to ensure the participation of all those taking part. My knowledge and experience of working with children with ASD and of their conversational styles and skills, sometimes including a tendency for self-directed conversations, indicated that as moderator I may need to exert some influence, for example in maintaining the group’s focus, gently steering the discussions (Willig 2008). I would suggest that the combination of focus group methodology with IPA provides an additional challenge for the moderator in balancing the more passive position suggested within focus group research with the active researcher role inherent to IPA.

# 3.5.3 Rational for the use of focus groups

Focus groups are a useful method for sociological research because the sociable interaction that is generated can yield rich insight into people’s life worlds. This is because the nature of the talk that is generated in focus groups is a mixture of personal beliefs and available collective narratives that are further flavoured by the local circumstances of participants’ lives. (Warr 2005, p.200)

The above reference to ‘social interaction’ and ‘talk that is generated’ could imply that the concept of conducting focus group research with a group of children diagnosed as having ASD may be at best challenging or, at worst, impossible. It could be argued that their difficulties and differences in social understanding and communication, regarded as a key area of impairment in ASD, suggests that they would find it challenging to interact with others in sharing their personal beliefs and experiences in order to allow the insight into their ‘life worlds’.

The decision to adopt IPA as a methodological stance also called into question my choice of focus group methods, rather than the most often used semi-structured interview. However, although aware of these challenges, the choice of focus group methods was made based in part on my previous experiences of working with, and observing, pupils with ASD in social group settings. It also drew on previous research investigating the role of other children in prompting children with ASD to express their views. Dunn (2000) found that the interaction between children with autism and other children, in this case non-disabled siblings, facilitated communication and that:

Allowing autistic children to put into their own words the confusing scenarios that litter everyday social interactions enables them (and us) to develop more meaningful strategies to facilitate their understanding and navigation of such events(p. 103)

The positive outcomes of a small research study in which prompts from a non-disabled peer encouraged a pupil with ASD to express their views (Charles 2004) suggested that the role of other children in accessing the perspectives of children with significant communication difficulties may be an area for further research and also discouraged me from employing individual interviews as the method of data collection in the current research.

The concept of a ‘social group’ for children with autism, for any purpose other than to actively teach social skills, again provides a challenge to our existing professional views of a pathology that is in part defined by ‘*a qualitative impairment in reciprocal social interaction’ and ‘lack of personal relationships’* (Frith 2003). The work of Hobson (2002) challenges this view of autism by exploring the ‘*close connection between what happens within an individual person’s mind and what happens between one person and another’* and the impact of the *‘emotional presence’* of another influences an individual’s capacity for thought (p.22) therefore, as Billington (2006 a) suggests, locating the individual firmly within the social world. Observations of the social interaction between pupils taking part in a short pilot project emphasised the potential for sociability within groups of children with ASD, arguably based on the acceptance of their individual differences and the realisation that others had similar interests, problems and difficulties.

This study aimed to combine and extend the above ideas. The research would explore, and hopefully harness, the impact of interactions between pupils with ASD in prompting them to express their views and perceptions of their experiences as they move from primary to secondary school. The use of a social group, with the aim of preparing and supporting pupils during this period, as the setting of the focus group research would help concentrate the children’s thoughts and discussions on the research area. Conducting the focus groups in this established ‘social group’ setting would hopefully enable pupils to feel comfortable with both other members of the group, and also with the adults facilitating and moderating the group, therefore establishing a permissive environment.

Other aspects of focus group methodology which also drew me to the approach included:

*Empowerment*

Existing literature suggests that focus groups may empower group members, as the balance of power between the researcher and the participants becomes more equitable in a group situation. Wilkinson (2004) infers that the number of participants involved in the group reduces the researcher’s control over the interaction, allowing participants to ‘*develop the themes most important to them’* (p. 181). However this presumed empowerment for participants is contested by some researchers, particularly when the approach is employed in research with children. Chilokoa and McKie (2007) suggest that researchers should have an underlying awareness of the differing power structures between children and adults. They argue that the assumption that the power and control of the researcher is reduced in a focus group, simply due to the researcher being outnumbered by participants, ignores the fact that the researcher sets the agenda for discussion. If this issue can be successfully addressed by permitting children some control over the discussion agenda, I would concur with the view expressed by Hennesy and Heary (2005) that the potential empowerment of participants, particularly lends the approach to research involving children. They suggest that it permits children to explore issues that are relevant to them, using their own language and meanings, whilst confident that they are in a supportive environment.

Bloor et al (2001) also question the extent to which such empowerment is achieved and suggest that this is dependent on what happens after the discussion. I would argue that the emancipatory role of focus groups depends on whether or not positive outcomes are achieved for the participants as a result of the research. In this study it was hoped that a potential positive outcome of the research would be to improve the experience of transition to secondary school for pupils with ASD.

*Enabling voices to be heard*

Linked to concept of empowerment is the suggestion that a focus group can ‘give voice’ to groups that would otherwise not be heard (Morgan 1997). In my view this lent particular support for the use of this approach in the current research, as the need to discover ways of giving voice to those diagnosed as having ASD is apparent both in professional practice and within the literature. Warr (2005) suggests that focus groups are a particularly appropriate method when working with vulnerable social groups, as participants gain the support of others in the group, adding further potential support for their use with children with ASD. Children belonging to groups who occupy marginalized positions may be reluctant to express their views to an adult in an individual interview (Peterson-Sweeney 2005) but may feel more relaxed in a more natural environment of a group setting which in some ways replicates situations that children are familiar with in school. The children participating in the current study could be regarded as marginalized by their diagnosis of ASD. As Moore and Sixsmith (2000) suggest the views of young people and children, particularly if they have a communication difficulty, are most often ‘gleaned’ through the discourses of parents, carers and professionals rather than being afforded a credibility of their own. Over the past decade however there has been a shift in this view and people with learning disabilities are now increasingly seen as ‘*reliable informants, who have valid opinions with a right to express them’* (Bollard 2003 156). I would argue that including children with autism in focus group research potentially provides another means through which they can communicate their experiences.

There appears to be some support in the literature for employing focus groups with children having ASD, as Barbour (2007) suggests that the use of focus groups can be successful in accessing the views of the *‘reluctant’*, those who may otherwise be reluctant to talk (p 20). It is also proposed that they may be useful in gaining the views of groups who can be described as *‘hard to reach’* (p 21), a term sometimes applied to those diagnosed as having ASD (Willis 2007). Barbour suggests that:

Focus groups can encourage greater candour and give participants permission to talk about issues not usually raised, especially if the groups have been convened to reflect some common attribute or experience that sets them apart from others, thus providing ‘security in numbers’ (p 21)

The common attributes for participants in the current study could be regarded as both the diagnosis of ASD and their forthcoming move to secondary school. It was hoped that the focus group environment would give pupils permission to discuss issues they had previously been reluctant to raise, as others may share similar views or experiences. ASD is often regarded as a learning disability, as even those thought to have a relatively high level of cognitive functioning may learn in ways which are different from others (Attwood 2007). There is some evidence in the literature of the use of focus groups with people described as having learning disabilities (Bollard 2003). Gates and Waight (2007) reflect on the practical and theoretical issues involved in using this approach in this specific context and suggest that it is an appropriate means by which research can be made accessible and inclusive.

*Data generated*

A further strength of focus group methods lies in the amount and nature of data produced through participant discussions. Morgan (1997) refers to the chance to ‘share and compare’ amongst participants and suggests that this provides an opportunity to collect evidence on how participants understand their similarities and differences. This was particularly relevant when working with children with ASD and was potentially one of the most valuable aspects of the focus group. Hyde et al (2005) suggest that focus groups allow children to bring their fears and vulnerabilities to the surface and this can encourage others to share their own vulnerabilities. Similarly children may be inspired to voice their opinions when they hear others do so and their memory may be jogged by the contributions of others. Whilst recognising these advantages it is also important to be mindful of the suggestion of Chilokoa and McKie (2007) that:

No matter how ‘well’ one attempts to do research with children in order to give them a voice, it is vital to recognize that the way the research itself is set up will invariably affect and influence what is gathered, and consequently the ‘voice’ that is heard. (p.207)

 Wilkinson (2004) suggests that:

Focus groups are a method of choice when the objective of the research is primarily to study *talk*, either conceptualized as a ‘window’ on participants’ lives or their underlying beliefs and opinions, or a constituting a social context in its own right, amenable to direct observation. (p194)

This supported the use of the focus group in the context of this study, as its focus was an exploration of pupils’ perceptions, views and experiences through their talk, and also the observation of the social interaction between those children presumed, through their diagnosis of ASD, to have a significant impairment in this area.

3.6 POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS OF METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

The amalgamation of an IPA research stance with focus group methodology as a mixed method approach presents inevitable challenges. In addition each of these approaches is described as having possible limitations which are considered below.

**3.6.1 Limitations of IPA approaches**

*Quality of participant accounts*

In common with other approaches employing interview methods, IPA has vulnerabilities in its dependence on participants’ memory and perceptions, and the way in which they choose to present their experiences and views to the researcher. Accounts may therefore be entirely subjective and the way they are recalled may not essentially be psychologically meaningful.

*The role of language*

Smith et al (2009) recognise the role of language in IPA describing it as *‘inevitably always already enmeshed with language and culture’* (p194). Willig (2008) suggests that, as phenomenological analysis works with texts, it is reliant on the *‘representational validity of language’.* If, as researchers, we subscribe to a more discourse analytic view it can be argued that language constructs, rather than describes, reality and that the language participants use to describe their experiences constructs their particular version of that experience. Viewed from this perspective it can be argued that data available in transcripts *‘tells us more about the ways in which an individual talks about a particular experience within a particular context, than about the experience itself’* (Willig 2008 p. 67). Smith (2011) argues that, although DA and IPA are both linguistically based approaches, their rationale differs in that IPA researchers analyse participants’ language in order to attempt to understand how they are making sense of their experience whilst DA researchers try to learn how participants are constructing accounts of experience.

*Validity and reliability*

IPA is inevitably a subjective approach to data analysis and it is suggested that no two analysts working on the same data would replicate each other’s analysis. (Brocki and Weardon 2006). Although the subjectivity of IPA is regarded as an advantage by its advocates, the question of reliability and validity is raised by others (Golsworthy and Coyle 2001 cited by Brocki and Weardon). In view of this a range of approaches have been taken by researchers to help validate their analyses, including analysis by a number of researchers before decisions are made on a thematic frame work, or validation of analyses by other academics (Brocki and Weardon 2006). However Yardley (2000) suggests that reliability may not be the appropriate criteria by which to judge such qualitative research and presents four broad principles by which to assess its quality: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. Smith et al (2009) clearly illustrate the ways in which IPA approaches may seek to address these principles. I felt that it would be appropriate therefore to attempt to judge the current research against the same principles in later chapters as the research process progresses.

When considering the number of participants most frequently involved in IPA studies Brocki and Wearden (2006) outline some of the issues with regard to generalisation of findings. They cite Smith (1999) who argues that IPA research should be judged on how well it illuminates the particular cases studied in that the *‘micro-level theorising should be richly informative of those particular individuals and may well be fairly modest in its claims to generalisation’* (p 95).

**3.6.2 Limitations of Focus Group Methods**

The advantages of focus groups are outlined extensively in the literature (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005, Wilkinson 2004) but it is suggested that some aspects of the methodology perceived to be advantageous can also be regarded as disadvantages or weaknesses. Barbour (2007) argues that some of the criticisms of focus group research arise from a ‘*lingering attachment’* to quantitative assumptions (p.35) and by placing focus group methodology within the context of qualitative research many of its perceived weaknesses can be viewed as advantages.

*Data generated*

Focus groups have the potential to provide large concentrated amounts of data on a precise topic of interest, from relatively large numbers of participants, in a relatively short time (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005), an attribute that could be regarded as a distinct advantage in terms of methodological considerations.However, it is suggested that if a group is too large, particularly if the topic is complicated, the data produced can be trivial, offering a shallower understanding than individual interview accounts (Kruger and Casey 2009). Also the amount and assortment of talk, generated through discussion, arguments, interruptions and tangental conversations, leads focus group data to be less coherently sequenced than that provided by individual interviews (Bloor et al 2001), resulting in a complicated analytical and interpretive task (Warr 2005). It was anticipated that this could be a particular concern when working with children with ASD due to their differing conversational skills, such as interrupting and following topics of their own choice.

*The role of social interaction*

The role of social interaction, which provides one of the defining features of focus group research, can also be perceived as a weakness as the success of the group is in part dependent on the dynamics between the individual participants (Bloor et al 2001). This may influence the nature of the data produced, as one or more members may tend to dominate discussions, compromising the equal representation of views (Barbour 2007). This was considered as a potential problem when working with children with ASD, as due to the differing level of communication skills and social confidence within the group could impact on levels of participation. The aim of a focus group can be to induce social interactions similar to those which occur in everyday life but with a greater focus, thereby appearing more naturalistic than an interview (Wilkinson 2004, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005). For children with ASD it was necessary to question whether such interactions do in fact occur in everyday life and to acknowledge the possible stress and anxiety caused for them by social interaction.

The social context of the focus group is sometimes presented as a less conducive environment for researching sensitive topics. This suggests that careful thought should be given to the extent to which a focus group setting may facilitate disclosure in relation to the research question (Willig 2008). In contrast Warr (2005) proposes that a supportive group may encourage individuals to disclose their experiences:

The support experienced by being in a group of similar others, and an increased capacity for directing the discussions, can validate participants’ experiences and viewpoints (p.202)

When relating this to the current study it could be hypothesised that children may find it difficult to express their anxieties about their forthcoming move to a new school or to discuss sensitive issues regarding their diagnosis or negative experiences. Conversely the potentially supportive nature of the group, and the possibility that others may describe similar thoughts or experiences, may create a permissive environment in which pupils would feel comfortable in disclosing their views.

Chilokoa and McKie (2007) suggest that in focus group literature there is little interest in levels of verbal participation. The meaning behind a participant saying nothing is rarely explored as *‘there is no space for silence in research results’* (p.213). As in the case of the current study, where focus groups are employed with the aim of giving voice to more marginalised groups of individuals, researchers need to be mindful of this issue.

*Accessing the ‘truth’*

A further challenge frequently made to focus group methodology is the extent to which it elicits the ‘truth’ from participants (Barbour 2007 p.33), particularly as participant responses can be inconsistent and there may be some fear of disapproval from other members of the group. Warr (2005) suggests that:

Focus group data can be perceived as unreliable because interactions tend to be orientated towards persuading the group rather than expressing “true” opinions (p 203)

However it can be argued concern with accessing the ‘truth ’in focus group data links to more positivist approaches and that, when seen in the context of qualitative research tradition, it should be assumed that the truth should be perceived as relative, as there is no one definitive view. Also focus groups may be more vulnerable to the possibility that the participant may tell the researcher what they perceive they would like to hear. Although it is not possible to generalise as far as to ascribe specific characteristics to all children diagnosed as having ASD, there is an accepted view that children with this diagnosis may have less awareness of the impact of their views and opinions on others, less motivation to please adults, and also a reduced need to comply socially with their peers, which may lead them to be less influenced by the views of others in the group.

3.7 IPA AND FOCUS GROUPS: A MIXED METHODS APPROACH

If focus groups are to become established as a serious option in IPA research, we think that the theoretical and epistemological issues and tensions do need to be tacked more explicitly. At the very least researchers should try to demonstrate their awareness that such tensions exist. (Tompkins and Eatough 2010 p 260)

It is evident that significant challenges exist when attempting to combine the use of focus groups as a method of data collection with the methodological stance of IPA. The idiographic commitment of IPA indicates that the preferred method of data collection in IPA studies is the individual semi-structured, in depth interview. However, due to the flexibility of application of IPA approaches, researchers are now beginning to combine this with a variety of data collection methods (Brocki and Weardon 2006). Nevertheless existing literature describes tensions in the compatibility of IPA with the use of focus groups, as some researchers suggest the potential benefits of combining the approaches whilst others continue to urge caution (Smith 2004, Dowling 2007).

Having used IPA in the analysis of focus group data some researchers reflect on the potential disadvantages of this pairing. For example Flowers et al (2001) suggest that their focus on shared understanding from focus group participants led them to neglect idiosyncratic individual experiences, a situation which I sought to avoid in this study. Smith et al (2009) continue to express some caution over the use of focus groups when collecting data for IPA research, as they allow multiple voices to be heard in one data collection event and:

The presence of multiple voices, and the interactional complexity of such events, does make it more difficult to infer and develop the phenomenological aspects of IPA (p.71)

More recently further examination of the use of IPA with focus group data is evident in the literature (Palmer et al 2010, Tompkins et al 2010). Tomkins et al reflect on some of the challenges of working with IPA when using focus group data and suggest that studies available in this area to date may have ‘bracketed’ the evident epistemological tensions. They infer that, although researchers have expressed caution over the suitability of using IPA with focus group designs, their concerns usually centre on practical issues of data collection, arguably similar to more general limitations of focus groups discussed previously, rather than epistemological concerns. In contrast Tompkins et al (2010) refer to challenges such as *‘negotiating part-whole relationships’*, balancing privileging the group over the individual and vice versa, and *‘making sense of the sense-making’*, suggesting that with focus groups the interpretative or sense-making process of the hermeneutic circle, usually seen as a “double hermeneutic”, takes on an additional dimension :

For with several participants actively engaged in reflection, elaboration and sharing of experience, the process becomes one of the researcher trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense both of their own experience and of each other’s – a “multiple hermeneutic” (p 255)

It is suggested that this emerging dimension of combining IPA with focus group methods could be regarded as a potential enhancement to IPA methods.

When questioning the balance between individual and group level data in research studies using IPA methods with focus group data (Dunne and Quale 2001, O’Toole et al 2004, Vandravala et al 2006), Tomkins and Eatough (2010) suggest that these tend to develop general group level themes. This therefore serves to eclipse the individual and challenge the explicit idiographic commitment of IPA, as the use of the group as a unit of analysis can mask the idiosyncrasy of individual positions. Conversely they suggest that in some studies the verbatim extracts used tend to showcase the individual at the expense of the group dynamic, therefore losing sight of the interaction within the group, which is potentially a rich source of experiential data. I was drawn to their suggestion that, due to the interactive nature of the group, focus groups could be seen as a positive choice for IPA, as the group may stimulate the production of individual accounts in such a way that individual interviews may not. This suggestion appeared to resonate clearly with my initial rationale for the use of focus groups within the current study. In view of this I chose to adopt the practical, procedural adjustments suggested by Tomkins and Eatough (2010) for using IPA approaches to analyse and present focus group data. These focus on attempting to achieve a balance in analysing and representing data at both a group and an individual level. These processes were combined into the analysis of data in the current study and are described in more detail in Chapter 5, ‘Analysis and Interpretation’.

In addition, Palmer et al (2010) also suggest a protocol for the modification of IPA approaches with focus group data. Building on the suggestion made by Smith (2004), that in order to conduct IPA with focus group data the analyst would need to *“’parse’ transcripts at least twice, once for group patterns and dynamics and subsequently, for idiographic accounts”* (p 50), they outline a procedure which they argue permits the exploration of both experiential and interactional elements of the focus group data side by side. Although, as a novice in the use of IPA, I did not choose to use this seemingly more complex approach, the research situation described by Palmer et al (2010) which precipitated the development of this protocol resonated clearly with my own research, as they describe a set of rich, illuminating personal accounts clearly embedded in a set of complex dynamics. They acknowledge that IPA was an ideal approach to engage with the experiential accounts in their data but that the *‘constitutive features of the interactive context of these discussions’* (p101) could not be ignored and also suggest that:

The group environment appeared to allow group members to co-constitute narratives and multi-perspective accounts that would probably not have emerged in single interviews (p117)

A further complicating factor in the current study was the possibility that some of the participants may not be able to fully articulate their perceptions and experiences due to social or communication difficulties relating to ASD and their accounts may not therefore provide the depth and quality of data preferable for IPA studies. I was encouraged by the account of Tobias (2009), in which IPA was successfully used in analysing data from focus groups consisting of secondary aged pupils with ASD, providing valuable insights into their experiences of school. Ultimately I chose to follow the suggestion of Smith (2004) who states that:

If the researcher is convinced that the participants are able to discuss their own personal experiences in sufficient detail and intimacy, despite the presence of the group, then the data may be suitable for IPA. (p 51)

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Willig (2008) suggests that the same ethical considerations should apply to the treatment of participants in both qualitative and quantitative research. However Brinkman and Kvale (2008) indicate that the complexity of researching the private lives of individuals, the human interaction involved, and the knowledge produced within qualitative research in psychology, indicates that it is *‘saturated with ethical issues’* (p.263). As such, ethical issues can arise throughout the research process, from the formulation of the research question through to analysis and dissemination of research findings. In view of the open-ended nature of qualitative research Brinkman and Kvale suggest a necessity to develop *‘ethical research behaviour’* (p. 276) and remain ethically attuned throughout, rather than regarding ethics as rule-following, as *‘ethical issues and concerns cannot be addressed and solved once and for all during the planning stages of the research*’ (Willig 2008 p.20). Brinkman and Kvale suggest that the ethical guidelines that should be considered throughout the research process include informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of the researcher. Neill (2005) refers to the specific ethical concerns to be considered when carrying out research with children:

The development of research with children highlights a number of ethical issues for the research process. Much of this research is qualitative in nature and involves children telling their stories about their experiences. These data collection activities bring into focus ethical issues concerning consent, confidentiality and protection from harm. (p. 47)

Each of these issues is considered below with particular reference to focus groups as a method of data collection and children as participants. A description of attempts to effectively address these ethical issues within this study is presented within Chapter 4, ‘Procedure’.

**3.7.1 Informed consent**

Informed consent involves the researcher ensuring that the participants are fully informed about all aspects of the research procedure, including the purpose of the study and any potential risks or benefits it may entail for them. Consent should be obtained before the collection of data begins. Brinkman and Kvale (2008) suggest a careful balance is needed between providing too much detailed information to participants about a study and leaving out aspects that are of particular significance for them. The question of informed consent in more exploratory studies is raised by Willig (2008) as direction in which the research develops cannot always be predicted. In relation to consent over degree of information to be disclosed Fox and Rendall (2000) connect the question to the paradigm adopted by the researcher

as soon as the research moves into a constructional paradigm the issue becomes one of making sense of that information rather than minimising it (p. 66)

The issue of who should give, and means by which informed consent is gained when researching with children, and in particular with those assumed to have learning disabilities should be carefully considered. Gates and Waight (2007) draw attention to the fact that not only must informed consent be agreed, the complexity of participants’ capacity to consent must be considered. To this end an accessible consent form and information sheet should be available to all participants taking into account their individual difficulties. Lindsay (2000) states that factors to be considered when gaining informed consent from children must take into account age, cognitive ability, emotional state and knowledge. He suggests that these may also interact. In the case of children participating in the current research taking age or cognitive ability alone into account as a measure of their ability to give informed consent may mask the influence of their difficulties relating to autism, for example communication difficulties or their lack of understanding of the social nature of the focus group situation. Lindsay suggests that:

Vulnerability must be considered in a broader way than age alone, with the responsibility on the researcher to err on the rule of caution (p.13)

It is important to revisit the issue of consent during the process of data collection in order that verbal consent is given to back up written consent. Participants should be given the opportunity to withdraw at any point if they choose. This is usually seen as the right to withdraw during data collection but it should also be explicitly acknowledged that participants may withdraw their consent at any point in the research process up to the point where analysis and write up begins.

**3.7.2** **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality, ensuring that private identifiable information will not be reported during the research process is central to all ethical research studies but particularly pertinent to the use of focus groups. The distinct aspect of focus groups (Hennessy and Heary 2005), namely the fact that individual disclosures are shared with all group participants and not just with the researcher, indicates that the researcher will need to be increasingly aware of the need to ensure confidentiality for participants as far as this is possible. Gibson (2007) highlights the fact that the risk of disclosure of personal information is high when working with children and therefore careful consideration should be given to the composition of the group, for example including children who do not attend the same school. She also suggests that the meaning of disclosure and confidentiality should be discussed with children taking part and that explanations that draw on real examples from their own lives can be useful in supporting their understanding.

However the researcher must accept that, particularly when working with children, confidentiality cannot be entirely ensured for all discussions (Smithson 2008) but the question remains of what information should be available to whom, for example should information disclosed by children be made available to their parents or teachers (Brinkman and Kvale 2008). Liamputtong (2010) also raises the concern that often in focus groups participants may belong to the same close community and therefore maintaining confidentiality of information becomes more difficult but also more important, particularly when working with marginalised groups who may become stigmatised. This could be regarded as a potential problem when working with children from the same school or community, particularly if those children are identified as having specific needs such as ASD.

**3.7.3 Consequences**

Any possible consequences of the research study for the participants, with respect to possible harm or potential benefits, should be addressed by the researcher (Brinkman and Kvale 2008). The intense group discussion, which is likely to arise in a focus group, may be stressful for some participants and may, in some cases, give rise to distress or evoke painful memories. The researcher would need to be acutely aware of this possibility in the current study due to the nature of the difficulties of the participants. Children with a diagnosis of ASD were more likely to find their inclusion in an unfamiliar social group setting, with the demands for communication and other potential sensory distractions and disturbances, challenging. It is also not possible for the researcher to ensure that children will not be hurt or distressed by comments made by others and group members may not always respond sensitively to the views or experiences of others (Liamputtong 2010 p 26). This may be particular relevant when working with children who have ASD due to their lack of awareness of social conventions and decreased awareness of the impact of their views on the feelings of others.

This links with allowing the participants a right to withdraw at any point in the process, not simply prior to data collection, reinforcing the view that ethical considerations need to be adhered to throughout the process, Brinkman and Kvale (2008 p.268) suggest a tension with regard to whether the researcher should pursue a ‘therapeutic vein’ in addressing any sensitive issues arising or whether refraining from this would present the researcher as cold and aloof. This would need to be carefully considered in the current study due to the potential challenges faced by participants. However I would argue that a detached and aloof stance would be difficult for adults to adopt when working with children.

**3.7.4 Role of the researcher**

In research with children there is always the potential for harm ensuing from the power differential between the adult researcher, and the child. Although, as described previously, a focus group methodology may lessen the power differential between researcher and participants, it is clear that within the group situation the balance of power is likely to remain with the moderator. Gates and Waight (2007) suggest that the development of an ‘ethical relationship’ between researcher and participants is essential, built on mutual respect and interdependence, as those taking part in the research may rely on the moderator’s knowledge of the research process and the participant has the knowledge to help address the research question.

In the current research study, although I would adopt the role of researcher, my professional role as an educational psychologist must also be taken into account. Fox and Rendall (2000) suggest that:

The fact that the participants see or know that the researcher is a psychologist sets up certain meanings for participants depending on their view of psychologists. (p 62)

It would therefore be necessary to take into account, not only the views and attitudes that children participating may have formed towards educational psychologists through their experience of working with them, but also the attitudes of the parents who would also be required to give their consent for the children to participate.

Although it is essential that researchers should give careful and considered attention to ethical issues, particularly when researching with children as participants, I would argue that this should not deter them from including children in the research process. For as Long (2007) proposes:

..it is equally important that in seeking to protect the vulnerable we do not also silence them. Protection can readily become paternalism and speaking up for children and young people can also slide inexorably into deciding for them, eventually without troubling to elicit their opinions and wishes first’ (p. 485)

3.8 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In summary, after much deliberation and consideration of approaches available, my chosen method was a mixed methods approach combining IPA, a distinct methodological stance grounded in philosophy and psychology with the use of focus groups. The rationale for this choice was based on the dedication of IPA to the detailed exploration of lived experience and the idiographic focus on the individual, who in this study is positioned as possessing the ‘expert view’. The recognition that IPA gives to the interpretative stance of the researcher, and also to the dynamic nature of the sense- making process involving both researcher and participants, was viewed as an advantage due to my professional and personal knowledge and experience of the phenomena to be studied. Although it must be recognised that challenges exist to the use of IPA in this study, not least that of combining it with the use of focus groups, overall it presented as an appropriate means by which to address the broad research question concerning how pupils diagnosed as having ASD experience and make sense of their transition from primary to secondary school.

# CHAPTER 4: LISTENING TO PUPILS

4.1INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I describe the practical aspects of the data collection stage of the research process. The chapter outlines the planning of the focus groups, selection of participants, details of how the focus groups were conducted, and finally how I attempted to address the ethical issues identified in the earlier methodology chapter.

4.2 PLANNING THE FOCUS GROUPS

Gibson (2007) suggests that focus group research requires considerable planning, preparation and skills in the selection and organisation of the group and the consideration of how the researcher or moderator will interact with them. If we acknowledge the fact that any focus group requires a high level of planning, and those involving children even more so, a focus group consisting of participants diagnosed as having ASD demands an increased level of planning and preparation.

**4.2.1 Pilot study**

A short exploratory pilot study was conducted during the previous year. Year 6 pupils were invited to attend social groups which aimed to help prepare them for transition to secondary school and a small number of these pupils took part in a focus group discussion to explore their concerns about their coming move. The experience of conducting this group informed much of the planning for the data collection stage of this study.

**4.2.2 Practical considerations**

*Selecting participants*

Invitations were sent to all Year 6 children known to the Autism Service to attend a planned ‘Social Group’ intervention to help prepare them for their transition to secondary school. The parents of pupils with a diagnosis of ASD or Asperger syndrome, known to be transferring to mainstream secondary schools, were provided with information on the research project by post prior to the meetings and their consent for pupils to take part in the study, together with that of the children themselves, was sought during the first meeting of the group.

Consideration was given to the composition of the focus groups, including whether single or mixed sex groups would be beneficial, or whether it was preferable for the participants to know each other prior to the research. As pupils responding to the invitation to participate in the project included both boys and girls a mixed sex group was planned. Coincidentally the pupils did not know each other either from school or in the community. The number of children participating in this project was selected on the basis of those who were able to attend each session. Given the possible anxiety which participants could experience in larger group settings and their potential differences and difficulties with social communication skills, a smaller group was considered to be advantageous.

The focus groups were conducted with five Year 6 pupils (n=5), all of whom had a diagnosis of ASD or Asperger Syndrome. Four of the pupils were due to transfer to a mainstream secondary school and the fifth had been offered a place in an integrated resource unit attached to a mainstream school. The group consisted of four boys and one girl. The pupils selected were able to attend each of the ‘Social Group’ sessions, which aimed to help prepare them for their transition to secondary school, and consent had been obtained, from both them and their parents, for their participation in the research process. The focus group meetings, during which research data was collected, were conducted with the selected pupils as an integral part of the social group session. This allowed them time to settle into the location and social situation prior to taking part in the more formal research setting and also time to relax, or debrief with adults, following the focus group.

The profiles of individual pupil participants are presented below:

|  |
| --- |
| **Sam**Sam was diagnosed as having Asperger Syndrome when he was 8 years old. Although he is aware of his diagnosis he generally prefers others not to know. At the time of the study he had only recently returned to his local primary school after several months out of school due to experiences of bullying. Sam is an only child and has a very close relationship with his mother. He was clearly anxious when first attending the social groups and his parents were initially reluctant to leave him. However, once familiar with the adults involved, Sam quickly became comfortable with the group situation and more confident in his interactions with other pupils, forming a particular relationships with Luke. Sam is a confident and articulate communicator who shows a strong preference for routines and rules. He has a particular interest in cars and building with Lego. He was due to transfer to a mainstream secondary school.  |
| **Luke**Luke was diagnosed as having Asperger Syndrome when age 9 and he attended his local mainstream primary school. His younger brother has a diagnosis of autism and attends a special school. Luke is aware of his diagnosis and chats freely about it to others. Luke presented as comfortable and confident from the outset of the transition groups. He quickly established a good relationship with other pupils, particularly Joshua, with whom he shared an avid interest in science and a detailed knowledge of space and astronomy. Luke is a confident communicator and is also willing to listen to the views of others. He frequently adopted a caring and encouraging stance towards others in the group. Luke describes himself as having sensory sensitivities. He was due to transfer to his local mainstream secondary school. |
| **Joshua**Joshua has a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome and presents as a very academically able boy. The background to Joshua’s diagnosis is unusual in that he asked his parents to refer him for assessment after reading Luke Jackson’s account of his life with Asperger Syndrome (Jackson 2002). Joshua was given his diagnosis at age 11, only a few months prior to the study. He attended his local mainstream primary school and was due to transfer to a mainstream secondary school. Joshua is a very articulate boy but his communication skills are affected at times by an apparent lack of sensitivity towards the feelings and needs of others. Although appearing confident in the group setting, his engagement was, at times, only on his terms and preferred to follow his own agenda. Although he tolerated other members of the group, his interactions were mostly directed towards Luke, with whom he shared common interests. Joshua possesses a mischievous sense of humour and often provided amusement for the group.  |
| **Joe**Joe has a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and was diagnosed at the age of 5. He attended his local primary school and planned to transfer to his local mainstream secondary school. Joe is aware of his diagnosis and talks freely about his perception of being ‘different’ to others. His mother describes him as ‘very comfortable with himself and his autism’. Joe also has some developmental coordination difficulties and very marked sensory sensitivities. Joe settled very quickly into the social groups and, although his communication skills were less articulate than others in the group, he was confident with some support to express his thoughts and experiences. At times Joe became detached from the group due to his limited attention span but he was happy to refocus his attention when prompted.  |
| **Jess**Jess was the only girl participating in the group but this did not appear to impact on her confidence. She was given a diagnosis of autism at an early age and was completely non-verbal until the age of six. Jess is now an extremely confident and articulate communicator, with expressive language skills and apparent social confidence which could possibly belie her diagnosis. Jess settled very quickly into the group situation and was potentially the most dominant contributor to discussions. She tended to gravitate towards adults for social contact, possibly due to being the only girl amongst a group of boys. At times Jess would adopt a caring and encouraging role towards others. In contrast to other participants, although Jess attended her local mainstream primary school, she was due to transfer to an autism-specific integrated resource base within a mainstream secondary school.  |

*Location*

The planned location of the group sessions was an educational setting at one of the bases used by the Autism Outreach Service. The geographical location of the schools from which participants were drawn encompassed much of the city and indicated that a central location would be more equitable for all participants.

*Timing*

The sessions took place after school as an integral part of a ‘Social Group’ intervention to support pupils during transition to secondary school. When considering the length of the focus group sessions account was taken of the potential skills of the participants in terms of attention, concentration and communication, together with possibly elevated anxiety levels. A flexible approach to timing was adopted with sessions planned to last for approximately forty-five minutes. These could be terminated early if children became bored or tired, or extended if they were well engaged and motivated. Regular breaks throughout each session were also planned.

*Resources*

A visual timetable was created in order to provide pupils with a clear structure for each session and visual prompts were also used throughout. A range of sensory toys and objects was provided to help support pupils’ engagement and attention and to provide a relief from the intensity of the group experience if necessary. Account was also taken of any potential sensory distractions or discomforts for the pupils.

*Moderator and facilitator roles*

My role as moderator of the focus groups was to ask initial questions in order to stimulate the discussion and to listen to children’s responses, discussions and interactions, offering appropriate prompts when necessary. I acknowledged that the children should be free to develop their own ideas and that these should be permitted to lead or dominate much of the discussion which would not therefore be primarily adult controlled. Also as moderator I would encourage all children, including those who were more shy or reticent, or whose verbal communication skills were restricted, to contribute to discussions, if they wished to do so, and to ensure that the group did not become dominated by more vocal, or socially confident, participants.

The group facilitators were specialist teaching assistants (STAs) with knowledge and understanding of ASD, and wide experience of supporting pupils with ASD in schools and social settings, and some knowledge of the participants. In addition one STA was a recent graduate in psychology and therefore had some knowledge of qualitative research approaches. The facilitators would have the role of prompting attention as necessary or supporting and supervising participants needing time away from the group. They would also record aspects of interactions and social behaviour within the group not accessed through audio- taping.

*Specific considerations*

The level of communication skills within the group would set the pace and style of the interaction and this would necessitate a very flexible approach to the structure of the group sessions. At times visual cues or adult prompts would potentially be necessary to prompt and maintain attention and to encourage the pupils’ listening skills. The level of language processing skills for individual pupils also needed to be taken into account, with additional time allowed to process questions and others’ responses. At times it may be necessary for an adult to interject to prevent individual pupil’s self-direction in conversational style from dominating interactions, or to encourage conversational skills such as turn-taking and being aware of the level of interest from others. In this way the focus group could potentially become, not only a means of generating data for the research project but also a valuable opportunity to teach, model and practice communication skills. However it would be necessary to achieve a careful balance between a minimum required level of adult involvement and allowing pupils to control the focus group discussion.

4.3 CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUPS

The outline of the group sessions is given below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Focus group 1****Pre-transition** | Held following initial transition visits to secondary schools, focusing on the concerns, worries and hopes of the children prior to their transition.**Activity** - Based on the concept of ‘Drawing the Ideal Self’ (Moran 2001), drawing on Personal Construct Theory (Kelly 1955). This approach acknowledges the child’s position as expert on their own ‘selves’ and aims to improve the adult’s understanding of the child’s views. The activity allowed less communicative children to express their views, as single words could be used to describe the students in the drawings. It encouraged cooperation between the children, as those with stronger literacy skills were able to scribe for those who were less confident. **Initial discussion -** based on the pupil’s ideas generated by the activity prompted by a sequence of questions to help focus the discussion. Participants were encouraged to explore topics they felt were important to them rather than working through predetermined subjects. **Mid-session break** – allowing for refreshments, time alone or with an activity of pupils’ own choice for some participants, and group activities and games for others. **Continued discussions –** Pupils discussedtheir personal concerns and expectations about the transition to secondary school. Minimal moderator questions and prompts were used.Discussions were recorded and the dialogue was transcribed as soon as possible in order to preserve memories of body language, facial expression and other non-verbal communication. |
| **Focus group 2****Pre-transition** | Activity–based discussions on ideas and strategies to help address some of pupils’ concerns and anxieties and to increase their confidence for the move to secondary school. Including:* Bullying, recognising bullying behaviour and ways to deal with this
* Creating scripts for anticipated difficult situations such as getting lost, arriving late for school or forgetting dinner money
* Understanding and complying with school rules.
* Managing the demands of homework

Again the moderator remained aware of the need to be spontaneous and adaptable in responding to and exploring emerging pupil-led issues. Some emerging ideas, such as planned scripts, were transferred into practical resources to support pupils on transition.  |
| **Focus group 3****Post Transition** | Held towards the end of the participants’ first term at secondary school, this provided an opportunity to share their experiences and to suggest ways of helping other pupils to cope with the transition to secondary school in the future. **Structured activity** – Although planned this proved to be unnecessary as pupils fell into comfortable discussions, in pairs or small groups, about their new schools and their experiences over the term and were happy to continue this in a more structured focus group setting. **Discussion** - pupils were prompted to identify positive and more negative experiences of their new school. **Mid-session break** – allowing for refreshments, group activities and social time. **Continued discussion -** During the second half of the session, at their own suggestion, the group discussed some possible solutions or coping strategies for some of the difficulties they had experienced with the aim of providing a guide or information for future students. As before discussions were recorded and the dialogue was transcribed as soon as possible in order to preserve memories of body language, facial expression and other non-verbal communication. |

4.4 ADDRESSING ETHICAL ISSUES

As with all EPs my work is subject to Codes of Ethical conduct for the profession, which contain sections relating to research and work with children. These include the Professional Practice Guidelines by the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (a Division of the BPS) and the Code of Professional Practice by the Association of Educational Psychologists. In accordance with the above codes, care was taken to ensure that children and parents gave consent to work on activities relating to the project and were aware that they could leave at any time. I was aware that some inconvenience may be caused to parents due to the timing of the children’s sessions at the end of the school day and it was hoped that any inconvenience would hopefully be offset by the value of the outcome of the project. Also children taking part in the project were offered the opportunity to take part in a six week transition preparation/‘social group’ intervention to help prepare them for transition to secondary school.

In order to minimize any potential stress, anxiety or harm to participants the research process would take place in an educational setting, where it was felt that participants would feel comfortable, and the researcher was accompanied by two specialist teaching assistants in all group situations. All children taking part in the focus groups were permitted breaks from the social environment of the group if needed and their emotional state was carefully monitored by the adults present. At the end of each session adults involved checked that the children were happy to leave and had not been worried or distressed by any of the discussions. The parents of the children taking part in the focus groups were made aware of the topics we were to discuss in advance and of any significant issues raised during the group sessions. This would hopefully enable them to support their children through any questions or anxieties they may have either prior to or following the group sessions.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, both parents and pupils, using appropriately accessible consent forms. Information on the project was given to parents and appropriately differentiated and age related information was provided for pupil participants. Information given aimed to take into account the communication difficulties and learning style experienced by many children with autism spectrum disorders. As information was given to participants at the start of the Transition Group intervention, two weeks prior to the start of the study, sufficient time was available for both child participants and their parents to discuss any concerns with the researcher and to consider whether they wanted to participate prior to signing consent forms.

The issue of confidentiality is more difficult to address in focus group research, for reasons discussed earlier in the methodology chapter, and this was potentially more challenging when working with children with a developmental or learning difficulty. The concept of confidentiality was discussed and specifically taught to the children taking part through the use of examples, role play and other more autism specific approaches including a ‘Social Story’ (Gray 1994). Confidentiality also formed part of the list of rules agreed at the start of the group sessions. Children and parents were informed that following the research the process of analysis would mean that their views would not be directly represented in the write up but that anonymised transcriptions of their discussions would be form part of the completed work.

It was also important to be mindful of the issue of ownership of data (Moore and Sixsmith 2000) and ensuring that the pupils’ voices were represented in the research as accurately as possible. The initial analysis of data from the pre-transition focus was shared with participants at the start of the post transition group and pupils were given the opportunity to request that any of their comments be withdrawn from the transcript or analysis. Similarly, prior to the completion of the research write up visits were made to individual pupils in order to share the outcomes of the study and to again allow them the opportunity for their comments and views to be removed for the transcript and final account. Fortunately no requests were made for this to be carried out.

4.5 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this chapter I have aimed to provide a clear account of the practical procedural aspects of the research process which took place during my time as manager of the Autism Outreach Service. I was fortunate that this role allowed access to both pupil participants and knowledgeable and supportive colleagues. The support of these colleagues was immeasurable in planning and conducting the sessions, recording both verbal and non-verbal data, and in helping to ensure that details of interactions between the participants were not lost. Shortly after completing the data collection and transcription phase of the research study I returned to my role as an Educational Psychologist in the LA, retaining a specialist role relating to ASD. In view of this change a considerable amount of time had lapsed between the collection and analysis of data and completion of this account of the research. This could possibly be considered as a disadvantage, as there was a potential for me to have become somewhat distanced from the research process and the pupils involved. However my continuing professional involvement with children with ASD, and their families, during the period of transition from primary to secondary school maintained my interest in the research area and sustained my commitment to seeking to represent the views of pupils participating in the study. I was able therefore to return to the research process with a renewed sense of commitment to presenting the pupils’ views and experiences of this period of their education.

# CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

### This chapter provides an account of the findings from this research study. Firstly it offers a description of my approach to combining IPA methodology with the data collected from focus groups with the participating pupils. A summary table of the superordinate and emerging themes arising within pupils’ accounts is then provided. This is followed by a detailed analytic account of each superordinate theme, together with the emerging themes clustered within it, and an indication of how themes overlap and interact with each other. Each theme is illustrated by transcript extracts. The aim of this discursive account is to provide the reader with a description of the emerging perceptions and experiences described by the pupils and also to offer an interpretation of their narratives. The account conveys the shared experiences of pupils and also, in the line with the commitment to IPA, it aims to allow the unique nature of each individual child’s experience to emerge.

### Having chosen to base my use of IPA on the guidelines provided by Smith et al (2009), I have also followed the suggestion of providing a discrete account and interpretation of research findings, without reference to existing literature. The interpretative account is placed within the wider research context in the discussion and conclusions chapter which follows.

### 5.2 ANALYSIS OF DATA

**5.2.1 Approach to analysis**

No single method for working with data obtained in IPA studies is prescribed in existing literature and a flexible approach to analytic development is more usual. The use of IPA methods of analysis with data produced from focus groups necessitates that some procedural adjustments are made to the analytic stages in order to balance both group and individual data. Tompkins and Eatough (2010), whilst not claiming to have found a definitive solution to this challenge, propose that through the addition of a further iterative loop in the analysis process individual accounts can be ‘*reclaimed*’ within the group data (p 250). I therefore strove to incorporate this suggestion into my approach to the data from this study.

Following an evaluation of studies employing IPA, Smith (2010) presents an IPA quality evaluation guide in which he sets out specific criteria by which IPA studies can be evaluated and I have aimed to use this as a guide when using the methodology in the current study.

## 5.2.2 The process of analysis

I began by analysing the transcripts of pre-transition focus groups and then moved on to focus on data emerging from the focus groups held following the participants’ transition to secondary school, following the same staged process.

*Stage 1 (Initial notes)*

The transcripts of the focus groups were read in detail several times and notes on reflections, thoughts, possible interpretations and points of potential interest were made. These included questions and also observations on the language used and the interactions between participants, including the influence of these in prompting responses and contributions. I followed the suggestion of Smith et al (2009) in categorising these initial comments as descriptive, the content of or subject of talk; linguistic, the specific use of language; and conceptual, more interpretative comments. Descriptive and linguistic comments focus on the transcript very much at face value, and possibly at a somewhat superficial level, conceptual comments involved more personal reflection.

A sample of data during stage 1 of my analysis is shown below:

Key: descriptive comments; linguistic comments; interpretative comments

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Transcript Focus Group 2 – post transition | Initial notes |
| **Jess Yeah OK …..**cos Well I’ve made lots of new friends which is cool. Some are in the IR bit and some in my form as well. And well it’s good cos you have well you know people to hang around with at break and everything and well the ones not in the IR they don’t seem to mind if you are. Well some of them don’t but if they do they want to come in with you. You know I think they want to see what goes on you know, the way the other kids are. Well not me but you know the real autism ones cos like they kick off sometimes and everything. Anyway it’s been good I think that has so far.**Joe**: I well I….haven’t made any friends. Not really …or at all I suppose. Well not new ones and then the ones from my old school. Well I don’t think they were proper friends really I’m not sure but well errr from my class the boys I mean. Well they’ve mostly gone all cool you know and stuck with other kids now. They just you know they just well diss you and everything most times. You know teeth and so on | Awareness of social nuance/imitation of others – language used, need for acceptance, ASD awareness – difference, importance of friendship ? avoidance of labelling mainstream peers. ?Expectation of isolation from mainstream Hesitation – qualifying opinion. Theory of mind – attributing thought to others ASD as differing from norm – a curiosity. ?Distancing herself from ASD identityPositive -? Hesitancy Understanding of friendship. Feeling of being ‘left behind’ – other pupils moving on. Sense of accepting this as inevitable.Language used. Bullying. Perception of lack of acceptance or acceptability from peers. Self-awareness |

The interpretation therefore took place at two levels. Firstly I was attempting to understand the experience of transition from the participants’ point of view and, at a second level, I was beginning to attempt to interpret their responses. At this stage I began to consider the pupils’ experiences in the light of my own professional and personal understanding, experiences and preconceptions. The pupils’ overarching understanding or conceptualisation of issues including transition, or of autism itself, could also begin to be considered. Throughout this process it was important to keep the initial notes closely tied to the pupils’ original accounts.

As the analysis progressed I became aware that my interpretation was not only influenced by my personal knowledge and experience but also by increasing familiarity with the pupils themselves, gained through the time spent with them over this period. I was aware that my analysis of pupils’ accounts following their transition to secondary school would inevitably be influenced by my interpretation of their views before the move and it was therefore impossible to approach transcripts with complete naivety.

*Stage 2 (Identifying emerging themes)*

Although this stage of analysis involves intense focus on discrete sections of transcripts I was conscious of the need to relate findings to the understanding gained through the overall process of analysis, linking individual ‘parts’ to the ‘whole’ within the hermeneutic circle. It was also important to consider convergence and divergence within their accounts.

A sample of data during stage 2 of my analysis is shown below, demonstrating the emergence of themes within pupils’ narratives:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Emergent themes | Transcript Focus Group 2 (post- transition) | Initial notes |
| Importance of FriendshipASD identityAcceptanceDifferenceASD identity Positive view of transition/ hopes realisedImportance of FriendshipIsolationExperience ofBullying | **Jess Yeah OK …..**cos Well I’ve made lots of new friends which is cool. Some are in the IR bit and some in my form as well. And well it’s good cos you have well you know people to hang around with at break and everything and well the ones not in the IR they don’t seem to mind if you are. Well some of them don’t but if they do they want to come in with you. You know I think they want to see what goes on you know, the way the other kids are. Well not me but you know the real autism ones cos like they kick off sometimes and everything. Anyway it’s been good I think that has so far.**Joe**: I well I….haven’t made any friends. Not really …or at all I suppose. Well not new ones and then the ones from my old school. Well I don’t think they were proper friends really I’m not sure but well errr from my class the boys I mean. Well they’ve mostly gone all cool you know and stuck with other kids now. They just you know they just well diss you and everything most times. You know teeth and so on | Awareness of social nuance/imitation of others – language used, need for acceptance, ASD awareness – difference, importance of friendship ? avoidance of labelling mainstream peers. ?Expectation of isolation from mainstream Hesitation – qualifying opinion. Theory of mind – attributing thought to others. ASD as differing from norm – a curiosity. ?Distancing herself from ASD identityPositive -? Hesitancy Understanding of friendship.Feeling of being ‘left behind’ – other pupils moving on. Sense of accepting this as inevitable.Language used. Bullying. Perception of lack of acceptance or acceptability from peers. Self-awareness |

(A full analysis of data obtained during this focus group session is contained within Appendix VI)

Within the richness of data emerging from pupils’ accounts I was aware, when analysing transcripts of their narratives, of the need to relate emerging themes to the main original research questions to be addressed by the study and to also allow for the emergence of additional themes of obvious importance to the pupils. At this stage it was evident that the experience of the difficulties and differences associated with ASD was one such additional important theme.

*Stage 3 (identifying superordinate themes)*

As Willig (2008) indicates, this stage attempts to introduce structure into the analysis by considering the emerging themes in relation to each other and detecting connections between them in order to identify superordinate themes. A superordinate theme is a construct that usually appears in all participant accounts but can be represented in different ways.

A sample of this stage of analysis, demonstrating the inclusion of emergent themes within superordinate themes, is shown below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Superordinate and emergent themes | Transcript Focus Group 2(post- transition) | Initial notes |
| **Relationships with peers**Importance of friendship**Experience of Autism**ASD identityAcceptanceDifferenceASD identity **Hopes and expectations**Positive view of transition/hopes realised**Relationships with peers**Importance of friendshipIsolationExperience of bullying | **Jess Yeah OK …..**cos Well I’ve made lots of new friends which is cool. Some are in the IR bit and some in my form as well. And well it’s good cos you have well you know people to hang around with at break and everything and well the ones not in the IR they don’t seem to mind if you are. Well some of them don’t but if they do they want to come in with you. You know I think they want to see what goes on you know, the way the other kids are. Well not me but you know the real autism ones cos like they kick off sometimes and everything. Anyway it’s been good I think that has so far.**Joe**: I well I….haven’t made any friends. Not really …or at all I suppose. Well not new ones and then the ones from my old school. Well I don’t think they were proper friends really I’m not sure but well errr from my class the boys I mean. Well they’ve mostly gone all cool you know and stuck with other kids now. They just you know they just well diss you and everything most times. You know teeth and so on | Awareness of social nuance/imitation of others – language used, need for acceptance, ASD awareness – difference, importance of friendship ? avoidance of labelling mainstream peers. ?Expectation of isolation from mainstream Hesitation – qualifying opinion. Theory of mind – attributing thought to others. ASD as differing from norm – a curiosity. ?Distancing herself from ASD identityPositive -? Hesitancy Understanding of friendship. Feeling of being ‘left behind’ – other pupils moving on. Sense of accepting this as inevitable. Language used. Bullying. Perception of lack of acceptance or acceptability from peers. Self-awareness |

At this stage some of the emerging themes clustered together more immediately than others, which appeared to evolve at the periphery of the analysis. It was also necessary to consider how, or whether, to reduce the number of themes which had emerged from the group data. As IPA has increased in popularity further guidance on its use is becoming available and it is suggested that a smaller number of themes are preferable in order to represent a more thorough and synthesised analysis (Hefferon and Gil-Roderiguez 2011).

The reduction in number of themes was inevitably a challenge, as I found it difficult to disregard aspects of pupils’ accounts. As Willig (2008) suggests the decision made by the researcher as to whether themes should be retained or abandoned is inevitably influenced by their interests and orientation and I was therefore aware of the potential influence of my own view and perceptions on this process. The analysis continued throughout the process of constructing a narrative account of the research findings as emerging themes were prioritised, revised and reordered. Also, as Tompkins and Eatough (2010) suggest, it was necessary to consider whether some superordinate themes should take on a higher order quality as they emerged as highly significant for all members of the group. In that way *‘the view of the whole was transformed by the perspective of the sum of the parts’* (p 251).

Following the suggested approach of Tompkins and Eatough (2010) relating to the use of IPA with focus group data, once the initial table of themes for the group was created I returned to each individual member of the group to attempt to assess the relevance of each theme from the perspective of the individual. This involved revisiting the focus group transcripts from the perspective of each individual, highlighting their contributions, together with the thoughts, notes and interpretations I had made of these when analysing the group data (see Appendix VII). This enabled the account of each individual to be read as a whole text and a gist of their account to be available. It was then possible to assess which aspects of the group summary of themes were emphasised in individual accounts and which did not fully represent the individual.

Through this process it was possible to identify themes which, although were representative of the whole group, shone through as particularly relevant for individual pupils and those which were relevant only to some participants. Although on paper this presents as a lengthy and somewhat onerous procedure, on reflection I was aware that as I had read and reread the transcripts in order to analyse data for group level themes I had been acutely aware of the individual narratives emerging from group transcripts. This additional layer of analysis therefore required me to approach these individual stories and accounts in a more formalised and systematic manner.

*Stage 4 (Summary table)*

The final stage of analysis involved the production of a summary table of superordinate themes, the individual themes underlying them, and quotes from participants to illustrate each theme. When reflecting on the themes emerging, it was evident that there was some similarity in those presenting as significant both before and following transition to secondary school. Initially I had planned to formulate a separate group of superordinate themes emerging from pre and post transition group data. However, when considering the pervasive nature of some themes emerging, it seemed more appropriate to present a single overarching collection of superordinate themes to encompass and reflect the pupils’ experiences of transition as a complete process.

The summary table of superordinate themes is presented below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **1. ANXIETY****a) Social challenges**Jess: What would you do…sit on your own or go to a table with some people? I don’t know at allSam: groups are hard though I think Joe: People actually groan if I get put in their group so how worrying is that?**b) School environment***Practical challenges*Sam: Does anyone know about timetables when you move? Luke: It’s all very confusing when it’s so big*Sensory Challenges*Joe: Yeah and the café is really smelly at our school. First I didn’t go in so I didn’t have any dinnerSam: they push you so much and there’s so much shoutingLuke: There was so much noise I couldn’t do it so it really got to me*Behaviour of others*Sam: I get scared a lot of the time really that the others, well it does seem to be the girls, will get us all into troubleLuke: if you’re put in what’s a bottom set then you might get the messing about from the other kidsJoshua: then if some of them are messing about and it’s not you then you have to worry that the teacher will get cross*Feeling safe*Sam: I think I would feel safer there cos err…it’s like out of the way and no one can see you and tell peopleLuke: That worries me …nowhere to go for ‘chill out’Jess: so it’s good to have somewhere to go to get away from people [ ] when you’ve had enough or if something upsets you.Joe: they let me stay there for a bit ‘til I was calmer again and they said I can do that so that’s good**c) Teaching and Learning**Joe: Sometimes I just sit there and think well now I am confused … I mean really confusedLuke: I know it will be hard and then so will maths be a think. Like lots of new stuffSam: He said I wasn’t listening but I just felt confused because it wasn’t like we did at our old schoolJoshua: I forgot as well that it makes the strict ones crosser then ever cos they say they can’t read your writing**d) Change and loss** Luke: No one comes with you in grown ups. I wish my teacher could but that doesn’t happenJoe: When you go it will be different all the time and that’s hard for meSam: I know her so it’s not so much of a shock. So will that be the same? I hope it’s the same**2. HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS****a) Opportunity**Joshua: Science will be good cos you’ve got proper labs and experimentsSam: I think the best lessons like at school get betterJess: clubs and things will be goodLuke: It’s grown up to go on the bus and you would have to have your own money as well**b) A fresh start**Sam: No one will know if you’ve been like away from school or if you’ve been like the bullied one and stuffJoe: Yes they don’t know if you’ve been weird or anythingJoshua: It will be good to get some new [teachers] and see if they like me a bit betterJess: well in school now I mean everyone knows you..that’s a good thing [ ] Perhaps you can hide a bit more when the school’s bigger**c) Realisation of hopes**Luke: well I think break times at my new school are better actually.Josh:They have better stuff and they stay off your back.Jess: in the end at my school anyway well …they got it sorted before you get there or if you do get stuck they kind of always help you … they don’t dis you or anything.**3. IMPACT OF SUPPORT****a) Preparation**Joe: well they made us do a PE lesson so that wasn’t goodJess: We got to go loads of times [ ] But like it’s …err not real is it. Not well..like it really isLuke: It made you find out things but then it made you worry about some things when you did**b) Support for learning**Joe: if you don’t have someone who helps you then you just have to stay confused I thinkJoshua: But no I don’t need help. That would make me look stupid and well I know I’m not so I’d rather not go that way if you don’t mindJess: Sometimes you want to sit with your friends though and there isn’t enough room for me and my support**c) Pastoral support**Joe: at our school they help you with things if you get cross or angry or upset about everything so that’s goodJess: it does make you feel better when there’s someone who’s nice to you I suppose. Sometimes it gets a bit much though I think Sam: Yeah well you don’t get into trouble as much if you know the rules so I think those social things …groups are a good thing really **4. EXPERIENCE OF AUTISM****a) Identity and difference**Jess: I don’t care that you’re Aspergers so why should anyone elseSam: I mean it’s just not what you want though is it … I mean different and everything and them treating you as if you’re differentJoshua: I’m Aspergers you know not thickJoe: I mean they’re not autistic like me but they’re not well you know ‘normal’ if you likeLuke: Not like us odd but really kind of freaky odd**b) Disclosure to others**Sam: I mean like I don’t want people to know about my Aspergers thing cos then well… well you know they would think I’m a retard or somethingLuke: But anyway if they know well what’s the fuss…better than being odd I thinkJoe: Can’t they just tell. I don’t think you can keep it a secret SamJess: Well they sort of have to know in my school cos of the resource…but well I wouldn’t tell anyone who didn’t know**c) Acceptance and understanding**Joe: No one tells [teachers] about Aspergers or anything like what you might do and not to send you out Sam: My form tutor’s alright I think as well. My mum says he knows things about autism cos she’s told himJosh:Don’t they know that some of us know as much as they do. I tried telling that teacher but he made such a fuss so I don’t speak to him anymore. In fact I might change classes you see. **5. RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS****a) Importance of friendship**Joe: Mates……. That’s what would be good. Mates go out with you like to town and stuffSam: Friends stop you getting bullied I think they would like protect you and tell for youJess: I mean like you need to get some friends like right away so they can go round with you and be like everyone elseJoshua: I thought well …this will be the time to make some friends but what you find is they don’t like the same thingsLuke: You need to say…find the right people but they don’t seem to be around **b) Fear and experience of bullying**Joe: Names are just as bad Jess… they can hurt you just tormenting you knowSam: Well… no surprise but it’s the bullying againJess: I think it might be worse at big school. Don’t want to worry you or anything Sam but well they tell you things don’t they about what happensLuke: at school you just need to keep out of the way when it happens to you. I don’t think you’ll ever…well…like stop themJoshua: Don’t let it worry you or get to you. Just ignore them I say. If you get upset it makes them worse. | **Line no.**T1 704T2 460T2 441T1 557T1 545T2 381T2 546T2 139T2 102T2 115T2 105T1 427T1 411T2 373 T2 405T2 604T1 696T2 258T2 278T1 506T1 673T1 462T1 390T1 96T1 115T1 517T1 374T1 13 T1 435T1 450T2 349T2 408T2 724T2 699T2 702T2 726T2 605T2 608T2 221T2 614T2 214T2 580T1 61T1 51T2 160T2 371T2 62T1 39T2 659T1 647T2 645T2 145T2 249T2 159T1 347T1 20T1 310T1 358T1 364T1 612T2 295T1 628T2 316T1 621 |

5.3 OVERVIEW OF SUPERORDINATE THEMES

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| --- |
| Superordinate themes and associated emergent themes for the group |
| 1. Anxiety2. Hopes and expectations3. Experience of autism4. Relationships with peers5. Impact of support | 1. Social challenges
2. School environment
3. Teaching and learning
4. Change and loss
5. Opportunity
6. A fresh start
7. Realisation of hopes
8. Identity/difference
9. Disclosure to others
10. Acceptance and understanding

 1. Friendships
2. Fear of bullying
3. Preparation
4. Support for Learning
5. Pastoral Support
 |

Although each of these themes has been considered individually it is important to draw attention to the fact that they are closely interlinked, each impacting on each other, and at times difficult to separate within the narrative account. In order to demonstrate these links it is possible to represent these themes as a schematic network as shown overleaf:

#### 5.4 SUPERORDINATE THEMES

Each of the emerging superordinate themes is now considered in detail. These are presented and considered individually in order to help the reader to make sense of the analysis and interpretation. As Smith et al (2009) suggest, the reader forms a critical role in the hermeneutic cycle of IPA and therefore the researcher’s analysis of the participant’s sense making is of no value unless the reader is able to make sense of this.

When presenting extracts of narrative to illustrate each theme, I found that the links between themes became more complex and, for some pupils, a particular theme emerged as dominant throughout their experience. When selecting quotes I felt that it was important to retain some instances of the interaction between pupils. As the rational for using focus group methodology for data collection in the study was to harness the potential impact of prompts and encouragement from peers in enabling children with ASD to express their thoughts and perceptions in more detail, I felt it would be important to identify and clarify the trigger for their contributions where possible.

**5.4.1.** ANXIETY

This superordinate theme encapsulates my attempts to interpret the worries and anxieties experienced by pupils as they approached their transition to secondary school and during their first term. Although each participant’s account suggested a differing emphasis in terms of their anxieties it was possible to identify connections and associations between their accounts and to draw these together within the following emergent themes.

**a) Social Challenges**

Pupils expressed anxieties relating to the social demands of secondary school and these focused on very specific situations that they would encounter on a daily basis. It was evident that some had considered these situations in detail, appearing to have rehearsed scenarios in their imagination and anticipated potential problems. The following exchange between two pupils exemplified a range of difficulties that children with ASD may encounter in the unfamiliar setting of a secondary school dining hall. Jess’ account suggested a mounting feeling of anxiety as she considered the challenges of the situation.

*Jess: I mean …where do you queue up and worst of all who do you sit with? What if no one wants to sit with you and everyone else is talking to each other and you get ignored? What would you do …sit on your own or go to a table with some people? I don’t know at all. And what sort of things do you get to eat**and will they laugh at you .. at what you eat I mean?*

 *Luke: Why would they laugh at it and anyway ..just sit on your own if you’re that worried? It’s not about talking is it .. it’s about eating? I take sandwiches anyway so I won’t be buying anything. If they let you do that …I don’t know. Now I’m worried…I can’t err …..eat school dinners and the dining room is noisy at our school but I’m sort of used to it now. I bet it’s much worse in that café thing ..err place they’ve got.*

*(T 1 line 702 -713)*

Here Jess emphasised the myriad of social challenges presented by this one aspect of the school day. Her questions are presented as rhetorical, as she appears not to anticipate any answers, but uses them as a means to emphasise the number of her worries. Although concerned by some practical aspects of the situation, the social challenge of initiating interaction with others and being seen to conform socially are uppermost in her anxieties. Although here this situation is described from the perspective of a child with ASD, I would suggest that the uncertainties she described, such as fear of isolation and concern over appearing socially acceptable, are not necessarily confined to those with ASD but could be attributed to any young person who lacks confidence in unfamiliar social situations.

Luke’s response demonstrated a very literal understanding of the situation, which he does not appear to have conceptualised as a concern for himself prior to this. In listening to Jess’ view he was prompted into considering what the experience of eating in school will mean for him and this provoked anxiety, particularly relating to the sensory aspects of the situation. This exchange between the two pupils demonstrated, not only a level of reciprocity in interaction, which arguably challenges our conceptions of the social nature of ASD, but also a vulnerability to be influenced by the thoughts and views of others.

Jess described how her anxiety in this situation continued following transition. Her account illustrated the conflict she experienced regarding whether to position herself with other pupils with ASD from the IR, or to distance herself from them by finding mainstream friends. This may suggest that placement in the IR could form a potential barrier for Jess with regard to her social inclusion in the mainstream of school, and her determination to overcome this.

*Jess: Problem for me anyway at first til I made my friends was not knowing where to sit or who you know to well… to sit with. I mean you could stay with the resource kids but some of them are so yucky when it comes to eating and some of them even stay in the base for their lunch so I needed to find someone to sit with and that’s not easy if you don’t know anyone.*

*(T 2 line 387-392)*

This extract caused me to reflect on Jess’ perception of her ASD, as she clearly regards herself as different from other pupils in the IR, who she depicts as a distinct group, describing them in quite negative terms. Jess demonstrates a desire for social contact which could be regarded as contradicting an accepted view of those with ASD. However, her placement in an IR had necessitated leaving her familiar primary school peer group, therefore placing her in the position of having to form new relationships, a challenging situation for many pupils without additional difficulties.

For some pupils I felt that their feelings of social anxiety were encapsulated by their worries concerning PE lessons at their new school. The exchange between Sam and Joe below provides an insight into the difficulties and challenges they anticipate in this situation.

*Joe: PE is my very worst thing in the world. My Mum’s told them I think so they know. I mean I can’t do it and then…. the changing rooms are horrible when you look in and what if people watch you when you get undressed and…it just takes me soooo long.*

*(T1 line 714-718)*

*Sam: Yeah and outdoors there’ll be football and stuff and they will laugh if you’re no good. Teams and things will be a worry I think. You know in the changing rooms does the teacher stay do you think cos that’s when well…. I’ve heard the bullies can get to you as well. Like making fun if you get undressed and of your things and stuff and beat you up. You have to have the right things. That’s important so tell your mums then they don’t have the excuse to do it.*

*(T1 line 719-725)*

For both Sam and Joe their social anxieties appeared partly rooted in their negative self-image and extreme self-consciousness, as expressed in their concern about undressing in front of others and in regard to their physical abilities. Although he expressed worries regarding his physical adeptness at sport and concerns over being socially included in teams, Sam’s anxieties link to a pervasive fear of bullying, focusing on how others perceive him and his awareness of a need to ‘fit in’ with other pupils. When considering this extract Sam and Joe present as a very vulnerable and socially naive boys, perceiving themselves as dependent upon adult protection. Sam appeared to have been very susceptible to rumour and hearsay as his, possibly exaggerated, fear of being ‘*beaten up’* in the changing room indicates. In this extract Sam also demonstrated a desire to protect, not only himself, but also other children in the group from the possibility of being bullied, as he attempted to make sense of what may cause this and to offer them advice. For Joe his experience of having an understanding teacher appeared to have alleviated some of his anxieties and his comments reinforce the importance of detailed information sharing between school staff at the time of transition as he appeared to draw some reassurance from a belief that his new teachers are aware of his difficulties.

Following transition the boys’ accounts suggest that their anticipated anxieties about the social aspects of PE lessons, and other lessons requiring cooperative work, were confirmed by their experiences

*Joe:**Well people actually groan if I get put in their group so how worrying is that. I mean ‘put in’ it as well. I can’t find one by myself cos I know what they’ll say and ….and no one’s going to choose me are they? Other kids don’t like having me there because they know I’m no good. That’s what these boys told me anyway. They pushed me out of the line when the teacher put me there and then I didn’t know what to do about it so I just stayed on the edge thing and the teacher just didn’t take any notice.*

*(T 2 line 439-443)*

*Sam: Groups are hard though I think – not just PE I mean. Sometimes in science or some other lessons they say ‘now get in a group of 6 or 4’ or whatever. Then what do you do. I don’t know whether to wait for someone to get me or to try to join in with someone. Usually one of the girls grabs me so I just go with that.*

*(T2 line 458-462)*

Here Joe’s account evoked a vivid picture of his experience of PE lessons and the social exclusion he experiences from his peers. Interestingly he ascribed no blame to other pupils for his isolation, perceiving this to be due entirely to his own failings and attempting to understand their responses. The lack of intervention from his teacher appeared to have confirmed his negative perception of his ability to contribute to the group, prompting me to reflect on the impact of this situation on his already low self-esteem in social situations. Both boys described their lack of confidence in joining a group of other pupils, with Sam presenting a picture of becoming almost ‘frozen’ by the challenge, and a sense of powerlessness and resignation in having to accept what others choose for them. When reading Joe’s quote presented below it appeared to encapsulate the overwhelming stress he experienced in PE lessons, leading me to reflect on how this presents in school and whether his teachers are aware of the emotional impact the situation has on him:

*Sometimes I feel like in PE I’m just upset for every second and if they would let you keep your watch on I would watch every second go past but you can’t so you just don’t know when it’s going to end*

*(T 2 line 455-458)*

**b) The School Environment**

The physical environment of their new secondary schools, which pupils experienced on transition visits, appeared to provoke considerable anxiety for them. I was aware that my interpretation of pupils’ accounts of their first encounter with a busy secondary school was potentially influenced by my own initial impressions when visiting a secondary school for the first time as an educational psychologist, having previously taught in a small primary school. I interpreted their anxieties as falling within the areas.

*Practical Challenges*

In common with many students, irrespective of additional needs, some pupils appeared preoccupied by a fear of getting lost in a much bigger school. Their responses demonstrated a tendency to anticipate problems and to predict the possible consequences of these, including the impact on their feelings, suggesting a level of understanding of their emotional responses which may not normally be predicted for children with ASD. The anxieties described by Sam and Luke below appear to transcend any reassurance offered to them by adults, referred to by them as ‘everyone’ or ‘they’. However, as the discussion progressed within the group, I noted that they were willing to listen to advice from other pupils and to suggest possible solutions for themselves.

*Sam: Yeah well I’m worried about how big it is ..you know the new school. Everyone says you won’t get lost but how do you not do…I’m sure I will and then what happens. I mean if you get lost then you might get err.. or like be late for your lessons and then you’ll get in trouble and then upset and so it will be awful I think.*

*(T 1 line 530-534)*

*Luke: It’s all very confusing when it’s so big. They say you get used to it but when there’s so many people about it’s just very confusing and you can’t think straight to find where you need to go and well.*

*(T 1 line 545-547)*

*Joe: Er well you could just follow everyone else cos like everyone in your class is well …..will be going to the same lesson.*

*(T 1 line 209-210)*

*Luke: I think now I think ….. you get a map like Jess said before. But I mean you can’t carry that around with you… I mean you would look stupid.*

*(T1 line 539-540)*

*Sam: Well I suppose you should well ….you should ask someone like a teacher. My school is I think they said the biggest in the city so it will confuse everyone I think and I might have to ask someone*

*(T 1 line 214-216)*

These extracts suggest an anticipated sense of confusion due to the size of the school building to the extent that it may prevent logical thought. However, when reflecting on the cause of Sam’s anxiety, this could be interpreted as connected to a fear of displeasing teachers and the emotional impact of this. Luke worried about other pupils perception of him, suggesting that he does not wish to appear different. Sam’s apparent insight that the size of the school will confuse all new pupils is likely, when seen in the light of his other comments, a means to reassure himself that, although he experiences difficulties, in this situation he is no different from others. The interaction between pupils in this extract suggests an arguably unexpected level of social awareness, as they made reference to the ideas of others and also looked to their peers for confirmation of their own understanding.

As is frequently apparent in the emerging data Joshua, although recognising similar issues and concerns to others pupils, diverged in his response by viewing these from a different perspective.

*Joshua: you know when you go in. You think …wow. That’s not a school it’s more like a …well posh offices or something. I know I might get lost but it’s exciting and… they might not find you.*

*(T1 line 554-556)*

Here Joshua seemed to recognise the size of the school as holding the potential for freedom, suggestive of a desire to move away from adult regulation to the development of autonomy and independence. As my analysis progressed I began to reflect on whether the attitude presented by Joshua was in fact his means of managing his underlying anxieties. I also considered, drawing on past experience as a teacher, the impact of his manner on his ability to form relationships with adults in school, which is considered later in this chapter. I felt that Joshua may exemplify the fact that the complexities associated with ASD, particularly those relating to anxiety, can be masked by good language skills and unconventional social awareness.

Practical aspects of school relating to self-organisation also presented as a source of anxiety and what is most noteworthy is the manner in which this was introduced in the group.

*Sam: Does anyone know about timetables when you move? They gave us one when we went and it’s a bit of a muddle I think.*

*(T1 line 557-559)*

*Jess: that’s so you remember what to take with you… you have to understand it you know. Keep it in your planner when you get it.*

*(T 1 line 562-563)*

Here, unprompted, Sam asked a question directly seeking the views of other pupils in the group. At a simplistic level this can be interpreted as Sam becoming more relaxed within the group, thereby feeling more confident to raise his anxieties. However, when viewed in the light of professional understanding of ASD, this interaction demonstrates not only a level of unexpected social reciprocity with other children but also an ability to attribute thoughts and feelings to others to the extents that these may be valuable in addressing his own concerns and worries. Evident within his question is Sam’s preference for routine and order and also further indication of his pervasive feeling of confusion at the prospect of coping with secondary school. In her response Jess expressed a degree of frustration at Sam’s worries, and a tone of resignation at his lack of understanding. Her somewhat impatient and almost adult manner in her response to him was indicative of her developing role within the group. Alternatively, viewed in the context of her ASD, this could also be seen as the use of learned phrases, or repetition of the responses adults have made to her.

*Sensory Challenges*

In light of the idiographic commitment of IPA studies, although the sensory environment of secondary school emerged as a source of anxiety for several pupils, in the following transcript extracts I have chosen to illustrate the impact of this for one individual pupil, Joe. When considered as an individual narrative his account clearly suggests the enormous impact his sensory sensitivities have on all aspects of his life in school and the level of stress and anxiety which results from this.

*Joe: Yeah and the café is really smelly at our school. First I didn’t go in so I didn’t have any dinner. Then like when my mum found out there was real trouble cos they said before I went that they would do something about that and then they well… they must have forgot I suppose because they didn’t and I wasn’t eating anything. So then someone went in with me and I went to the front of the queue but that was just as bad cos it still smelled and they all still shouted and pushed even more.*

*(T2 line 379-385)*

*Joe: Well I’m a bit slow. You know getting changed and so now they let me use the disabled toilet. I think that might be because of the smell I don’t know….same as like for the café*

*(T 2 line 424-426)*

Joe described his overwhelming sensitivity to smell which lead him to miss lunch rather than go into the dining room. It appeared that he did not tell anyone about his anxiety, as it was left to his mother to ‘find out’ and, only with her intervention, was the situation addressed. A lack of awareness and understanding amongst school staff of the impact of sensory issues for children with ASD was implicit here, both in the failure to acknowledge Joe’s needs when first at his new school and also in the unsuccessful attempt to help alleviate his difficulties. However Joe appeared to try to excuse their lack of response and to accept the inevitability of his situation. A lack of communication between staff and Joe is suggested in his questioning of why adaptations have been made to his PE changing arrangements. Joe’s account implies that he is unable to adequately express his anxieties and continues to need an advocate, in this case his mother, to intervene for him.

Later Joe continues his narrative, describing his sensitivity to noise and the impact of this on his experiences in school:

*Joe: The shouting is bad though I mean it makes me jump even if it’s not for me… I feel as if it is and I have to try to stop myself from being upset. It’s hard that. I even cried once and then everyone laughed and I had to be sent in*

*(T2 line 451-453)*

Here Joe again referred to a PE lesson at secondary school, his sensitivity to the shouting of the teacher and the stress this evoked for him. When viewed in the context of his previously described anxiety relating to the social nature of PE lessons this can be seen to compound his stress and discomfort. His perceived need to control his emotional reaction to prevent ridicule by others, and his attempts to do so, appear to exemplify the extreme effort required from pupils with ASD in coping with the everyday demands of school. Joe also described his reaction to the experience and anticipation of hearing the bell at the end of lessons.

*Joe: You should hear the bell at my school. I banged my hands over my ears when I heard it on my visit cos it shocked me so much you know, even if they tell you it’s going to happen they don’t say how loud. It’s more like a siren I think and it makes you feel you should run and hide somewhere but I’m more used to it now …now it just annoys me but you are like kind of waiting for it to happen in the lesson so you can be ready for it I think.*

*(T 2 line 538-543)*

The language Joe used here evokes a sense of the level of his sensitivity to noise as the bell to him sounded like a ‘*siren*’ which ‘*shocked*’ him. He conveyed an impression of the urgency with which he needed to block out the sound by ‘*banging*’ his hands over his ears. The impact of the noise, making him feel that he should run and hide somewhere, appeared to panic him, evoking almost a fight or flight response. Joe implied that he has been warned about the bell but that adults have not appreciated the level of his sensitivity. The more nonchalant ‘*now it just annoys me’* appears at odds with the image of Joe waiting for the sound during lessons and feeling the need to prepare himself and be *‘ready for it’*, suggesting a need to present himself to the group as less worried by this than he actually is. However the potential impact of Joe’s anxious anticipation of the lesson change bell on his engagement with learning during the lesson was evident.

Other pupils also described anxieties relating to sensory experiences. For Sam, it was not the sound of the lesson bell that created a sense of anxiety but rather the anticipation of what it signals.

*Sam: Yeah like at my school it’s just like a signal for everyone to push and shove you when you’re on the corridors. Like you could lose your bag or something off your back cos they push you so much and there’s so much shouting like what you’re going to do at break and everything and they can grab you and push you along.. even people you’ve never seen before and all the girls are talking all the times [……] I still think it’s all really scary and I don’t think I’m getting used to it at all yet …well if ever I will*

*(T 2 line 542-550)*

Sam’s account also exemplified the challenge of separating the themes emerging within pupils’ accounts as in this extract, although he is concerned at the sensory impact of being pushed along by other pupils, his aversion to close social contact with unfamiliar peers is also clear. The fact that Sam notices and mentions discussion he overhears about what pupils are going to do at break time also suggests a degree of social anxiety and apprehension about how he will spend his break. The overwhelming sense of confusion and anxiety experienced by Sam in this situation is evident in the strength of emotion portrayed in his language depicting the situation as ‘*really scary’*.

Luke also clearly depicted the overwhelming sensory impact of busy school corridors at times of lesson change and the extreme anxiety this provokes.

*Luke:…….when the bell goes and you sort of look down the corridor to the stairs where you need to get to for your lessons and all you can see is all these kids… pushing and shoving and all crowded together like bobbing around and coming towards you and it makes you sort of panic a bit really cos you think now well.. how am I going to get through that lot or even well will it be safe cos you never know what could happen do you. And all the noise and everything. Sometimes I think I’ll just stay where I am but then you get pushed out of the door with everyone else and you just have to hope for the best.*

*(T 2 line 552-561)*

The imagery created by Luke, as he graphically described his sense of panic, to the extent of appearing to fear for his safety, over the situation in the school corridor is particularly powerful and potentially at odds with our expectations for a young person with ASD. Each of the above extracts can be viewed as challenging the description of those with autism as inflexible thinkers with an impaired sense of imagination, as Luke and Sam clearly attempt to imagine and make sense of what may potentially happen to them as they try to move through this crowd of pupils. The language they used in their accounts reinforces the physical nature of the experience of moving around the school corridors in their reference to *‘pushing’, ‘grabbing’, ‘shoving’* and ‘*fighting*’. An impression of helplessness is also evoked as, despite his anxieties, the only response available to Luke is to be carried along with the other pupils. Luke appeared able to instantly process the context and image of the corridors and considered his options, to stay or move, and how safe he will be, before being pushed along with others around him.

Returning to Luke’s account, his sensitivity to noise is clearly described below, as is his frustration over the impact of this in lessons, and the consequences of his reactions.

*Luke: All I wanted to do was to get on with my work in science cos well we were like you know doing some good stuff for once but there was so much noise I couldn’t do it so it really got to me and I started to make…. you know some noises to stop it bothering me so much and stuff and put my hands over my ears and then can you believe it ….They sent* ***me*** *out of class. Well he did anyway that rubbish teacher*

*(T 2 line 136-141)*

Here Luke provided insight into the cause of his behaviour in class and gave a very logical and reasoned explanation for it. His anxiety and frustration caused by the level of noise in the classroom appeared to be compounded by a presumed lack of understanding on the part of his teacher, as the behaviour he adopted to enable him to focus on his work resulted in him being excluded from the lesson. I would suggest that personal accounts, such as Luke presents here, provide those working with pupils with ASD, a clear insight into the link between the experience of sensory overload and their behaviour.

*Behaviour of Other Pupils*

Linked closely to Luke’s account above, the general behaviour of other pupils in the school environment, of which participants seemed to be acutely aware, presented as a source of stress and anxiety. Pupils began to express their anxiety in anticipation of this aspect of school prior to transition, demonstrating a tendency and ability to predict potentially difficult situations. Again Sam asked the group a direct question, generating a reciprocal discussion on the issue of pupil behaviour in lessons:

*Sam: you know like in classes ..like lessons. Do you sit in tables like you do at school now? Only what happens if you get a bad table …. I mean like bad like other people not following the rules or messing around and things. Or not listening so you can’t listen. Only then you might get the blame or you might…… well not be able to do your work and that.*

*Joshua: that would be tempting I think and……. cool sometimes*

*(T 1 line 491-496)*

*Luke: Yeah so like well …if you’re put in like what’s a bottom set then you get the messing about from the other kids and then you can’t work and you might get into trouble.*

*(T 2 line 114-116)*

Sam and Luke both expressed anxiety that the behaviour of others would prevent them from working, and appeared to adhere rigidly to the view that this is what is expected of them in lessons. They also anticipated and feared becoming associated with pupils who misbehave, giving rise to additional anxiety about the teacher’s reaction. Their accounts also led me to question whether they had some awareness of their own social naivety and the potential that they may be ‘set up’ by their peers and left to shoulder the blame for disruption in the lesson. Joshua again offered a contradictory view, perceiving this as a potential opportunity to engage in challenging behaviour himself. However his comment led me to consider whether this could be understood as his need to be seen as part of the group and to be regarded as *‘cool’*.

Also present in Sam’s account, and supported by Joshua, is a sense of frustration at the perceived injustice of sanctions given to the whole class, when they feel that personally they had been innocent. The strong sense of justice often attributed to those with ASD is also evident.

*Sam: …….I mean if that happens then you don’t know what to do cos it’s like not fair when you do yours* (homework) *and everything. I get scared a lot of the time really that the others, well it does seem to be the girls will get us all into trouble with teachers and sometimes when you like feel that worried it’s hard to think*

*Joshua: yeah like detentions. They can get you detentions so if say on your group if you’re working in a group then if some of them are messing about and it’s not you then you have to worry that the teacher will get cross and then everyone in the group looks the same and might get detentions. It’s best if you don’t work with the messy about ones.*

*(T2 line 99-108)*

Here Joshua again demonstrated his awareness that he should avoid more disruptive pupils in lessons. However this could potentially increase social isolation, and peer rejection, if pupils choose to distance themselves from any pupils they perceive to be troublesome. It is evident that pupils’ worry and anxiety relating to the unpredictability of other pupils’ behaviour, together with the possible consequences of this, in terms of teacher reaction or potential sanctions, creates a barrier to learning for, as Sam clearly articulates above, the anticipation of this leads to such anxiety that he is unable to think. What is also evident from Sam’s account is that this occurs frequently and that it causes him to be *‘scared a lot of the time’*. When seen in the context of other worries he and others express it appears to contribute to a sense of pervasive anxiety across the school experience.

Unsurprisingly, in view of the narratives presented here, pupils perceived the ability to manage behaviour effectively in the classroom to be a positive quality for secondary school teachers, offering them a sense of reassurance and security.

*Sam: Well****…****I think that teachers can be strict but that’s kind of good I think. If other people, kids, ….pupils I mean, if they well misbehave you know then if the teacher’s strict they tell them off. That makes me feel less stressed, worried you know. Like if a grown up doesn’t tell them I might be well you know tempted and like my mum and well this help, from the Autism place Ian his name is, well they say that if I tell people off myself that.. that might bring back my problems you know like I’ve had before with the bullying.*

*(T2 line 231-238)*

For Sam, confidence in the teacher’s ability to manage classroom behaviour also offered the reassurance that he will not need to intervene himself. Here he demonstrated awareness of his tendency to impose rules and structure on others and his difficulty in controlling this impulse. The anxiety that this provoked for him clearly links to his pervasive fears relating to previous experiences of bullying. Interestingly Sam demonstrated that he has not been able to recognise the links between his attempts to regulate the behaviour of others and incidents of bullying, but he has needed this to be specifically identified and explained by adults.

*Feeling Safe*

Some pupils expressed anxiety over whether a designated place would be available to them at their new school to retreat to when stressed or upset. The availability of a quiet room or space for pupils with ASD to access is widely recognised as beneficial to their inclusion in mainstream schools, and particularly so in secondary schools, where the environment can often be noisy, stressful and confusing, particularly during less structured times of the day . Pupils recognised their desire for a ‘safe haven’ but appeared to need this for different reasons. Sam identified the necessity for somewhere to take refuge when upset or worried, a place away from others, again linking to his fear of bullying and teasing.

*Sam: They showed us…. me and my mum where I could go – this room that the special needs person sits in you know if I get upset or worried. So really that’s better than at little school because there you have to sit on the corridor with everyone looking at you so well we think that’s a better thing about secondary school. I think I would feel safer there cos err … it’s like out of the way and no one can see you and tell people*

 *(T 1 line 423-428)*

Sam portrayed quite vividly his lack of privacy at primary school when feeling stressed or worried. As with much of his account there is a strong impression of extreme self-consciousness and perception of himself as vulnerable to unwanted behaviour from others if they become aware of his emotions and anxieties. Also evident in Sam’s narrative, both here and throughout his account, is his relationship with his mother. His use of *‘us’* and *‘we think’* suggests his mother’s potential influence on, or confirmation of his views and anxieties.

Later Luke and Joe build upon Sam’s comments:

*Luke: Yeah and you need somewhere to go if you get upset like Sam said before. So you’ll be okay there. …. That worries me. ….. nowhere to go for ‘chill out’. I mean what do you do if you can’t take it anymore. Like the noise and so on or ..or if you get so cross you’ll like …explode.*

*Joe: I think I can go to the Learning Base .. they call it that…. but I won’t feel like learning so that’s a worry as well.*

*(T 1 line 409-415)*

Luke again showed insight into his sensitivity to noise, his tendency to become angry in response to this, and his need for a quiet space in which to calm his emotions. The intensity of his experiences and feelings are reinforced by his use of phrases such as ‘*can’t take it any more’* and his description of becoming so cross he feels like he will ‘*explode*’. For Joe an additional worry stemmed from his literal interpretation of language, as his ‘safe haven’ in school will be the ‘Learning Base’. He recognised that when in need of a quiet space he is not in a frame of mind for learning, demonstrating an understanding of the impact of his emotions.

Following transition pupils who had access to a place of refuge, away from the stressful, and sometimes confusing, mainstream environment, spoke of their appreciation of this. They particularly valued the opportunity to escape busy social situations during the unstructured times of the school day, such as break or lunchtimes, which they found to be noisy and intimidating.

*Luke: I mean like they have this room you can go to at lunch if you need to you know for a bit of peace and quiet. That’s helpful sometimes if you’re getting a bit stressed and you don’t want to go out with others being loud and stuff. You can just be quiet by yourself and like play on the computers if you want to. Yeah that’s helpful ….I didn’t get that at the old school.*

*(T 2 line 570-575)*

*Jess: So it’s good to have somewhere to go to get away from other people, well mostly the kids you know, when you’ve had enough or if something upsets you. It’s good to have people you know will be nice to you I think*

*(T2 line 373-375)*

*Joe: I have to go in the Diamond room to eat it and then I can stay there for all of lunchtime if I want. So they do cool stuff like games and computers and things so that’s better than going outside. And let me say that once when I got well you know errr …stressed up in PE then that’s where I went to and they let me stay there for a bit til I was calmer again and they said I can do that so that’s good*

*(T 2 line 399-405)*

Jess refers to having the opportunity to escape from other pupils, apparently contradicting her frequent references to her desire for friendships and social contact with her peers. She emphasises the importance, not only of a place of refuge but also, of having supportive people present there. Her appreciation of people who are *‘nice’* to her could be seen to infer that when in the mainstream school environment she encounters individuals who are less positive in their attitude. Although often expressing a desire to be included with her mainstream peers, Jess referred to them here as ‘kids’, suggesting that she regarded herself as separate from them. For Sam the awareness that he was able to access a calm and supportive environment when he felt stressed or upset appeared to offer him a sense of reassurance, helping to reduce his overall feeling of anxiety.

**c) Teaching and learning**

Anxiety about the learning expectations at secondary school were common to all pupils , with most concerned that lessons would be too difficult for them and that the pace of teaching would not take account of their understanding. Also evident was the insight that pupils had into their leaning difficulties and differences. This seemed to suggest that negative experiences of learning in their primary school had contributed to the construction of their views.

*Joe: You know like for understanding things you know like in err… lessons and everything well I’m worried about that I think…..(pauses and twists hands)*

*Jess: Joe (shakes head)*

*Luke: go Joe don’t take any notice.*

*Joe: Yeah well if they you know give you a book and ask you to read it …what if you can’t? That’s what I want to know and it’s been bothering me since we went cos in this form room place they had piles and heaps of books on the back and I couldn’t stop looking at them all….then they gave them out. Well I didn’t even open it cos ..well it just looked so hard. So I’m not sure what you do then*

*Sam: that’s what you have to do. Read things and then they ask you questions. They do that in every lesson….. I think so*

*Luke: yeah…. lots of reading I know so it will be hard and then so will maths be I think. Like lots of new stuff*

*(T 1 line 685-710)*

Here the pupils’ views presented as a combination of anticipation, or anxiety about the unknown, and their preconceptions regarding secondary school lessons. Sam has gained what initially appears to be a confident knowledge of this which then becomes more hesitant, suggesting that he is quoting information or rumours from adults or older pupils. Joe’s anxiety about understanding the content of lesson is clear, and for both Luke and Joe their reading skills appear to be an additional concern. Joe’s recollection of a lesson on his visit to his new school reflected the panic he felt as his attention was drawn to a pile of text books and his experience of the lesson seems to have been dominated by this, combined with a mounting expectation, or fear, that he may be asked to read. The fear of this challenge and the helplessness of not knowing what to do in the situation had remained in his thoughts following the visit and had persistently *‘bothered’* him, clearly contributing to his anxiety. This demonstrated how the generally unnoticed details of the classroom environment can provoke anxiety for pupils with ASD and the barrier that this can create for their learning if this is not recognised. However it is also important to acknowledge how difficult it may prove for adults to anticipate the specific aspects of the classroom that are likely to provoke anxieties for individual pupils.

Interestingly, although this experience clearly provoked feelings of anxiety for Joe, he was reluctant to describe his experience until prompted by other group members. This transcript extract exemplifies how pupils were able to encourage responses from others who appeared more inhibited or less able to express their views. It also demonstrates how the experiences and ideas voiced by individuals prompted others to either confirm their views or to feel comfortable in contributing similar concerns of their own.

Later Sam continued to voice his anxieties about lessons:

*Sam: Lessons might be hard unless well…..err things like you’re good at well say like I’m good at maths but if you’re not and they do things like that you didn’t do in your old school and everyone else did then you’ll look stupid and everyone will laugh at you and tease you.*

*(T 1 line 263-266)*

Sam’s apprehension about lessons at secondary school seemed to rest more with the social impact of failing to understand and of appearing different to others. His comment suggested that his fear of bullying and teasing dominates his thinking around all aspects of school life, even in areas where he acknowledges he has strengths, such as maths lessons. He seemed to view any visible weakness or difference from others as potential invitation to teasing and negative behaviour from his peers. This links with the concept of ‘difference’, and how the participants in the study perceive and negotiate their differences within the school context, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Following transition learning remained a concern for most pupils. The level of anxiety expressed varied between pupils, as did the cause of their worry, but most found some aspect of the school curriculum stressful at some level. As they had anticipated, some pupils experienced feelings of overwhelming confusion in lessons where subjects were no longer presented in the same way as at primary school and they described the mounting sense of anxiety this caused.

*Sam:**He said I wasn’t listening but I just felt confused because it wasn’t like we did at our old school. It was a different way and I was completely lost and you were supposed to show your working out but I couldn’t do the working out so I kept getting in a panic and then I couldn’t do anything about it. I just sat there and looked out of the window and then you get in trouble for being lazy and not working. I mean I’m good at maths when I understand but if they don’t help you understand and they are so strict that they scare you then your lost I think.*

*(T 2 line 258-264)*

Sam’s account appeared to demonstrate some of the presumed difficulties associated with ASD in relation to learning, including a poor ability to generalise and apply skills and knowledge from one situation to another, as he viewed himself as good at maths at primary school but was not able to generalise these skills and adapt to the method of working in his new school. The anxiety and ‘*panic*’ this evoked is clearly evident and appears to be related not only to being confused and unable to understand the task, but also his to inability to comply with teacher expectations and his anticipation of the consequences of this. His account demonstrated how his anxiety mounted from confusion, to panic, and then on to fear as the lesson progressed. This provided a powerful insight into the way in which anxiety can quickly escalate for children with ASD and also demonstrated Sam’s ability to predict the consequences of his behaviour, with these thoughts contributing further to his feelings of anxiety. Sam’s perception of the teacher in this lesson is suggestive of a lack of understanding of his needs but it appears that, although Sam does not understand his work, he does not ask for help or clarification and this increased his anxiety and feeling of helplessness.

Confusion due to lack of understanding in lessons also arose in Joe’s account, as did a lack of ability to communicate this to teaching staff, which appeared to lead to his disengagement from learning.

*Joe: Sometimes lessons like English is hard cos I think they think that you’re more clever than you are and then they go too fast so it’s hard to understand what they mean or what you have to do. Sometimes I just sit there and think well now I am confused,…… I mean really confused*

*(T 2 line 598- 603)*

Here Joe attempted to rationalise the teachers approach and to understand their thoughts and assumptions, a skill which contradicts the presumption that those with ASD have an impaired sense of theory of mind. In common with much of his narrative, Joe tended to attribute the inability of others to anticipate or meet his needs to his own deficits rather than to their lack of understanding or willingness to adapt.

Joshua drew attention to the specific difficulty he experiences in recording his work and the increased level of stress this caused at secondary school due to the emphasis on written work in most subject areas.

*Joshua: everything’s writing though I find you know….. writing this and then that err….even if you’re in a lesson that’s not about writing like say err..geography. I mean it should be a really good lesson cos it’s like more interesting that a lot of them but you have to write all sorts of stuff in your book and so if you like me like use your left hand and errm… it gets all smudged then it’s hard to do and slow as well and that can make them think you’re thick as well when really it’s just about the writing. I forgot as well that it makes the strict ones crosser then ever cos they say they can’t read your writing.*

*(T 2 line 272-279)*

In this extract, which for Joshua was particularly lengthy and could be therefore be regarded as indicative of the depth of his feeling relating to this, he expresses his frustration at the impact of his poor handwriting skills on his access to lessons which he perceives should be interesting. His sense of frustration is compounded by his assumption that his recording skills may influence teachers’ perception of his abilities.

When considering the stress and anxiety in lessons described by pupils I found it difficult to separate this emerging theme from that of ‘*understanding and acceptance*’, described later under the superordinate theme of *‘experience of autism’*. Although the curriculum content was clearly described as contributing to the stress of some pupils, teaching styles and teacher attitudes also played a significant role. As evident in Sam’ earlier account, often it was the pupil’s perception of the teacher, and their expected responses, which lead to more stress than the learning itself.

**d) Change and loss**

Although some pupils expressed worries about forthcoming changes, and losing the familiarity of primary school, their worries centred primarily on the loss of familiar adults who support them. This appeared to suggest an attachment to social relationships, which could be interpreted as potentially at odds with the accepted social impairment of ASD.

*Joe: do they have helpers the same at secondary school. I’m worried about that now…I think. I think I really need to have one or I’ll be stuck. I mean can it be the same one. I like Miss S. Can I have the same one. Miss S likes me and she could come with me I’m sure she would.*

 *Luke: don’t be daft Joe, it’ll all be new people there you know. Everyone will be different. No one comes with you in grown ups. I wish my teacher could but that doesn’t happen...grow up*

*(T 1 line 501-507)*

Joe’s account implied a high level of dependence on his familiar teaching assistant. It seems on reflection that, although the Joe viewed her support in lessons as important, his attachment was also due to his perception of being ‘liked’, an experience which, as evidenced later, he unfortunately does not often encounter. It seems that Joe had established a very reciprocal relationship with the TA which he is reluctant to lose. A measure of the tolerance and acceptance developing between the pupils in the group is evident here in that Joe accepted Luke’s impatient response to him without comment, and later expanded his contribution:

*Joe: I mean I like my teacher cos they err she well you sort of know what you can get away with and like err it’s the same every day like school and everything so you know what to expect and no surprises. When you go it will be different all the time and that’s hard for me. Like what’s coming next will be a worry.*

*(T 1 line 670-674)*

*Sam: what about like what happens when your teacher’s off … on a course or something and then you get someone else. At my school they tell me or my mum so I know and….and it’s always the same someone else. I mean the same teacher who takes over so I know her so it’s not so much of a shock. And she knows me. So will that be the same. I hope it’s the same.*

*(T 1 line 459-464)*

In describing their experience of relationships with adults in primary school pupils appeared to value pupil/teacher relationships in which the teacher knew them, and was aware of their differences, and they in turn knew the teacher and found them predictable, consistent and supportive. The predictability of primary school appeared to provide a degree of confidence and security for Joe, who demonstrated some awareness of his difficulty in managing change. Although a preference of routine and a dislike of uncertainly is evident for Sam, who vividly described the potential for ‘*shock*’ if faced with an unfamiliar teacher, and for Joe, they appeared aware of the role of other people in maintaining consistency and familiarity.

Overall, the fears and anxieties pupils described appeared to reflect the experience of autism for each individual and the impact this had in the school environment. Previous experiences of school, linked to both social and learning situations, also seemed to influence their worries and anxieties about the move to secondary school. The way in which pupils attempted to make sense of their autism and their experiences in primary school influenced their understanding of the transition to, and early experiences of, secondary school. For Sam, amidst his concerns and anxieties, a sense of resolve and determination was evident in his view that the move could be a success, even though it would mean having the resilience to weather the difficulties that arose.

*Sam: It’s important to stick it out, you know just get on with it and then it will get better …..*

*(T1 line 200-201)*

**5.4.2 HOPE AND EXPECTATIONS**

Amidst their anxieties and apprehension pupils were able to recognise some positive aspects of transition and to express some of their hopes, expectations and wishes for the future in their new school. I considered that, at times, this served to contradict the views encountered in my work with parents and teachers preparing pupils for the move to secondary school. This superordinate theme encompasses these positive perceptions and experiences, whilst acknowledging the disappointment experienced when pupils’ hopes and expectations were not met.

**a) Opportunity**

During their initial transition visits to secondary school some pupils were clearly impressed by the resources available, such as science laboratories, IT and art equipment and technology classrooms. This appeared to inspire their enthusiasm and excitement and to counter some of the fears they had expressed around the experience of learning at secondary school.

*Joshua: like we said, me and Luke, science will be good cos you’ve got proper labs and experiments and teachers and technicians and everything so that will be great. Really interesting not just boring talking and pretend experiments like at primary. You even have those burners to set fire to stuff …cool*

 *(T1 line 390-394)*

*Sam: I think the best lessons like at school get better like art and things cos you have proper lessons in them in proper rooms not just like in your classroom with your own teacher like Miss P teaching everything.*

*(T 1 line 96-100)*

Unexpectedly, in view of their expressed anxieties over the social demands they may encounter at their new school, some pupils were eager in their anticipation of after school clubs and activities which would potentially offer new experiences and opportunities.

*Luke: … I think you can go to clubs for ICT as well. You know like after school and everything so that’s a good thing as well.*

*Jess: clubs and things will be good ….. you can try new things out to see if you like them. Do you think you need to go with a friend though. I think that’s best then you know what to do mmm……. Good though*

*(T1 line 113-117)*

Most notable in these extracts is the apparent contagion of excitement within the group leading to an overarching sense of optimism and confidence for each of the pupils.

Some divergence was evident between pupils’ views on the prospect of travelling to secondary school independently. Whilst some pupils viewed the possibility of this with apprehension, others considered it as an opportunity for independence from adult supervision and mark of maturity. Although presenting as somewhat hesitant in his confidence to manage the situation without support, Luke appears to have considered the benefits of mastering this, viewing it as an opportunity for wider independence. I sensed that Luke’s attempt to reframe the anxiety of others as a positive opportunity rested largely in his desire not to be regarded as different from his peers.

*Luke: But you know I think that … well I think perhaps you could say that the bus is a good thing. You see like now I go with my mum and well.. not all my friends do so sometimes I think it looks a bit daft, you know like still babyish. It’s grown up to go on the bus and you would have to have your own money as well I think. You have to sort of sort yourself out but…. that’s okay I think. Once you can do it for school then I suppose you could like ……do it anytime and then you would be able to go out to places. (T1 line 514-520)*

**b) A fresh start**

As professionals we most often hold the view that enabling pupils to maintain their existing friendships will support their transition to secondary school. However, here children viewed the move as an opportunity to make a fresh start in relationships and to forge new friendships. For most this represented a chance to escape the conceptions of their current peer group in relation to their ASD, and the impact of this on their social acceptance in school.

*Luke: I had this friend in my class last year and that was good cos we went to his house and we played with his Lego and then in school when he told the other kids they laughed at him and so he didn’t ask me again.*

 *Jess: that’s sad Luke. But I think friends are good so there will be some at the new school cos there are so many new people and they won’t know stuff like that*.

*(T 1 Line 367-373)*

Here Luke related his pleasure in forming a reciprocal friendship with another child, only to have this thwarted as a result of peer pressure. Luke’s desire for friendship was evident, as was his recognition that, in light of this experience others perceived him to be unacceptable as a friend. In the supportive role, which she frequently adopted within the group, Jess offered reassurance based on the notion of starting afresh amongst other children who are unaware of past events and free from preconceptions. A similar view is expressed by Sam, who seemed to view the move as an opportunity to change his identity as *‘the bullied one’* and to reinvent himself as a more popular pupil.

*Sam: Yeah and no one will know if you’ve been like away from school or that you’ve been like the bullied one and stuff. Cos well there will be new people who don’t know things about you and then they might well like you more I suppose.*

*(T1 line 374-377)*

Sam appeared to attach importance to being liked by others, suggesting that at the moment he perceives himself to be unlikeable, attempting to make sense of this by attributing it to his behaviour and reputation amongst his peers.

*Joe: Yes they don’t know if you’ve been you know weird or anything. You can, well they can well forget people who errm dissed them before you know….. at their old school. They won’t get tormented like before. Things will be different you see. That’s the way I hope at my new school.*

*(T1 line 13-17)*

Joe also anticipated that making a fresh start amongst an unfamiliar peer group would be an advantage. He appeared to assume that unfamiliar pupils would be more tolerant of his unusual behaviour and presented as confident that the experience will be positive for him. In common with Sam, Joe anticipated that a change of school would enable him to escape bullying and teasing from other pupils, again demonstrating the interlinked nature of themes emerging from pupils’ accounts. Joe’s misuse of pronouns here is notable and could be seen as suggestive of an unconscious attempt to depersonalise his views and possibly some disbelief that the situation can actually change for him.

*Joshua: Different teachers will be good like I said before. I don’t think my teacher likes me. Ignores me or gets angry when I tell him things like in science. It’ll be good to get some new ones and see if they like me a bit better.*

*(T1 line 342- 345)*

Joshua extended the prospect of starting anew, highlighting the opportunity to establish new relationships with teaching staff. Here he demonstrated an awareness of how others perceive him and the impact of his own behaviour on the success of his relationships. Although often presenting a critical and unfavourable view of teachers Joshua revealed an underlying wish to have his teacher’s approval. Within each of these narratives pupils make no reference to either wishing, or attempting, to change their own behaviour but the hope that others will become more tolerant of who they are and how they behave, suggesting for some an acceptance of their differences, or a possible resignation that they cannot change who they are.

*Jess: well in school now I mean everyone knows you… that’s a good thing but you know sometimes you think why does all the teachers talk to me and watch me. It would be good to be like everyone else sometimes you know and then they wouldn’t notice you so much. Perhaps you can hide a bit more when the school’s bigger. They have lots of other people to watch.*

*(T 1 line 447-451)*

Jess revealed the dilemma she faces in acknowledging the advantages of being in a small school, where she is known to all of the teachers, whilst also recognising her developing need for independence from adult attention and supervision. This suggests that transition presents children with a dilemma which is central to the process of growing up, that is in order to gain a level of freedom and autonomy from adult regulation there is a need to relinquish some adult protection. Jess clearly viewed herself as different from others and the attitude of adults around her confirmed this view of her identity. She appeared to anticipate that the move to a large secondary school would provide her with a desired degree of anonymity within her peer group, together with an opportunity to be treated in the same way as other pupils. Further discussion on how Jess negotiates her sense of identity amidst the tensions of her placement within a specialist resource in a mainstream school appears within the emerging theme of *‘identity and difference’*.

**c) Realisation of hopes**

There was a clear divergence between pupils’ views as to whether their experience of secondary school had met with their more positive expectations. In the extract below Luke clearly indicates his disappointment in the eagerly anticipated science lessons, perceiving them as lacking challenge and repeating primary school content. His account suggested that if pupils’ expectations are not met their disappointment can lead to disaffection and disengagement with lessons, a situation which appeared to arise for Luke after only a short time in school. Although Luke’s narrative presented as calm and reasoned, his use of the word *‘angry’* suggests that possibly, when in school, his response to this situation is more intense. Also notable within this quotation is the reference to *‘we’* as a group, indicating that Luke viewed himself and the other participants as a coherent social group with similar views. In contrast to the mature and considered expression of views in Luke’s account, Joshua articulated his disappointment in science lessons in a more aggressive and less measured fashion:

*Luke: …you know how we all really looked forward to science and proper lessons and everything well it’s not that much different apart from when they show you experiments. It’s just the same as Y6 but easier. I have to tell everyone that I’m disappointed in it actually and it makes me feel quite angry errm… even like I don’t want to go to those lessons any more …(T2 line 122-126)*

*Joshua:**We’re doing space again, can you believe – so crap, boring, boring, boring and they don’t know what to do with it anyway so even more boring. We even made models – planets and things – so crap*.

*(T 2 line 156-158)*

The frustration that Joshua experienced at the repetition in the science curriculum is evident, together with some disrespect for the teaching methods and subject knowledge of his teachers. Clearly these lessons have not reflected some pupils’ expectations and, rather than accepting this, as other pupils possibly would, or taking advantage of less challenging lessons and activities, this had become a source of stress, impacting on their views of the subject area and the teachers involved. In addition to the potential for disengagement from lessons, the possibility of negative impact on teacher/pupil relationships was also apparent. Pupils appeared to perceive that teachers were not taking their strengths and previous knowledge into account, some interpreted this negative view of their ability as relating to their diagnosis of ASD.

Demonstrating awareness of his contradictory view, Joe responded with a more optimistic account of his experiences and also recognised that some aspects of school, which has initially caused him anxiety, had been unexpectedly positive events.

*Joe: Well…… the good thing that’s what we’re on about isn’t it. I would say is science. Ha Josh! Like the experiments. Very different from little school. […]. And trips. Trips are fun but I was worried about it but I think my mum sorted it out. (T2 169-173)*

Jess also suggested that some of the anxieties pupils had experienced, concerning the more practical aspects of school, had also been unfounded, whilst acknowledging that his may not be true for all pupils. She appeared to indicate that the supportive responses she encountered from others are unexpected, leading me to question whether this was attributable to prior negative experiences in school or to previous misconceptions regarding secondary school.

*Jess: …..the same with getting lost I mean it was a bit worrying but well you just go with everyone also and you’re okay I think. They were a bit silly thing to get stressed about cos in the end at my school anyway well …they got it sorted before you get there or if you do get stuck they kind of always help you … they don’t dis you or anything. (T2 476-480)*

Pupils also reflected back on their experiences of primary school to draw direct comparisons with their new school. At times these views related to their hope to gain increased autonomy and less adult supervision within a larger school. Here they discussed their frustration with their lack of independence during unstructured times of the day at primary school, and intense attention from well-meaning school lunchtime supervisors, concluding that the relative anonymity and increased choice available to them at secondary school was preferable.

*Jess: Yeah and like they try to make you play their made up games with other kids even when you don’t want to at all….like cos it’s so boring and you just want to do your own thing (T2 356 -358)*

*Luke****:*** *….. well I think break times at my new school are better actually. (T2 351)*

*Joshua****:*** *I go to the library to use the computers. That’s not going to happen at any primary school I know! So another reason why big schools are better. They have better stuff and they stay off your back. (T2 406-408)*

The differing views articulated by pupils here were summarised succinctly by Luke who demonstrated a particularly pragmatic view.

***Luke****:…. Not so bad as we thought it might be but then well…. not as good either. It’s just like well…. school I suppose (T2 724-726)*

**5.4.3 IMPACT OF SUPPORT**

This theme draws together the experiences and perceptions of pupils regarding the support available to them during the process of transition from primary to secondary school and during their first term in their new school. It considers and interprets their views on preparation for the move and on the support provided for them at secondary school, both for their access to learning and to support their social inclusion.

**a) Preparation**

An important aspect of transition preparation for pupils is introductory visits to their new school and they were eager to describe their experiences. As indicated within the emerging theme of ‘*Opportunity*’, some pupils gained some positive impressions of their new school during visits, even though, as also suggested earlier there was a sense of dissonance between expectations and reality. However, as the narratives below exemplify, for some pupils a visit to their new school heightened their sense of anxiety.

*Joe: Well you see like from our school well… everyone goes together and then all the special needs kids go as well ..together I mean. So you well get some extra visits to everyone else and they show you the special needs places to go and everything. That was good that day apart* *from they like made me tell everyone else in my class about it ..cos it was like before they got to go you know. So then well everyone knows you’re like the special needs don’t they and then well that’s more dissing again. But I have to say that the all together day was well … I would say quite terrifying really. That’s what I felt anyway but then I suppose that’s the way it is so you might as well know. But it does scare you and make you worry.*

*Sam: Yeah I was scared as well cos we saw a kind of well …incident I would call it. You know a bullying incident. […] So that was very worrying. But we went and told cos like with my mum being there and everything you could in the rules and… I think they were going to sort it out so that was good.*

*Luke: What scared you Joe? Was it noisy and things. That was what I thought was really bad.. all the noise and shoving and stuff like when the end of the lesson came. But I thought the lesson bit was good really. I mean it made you want to go then like as something different …like a bit exciting*

*Joe: Well they made us do a PE lesson so that wasn’t good. I mean everyone was shouting and I think they were excited but well .. for me it was the worst thing. I think I saw the worst bits of school for me anyway.*

*(T2 line 676-698)*

The most powerful feature of these accounts was the level of anxiety, and even fear, that pupils experienced either during their visit, or when reflecting back on it later. For some pupils they encountered experiences that linked to their most entrenched worries, such as incidents of bullying or PE lessons. The language pupils used to describe their feelings, such as *‘terrifying’* and *‘scared’*, was indicative of the intensity of their anxiety during these visits. However an acceptance of the inevitability of experiencing the school environment as stressful also emerged in Joe’s remark, *‘I suppose that’s the way it is’.* Also for Joe, his experience of having additional visits to those of with his peers appeared to reinforce his perception of being different to other pupils, confirming his identity as having ‘special needs’.

It is however possible to interpret some of these narratives from a more positive stance. Although Joe was distressed by his experience of having a PE lesson he suggests, possibly with a tentative degree of optimism, that he has now suffered the worst that school can offer, suggesting that other experiences may be more positive. Sam described his worry at witnessing an incident of bullying, but appeared reassured by his perception that this was appropriately addressed by school staff. And, although Luke conveys his distress at the sensory environment of school, he hesitantly acknowledged his sense of excitement at the prospect of new and different experiences.

When reflecting on their pre-transition visits after a term at secondary school pupils appeared quite sceptical about their value, suggesting that the impressions created where not a true reflection of the reality of school life.

*Jess: We got to go loads of times and sometimes you did quizes and treasure hunts around school so that was fun. But like it’s …..err not real is it. Not well…like it really is.*

*(T 2 line 699-701)*

*Joshua: They make like they’re selling it to you I think. Like sort of….. ‘come to our school and do all these exciting lessons and have this big posh new building’. Then when you get there it’s just well… school same as ever.*

*(T 2 line 705-707)*

Pupils also presented as unconvinced of the value of other interventions, such as written transition programmes and methods of communicating details about themselves to future teachers.

*Jess: yeah like in my book you had to write things down about yourself and that was supposed to tell everyone … teachers I mean err well … all about you I suppose. But well I don’t know if they read it. I mean it’s not like they knew you when you got there at all.*

*Luke: well I liked doing mine but …not sure if it helped at all. I mean I put all sorts of stuff in it like about being good at ..well liking science and things but I don’t think the teachers took much notice. Oh yeah and like not liking pushing and things like on the corridors but they didn’t change anything …it didn’t make any difference. It made you find out things but then it made you worry about some things when you did.*

*(T 2 line 715-724)*

The accounts pupils gave suggested that the provision of written transition materials, whist viewed as enjoyable for some, did little to prepare for the reality of *‘being there’,* so were therefore not perceived as helpful. Luke suggested that in encouraging him to investigate information about his new school, his transition work had in fact contributed to his anxiety about the move. Emerging from these extracts is a sense of frustration that, although pupils’ views were sought by adults, they appeared not to have been valued or acted upon and there was a perceived of lack of commitment from school staff to take account of individual needs and differences.

**b) Support for learning**

A key issue emerging from pupils’ accounts following transition to secondary school was their perception of additional adult support, particularly that provided in lessons. At a practical level some pupils, whether personally receiving support or not, viewed this as a positive way of encouraging pupils to engage with lessons, helping to reduce their anxiety in class, or acting as an advocate.

*Joe: If you don’t have someone who helps you then you just have to stay confused I think. There isn’t any other way*

*(T 2 line 602-3)*

*Jess: But like once I hadn’t remembered my homework and the IR person they well told the teacher and everything so I didn’t get a detention or anything.*

*(T 2 line 228-230)*

However, also apparent in pupils’ narratives was an underlying discourse suggesting that pupils regarded the presence of visible adult support as having a negative impact on their social inclusion, as it served to emphasise their difficulties and their difference from their peer group.

*Joshua: But no I don’t need help. That would make me look stupid and well I know I’m not so I’d rather not go that way if you don’t mind.*

*(T2 line 608-609)*

*Joe:* ***…*** *they gave me this lady in English and in maths and well… I suppose it’s okay but well like they all know now don’t they ..the others. Like I’m more different than ever*

*(T 2 line 505-507)*

Joshua was confident of his ability to cope without additional support during lessons and it appeared unlikely that he would accept this due to his perception of the negative impact this would have on other pupils’ views of his ability. Joe clearly experienced tension between awareness of his need for support and his perception that the presence of this reinforced his differences in the views of other pupils, therefore impacting on his self-esteem and social acceptance. He appeared to view the presence of adult support as key to preventing him from hiding his differences.

Jess described the barrier to social interaction with her peers created by having support, together with the intense pressure to work at all times during the lesson in comparison to other pupils, who she perceived could be more self-determining in the use of their time.

*Jess: Sometimes you want to sit with your friends though and there isn’t enough room for me and my support. It will be good when I can just do that like everyone and then chat and stuff. I mean I don’t want to get in trouble but sometimes I wonder what they are all talking about you know in a chatty lesson and I’m stuck working all the time.*

*(T2 line 221-225)*

Here the presence of an additional adult appeared to form a physical, as well as a social, barrier due to lack of space in the classroom. Also when reflecting on this comment I was drawn back to Jess’ hope that her new school would provide an opportunity for less intense adult supervision and the chance to be treated in the same way as her peers. She returned again to her desire to be socially involved and *‘like everyone’* but appeared to be encountering continued barriers to this.

For those having support in most lessons, although they acknowledged that this was helpful in terms of their understanding and learning, it was also perceived as a barrier to interaction with the subject teacher. The following extracts, again from Jess, who received a higher level of support due to her placement in the IR, exemplified the impact of the presence of support staff on the interactions between teachers and pupils.

*Jess: I don’t always have much to do with the actual teachers, you know the ones that …. that teach the lesson at the front.*

*(T2 line 210-211)*

*Jess: I don’t think they think they have to bother with you when you’ve got your help person. They just kind of ignore you and…and sometimes they talk to her and tell her what to do instead of me and then she tells me. Like I’m deaf*

*(T2 line 725-728)*

As she attempted to make sense of the attitude she perceived from teachers, Jess demonstrated an ability to attribute thought to others, and to attempt to view the world from another’s perspective in order to understand their behaviour. She clearly experienced a strong sense of disengagement on the part of some teachers and no evidence of attempts to establish a relationship with her. On reflection, in a busy classroom it is possible to view this situation from the perspective of the teacher in that the presence of additional support for some pupils allows them to focus their attention on pupils who do not have this. It may also be indicative of a lack of confidence on the part of teachers in their ability to meet the needs of pupils with ASD. However it clearly created the impression for Jess that, as she has additional needs, her learning is not the teacher’s responsibility, and she is therefore not included in the class as a whole. Jess’ description of teachers who address the TA rather than speak directly to her appeared to suggest, as Jess herself notes, that the teacher in question regards her ASD as a debilitating impairment. At worst this approach could be considered as symptomatic of a patronising attitude to disability, as they fail to acknowledge her or to give her a voice in the lesson.

**c) Pastoral support**

In the extracts below pupils reflect on the approaches adopted by schools with the aim of providing social or emotional support during their first weeks at their new school.

*Luke: yeah well my buddy thing he stays with me at break and everything but well we both just get a bit fed up with it but he thinks he needs to be with me cos he well …… volunteered I suppose. Anyway it’s only for another week I think and then we will be free to do what we want. Don’t get me wrong I think he would stick up for me and nothing has gone wrong with everyone else. [ ] But it’s just been a pain. I mean sometimes you don’t feel like it do you. Not getting away and everything and he just doesn’t seem to get it. Following the rules I suppose.*

*(T2 line 53-63)*

*Joe: At our school they help you with things like if you get cross or angry or upset about everything so that’s good. And they made like a group of other kids like to help me and they know about the autism and stuff so I can go round with them if I want to.*

*(T2 line 614- 617)*

Luke clearly felt frustrated at the decision of school staff to provide him with a ‘buddy’, and it is evident that this was not discussed with him. Demonstrating unexpected intuition, he appeared aware that his ‘buddy’ was also frustrated by the situation and assumed that he was supporting him due to a sense of duty rather than a feeling of friendship. Rather than valuing the support, Luke regarded it as intrusive and inhibitory, anticipating a time when he will be *‘free’*. In realising that he is presenting a negative account of this support, Luke attempted to address this by suggesting that his ‘buddy’ would act as an advocate if needed. A point of interest here was Luke’s perception that his ‘buddy’ *‘just doesn’t get it’*, as I reflected that this is a phrase often used by others to describe the behaviour of those with ASD in social situations. This suggested a reciprocal lack of understanding between autistic and non-autistic pupils. Joe presented a more positive picture of, what I assumed to be a ‘Circle of Friends’ approach, in which he appears to value the support of other pupils and to appreciate their knowledge and understanding of his ASD.

*Sam: Well they sent me to them mentors at my school for the girl problem when my mum told them about it. They sort of listened to me and we talked about bullying and what it is and everything. I think someone had told them about me …. You know how I am and the autism and everything. So that’s what they wanted to talk to me about …I mean like it was my fault or something*

 *(T 2 line 342-348)*

*Jess: They are all nice to me and the same people I see in the IR in the morning so they know me and everything as well I suppose. It does make you feel better when there’s someone who’s nice to you I suppose. Sometimes it gets a bit much though I think.*

*(T2 line 214-218)*

As professionals we assume that the availability of a key adult in school, with whom pupils can discuss any worries, is supportive of their inclusion and emotional well-being. Here Sam and Jess presented conflicting views on their experience of this. Sam’s account suggested a perception that the learning mentors had their own agenda for discussions with him, based on their knowledge of his ASD, rather than a willingness to listen to him. As evident in later discussions, Sam is hesitant in allowing others an awareness of his diagnosis, and his perception that if adults are made aware of this they may attribute blame for his social difficulties to him could serve to intensify his resistance to disclosure. Although Jess viewed the availability of adult support and advocacy in the resource base as reassuring, she suggested that, at times this is too intense and intrusive, causing me to again reflect on her hope for reduced adult supervision once at secondary school.

In the further exchange below Sam and Jess progressed to discuss their experience of taking part in structured ‘Social Groups’. Whilst acknowledging the potential value of this approach for teaching and reinforcing new social skills, both pupils had clearly given some consideration to the actual benefit of their experience. Sam questioned the likelihood of learning from other pupils who also have *‘special needs’,* as whilst appearing to identify with them he seemed frustrated at their level of skills. Jess questioned the value of developing and using appropriate social skills when her ‘non-autistic’ peers do not. Her comments suggested her sense of injustice that adult expectations of her behaviour surpassed that expected from other pupils.

*Jess****:*** *Yeah but Sam …I think it’s good but we do things like rules for talking to people and stuff like not interrupting or saying rude things but that would be okay if all the other kids ……I mean like the not in the resource or like not autistic kids had the same cos I mean they interrupt and say rude things as well but no one teaches them not to. They try to get us to follow the rules for being polite to everyone else but they’re not always polite to people are they so that’s not right in the end I think.*

*Sam****:*** *Yeah well you don’t get into trouble as much if you know the rules**so I think those social things…..groups are a good thing really and you well do it with other kids who like…well I’m not sure if they have the same autism and everything but they are special needs kids. Suppose though they well they ….don’t know that stuff either so it’s not like you could copy them. I mean sometimes I have to remind them.*

*(T2 line 580-596)*

The short quote from Jess below succinctly encompassed the apparent feelings amongst the participants as they attempted to understand the efforts of adults in school to offer them support.

*Jess:**I think they do stuff they think will help you but it doesn’t always work out. (T2 line 9-13)*

**5.4.4 THE EXPERIENCE OF AUTISM**

This superordinate theme relates to the way in which pupils come to understand and negotiate their autism within the context of school. It encompasses their attempts to understand and make sense of their perception of being different from their peer group, and the tensions they experience in deciding whether others should be informed of their diagnosis. The understanding and acceptance they experience from others, particularly the adults they encounter in school, and the impact of this on their construction of their personal identity is also reflected upon.

This issue emerged as a central theme both before and after the pupils moved to secondary school. In the initial focus groups, although ASD was mentioned spontaneously, and without adult prompts, by several of the participants, others were more reticent. Following their move to secondary school each of the pupils appeared comfortable to discuss issues relating to their ASD more openly. I hypothesised that this could be attributed in part to their heightened awareness of their differences within the context of their new school. Also increasing familiarity with each other and confidence in the group setting may have allowed for further disclosure in what pupils perceived to be a safe environment. When rationalising my inclusion of this theme, and linking it to the research questions, it appeared that the way in which pupils made sense of their diagnosis had clear implications for the manner in which they negotiated the experience of transition and life at secondary school.

**a) Identity and difference**

This theme encompasses the pupils’ perception of their ASD and seeks to interpret how they attempt to make sense of their differences. It also explores an emerging sense of identity within the group as *‘autistic’* or ‘*Aspergers*’, as distinct from other children with special educational needs. Some divergence emerged between those pupils who appeared to have accepted and become comfortable with their differences and those who continued to regard them in a negative light, possibly struggling to accept the impact that their diagnosis has on their life and the view that others have of them.

Here the succinct quote from Joe exemplifies his apparent acceptance of his differences to the extent that he sees in a positive light. Although he describes himself as *‘weird’*, he sees this as integral to who he is.

*Joe****:*** *It’s not that I mind being weird you know….. It’s quite good really. I mean I think people think well that’s just Joe and well so do I really. That’s just me.*

*(T1 line 81-83)*

Interestingly in the extract presented here Joe perceives his primary school classmates as generally accommodating to his differences, accepting them as part of him. However he later showed recognition that those unfamiliar with him may find his behaviour less acceptable and that in order to make friends he may need to be ‘*not Aspergers’*, and to change, not only his behaviour, but also his character and individuality. He also made it evident that change of this kind was unlikely, although it was unclear whether this was through choice or inability to change his behaviour. Joe also indicates his recognition that having friends would possibly decrease the likelihood of what he refers to as *‘tormenting’* from other children.

*Joe: Well I don’t mind if I make noises and well just be me …odd. But I think everyone else does so I would have to try to be like not Aspergers or something but that’s not me really but I might need to do it if I wanted to have some friends and that would be good you know to stop the tormenting. Don’t think it’s going to happen though. (T1 line 328-332)*

*Jess: I don’t care that you are Aspergers so why should anyone else. It doesn’t make you feel any different really does it ..I think so anyway and we’re just the same but we get more help I think and that’s a good thing. And anyway – what can you do about it now. Get unautistic or something*

*(T1 line 61-65)*

Jess also expressed acceptance of her autism, and that of others in the group, attempting to recognise the advantages that this can bring in terms of help and support. However her view appeared to indicate a degree of resignation to her diagnosis, alongside a hesitant suggestion that this does not make her different to anyone else. She contested Joe’s assumption that others will not accept him due to his autism and within this she also appeared to express a direct challenge to those who do not accept individuals with autism. Also emerging here was the developing recognition of similarity between the children participating and an emerging sense of identity within the group of ‘being autistic’. Similarly this is evident in Joshua’s comment below, where he also challenged the negative assumptions and pre-conceptions that others may hold about those with Asperger Syndrome:

*Joshua: You know when you read stuff and they say that we haven’t got a sense of humour. I mean like us with Aspergers or whatever.*

*(T2 line 303-205)*

Sam expressed the contradictory feelings he experiences in acknowledging that he is *‘different’* from his peers, whilst recognising that in many ways he is the same, sharing similar interests and expectations despite his sometimes inappropriate behaviour. He also indicated that his perception of *‘difference’* has negative connotations and that being treated as such is undesirable for him.

*Sam: I mean it’s just not what you want to be though is it .. I mean different and everything and them treating you as if you’re different. Not like everyone else when really you are you know. I mean sometimes you go off on one if you get stressed and all but well you still like want to be like the others and do all the same stuff like going out and stuff.*

*(T1 line 51-55)*

*Luke: Tell that to my teacher at school. He goes on about it all the time but I can’t make myself be anything else can I? On and on like it’s something I did wrong or something*

*(T1 line 66-68)*

Luke expressed frustration at the attitude of his teacher to his differences who appears to have evoked for Luke a feeling of personal responsibility for these. What is unclear from Luke’s account is whether his teacher makes reference to his diagnosis in an attempt to support him, or explain his behaviour, or whether his comments are less positive. Luke also suggested that he sensed pressure to change in order to be more acceptable to his teacher and that he believes that this would involve compromising his identity.

Although the construct of autism as an identity emerges as a group theme, Joshua’s views diverged considerably from the other pupils’ perception of themselves and their autism, as he appeared to regard his autism in unequivocally positive terms, challenging the views of those who believe otherwise.

*Joshua: Like we don’t know anything….. babies and retards. Don’t they know that some of us know as much as they do. I’m Aspergers you know not thick*

*(T2 line 159-161)*

In addition to attempting to negotiate their perceived differences from their non-autistic peer group, pupils inferred a need to establish their identity in relation to pupils with differing educational needs. A level of tension was evident in their accounts, as pupils recognised themselves as distinct from other pupils with additional needs. More generally however there was an underlying perception of that all those with SEN transgressed ‘normality’ in some way.

*Joe: I mean they’re not autistic like me but they’re not well you know ‘normal’ if you like*

*(T2 line 371-373)*

*Luke: there is this one boy but he’s weird as well but he talks to me sometimes.*

*(T2 line 22-23)*

*Joe****:*** *like me odd you mean like …… strange*

*(T2 line 68)*

*Luke: Not like us odd but really kind of freaky odd and his buddy has left him alone more I thinks cos he doesn’t speak much so I mean I talk to him. I think they’ve sat us together.*

*(T2 line 62-65)*

Although Luke appeared to regard autism in negative terms, he differentiates this from his view of another pupil with SEN in understanding him as ‘*freaky odd’*. This is suggestive of a developing identity between participants here as a group of individuals with ASD and characteristics in common. I reflected that it was unclear whether the group defined themselves by their diagnosis in a negative manner or, more positively, were developing a view of themselves as belonging to an autistic community. Luke’s account also suggests a perception that adults in school view pupils with SEN as a distinct group, quite separate from their peers, in remarking *‘I think they’ve sat us together’*. This statement may also serve as a challenge to the accepted view of those with autism as lacking in empathy as Luke appears to feel sympathy for the child with SEN and talks to him when he is ignored by his ‘buddy’.

Jess presented a further dimension to her concept of difference in relation to her identity as an individual with ASD.

Jess: … *I think they want to see what goes on you know, the way the other kids are. Well not me but you know the real autism ones cos like they kick off sometimes and everything.*

*(T2 line 9-13)*

Interestingly, within this comment Jess differentiated herself from the other pupils in the IR, towards whom she exhibited a negative view, distinguishing between herself and those with *‘real autism’*. This suggested that she sensed a pervading negative concept of autism amongst her peer group and sought to distance herself from others with ASD in an attempt to be accepted by her mainstream peers.

**b) Disclosure to others**

One of the most contentious issues debated within the group was the dilemma of whether teachers, or other pupils, should be made aware of their diagnosis of ASD, and the potential impact this could have on attitudes and behaviour towards them. The account of one pupil in particular, Sam, alluded to his view that, in keeping his diagnosis ‘*a secret’,* he increased his potential of being considered ‘normal’ by his peers, disguising his differences, and therefore becoming less vulnerable to bullying.

*Sam:**I mean like I don’t want people to know about my Aspergers thing cos then well …well you know they would think I’m a retard or something and like well I’m not really. I mean for most of the time I’m okay in school and then it’s like* ***Bang*** *and something really gets to me and then I like explode and everything .. Oh I can’t explain but you know they would think I’m more weird if I said I had a… an actual thing like a mental thing. (T1 line 39-44)*

*Sam: It sort of gives them an excuse so you have to keep it a secret if you can I think that’s always best.*

*(T1 line 638-639)*

I interpreted the language Sam used as suggestive of his very negative concept of ASD, and he appears to assume that his peers will hold a similar view. In presenting this critical discourse on ASD Sam demonstrated little awareness of the potential impact of his language on others in the group but they accept this with a degree of tolerance that possibly indicates that they are familiar with exposure to this level of negativity.

Joe’s response to Sam’s comments precipitated a discussion on ASD as a hidden disability, as he appeared to assume the question of disclosure to others is redundant, as imagines his difficulties are visible to all.

*Joe: Don’t you think they know anyway though. I mean they can tell if they see you can’t they. People, other kids I mean … well they think I’m weird but I think it’s cos of what I look like and things I do and like noises and things. So can’t they just tell. I don’t think you can keep it a secret Sam.*

*Joshua: What you mean like ….you can look err… Aspergers. Is that how they know. I mean if you looked something like that then you would know and everyone right from when you’re little not just like … last year I think with me. That’s not right Joe and anyway look at Luke. He looks well…….. you could say just err .. normal like everyone else and we know he’s not. I mean you wouldn’t look at him and say ‘here comes the special needs kid with the autism’ would you. No Joe they can’t tell by looking at you it has to be something else but…not sure having it a secret is such a good thing Sam.*

*(T1 line 643-654)*

Joshua, although initially appearing to grasp the concept of his differences as visible as a means of making sense of others’ behaviour towards him, then quickly refuted this assumption, based on his own experience of late diagnosis. Notably, although normally describing his ASD in positive or at times almost superior terms, here Joshua indicated that he also views ASD as transgressing normality. Joe, unconvinced by Joshua’s explanation, continued to maintain that his behaviour makes his differences obvious to others and that this creates a barrier to being perceived as ‘normal’. He suggested that, although he is aware of the negative preconceptions others may hold about ASD, this is preferable to being considered *‘weird’.*

*Joe****:*** *you know don’t you that**it’s not well……cool but you have to not care. They’re going to know something’s up anyway if you act weird and stuff*

*(T 2 line 629-631)*

A view supported by Luke*:*

*Luke: But anyway if they know well what’s the fuss …better than being odd I think*

*(T2 line 659-660)*

*Jess: Well they sort of have to know in my school cos of the resource …….But well I wouldn’t tell anyone who didn’t know. I mean like when I go out or stuff like that. You know once when I was on the bus well my friend she told like err …everyone that I’d got this thing and it made me weird and do weird stuff and everything like and then she asked me to talk about my things and then they laughed at my voice I think it was but I don’t know why and so I don’t sit with her now but she’s well still my friend but I well …she doesn’t talk to me anymore she just laughs when I see her and talks to this other girl.*

*(T 2 line 645-655)*

For Jess her placement in the IR has denied her the choice of whether to disclose her diagnosis to others in school and she appeared to accept the inevitability of this. However, it could be inferred from her narrative that she would prefer not to disclose to peers, due to the impact of this on their attitude towards her. Throughout her account Jess has implied an aspiration to be perceived and treated in the same way as others and it appeared here that, when others become aware of her ASD, this creates a barrier to her social inclusion. Also implicit here is the question of pupils’ need to feel able to trust others with the knowledge of their diagnosis.

This following succinct quote from Luke embodies the sense of isolation experienced, not only through being different, but by others being aware of his differences.

*Luke: It’s just not being on your own that’s important and if they know about the autism then sometimes you are.*

*(T1 line 662-663)*

**c) Acceptance and understanding**

Linked closely with the theme of disclosure to others is the pupils’ perception of how others’ view and attempt to understand them and their ASD. Here the understanding and acceptance they experience from their teachers is considered, as that of other pupils is reflected upon elsewhere. This emerged as a significant concern for most pupils prior to transition but became more prominent once at secondary school. A shift in focus as was also apparent, as following transition their comments became more focused on teachers’ understanding of ASD per se, whereas while at primary school pupils appeared to attach more importance to adults understanding them as individuals.

Pupils appeared to have experienced a general lack of knowledge about ASD amongst secondary school teaching staff, together with little appreciation of how their ASD affected them, or approaches that could help and support them. In the following exchange between Luke and Joe, and the additional comment made by Joshua, it is apparent that they perceived some teachers to have defined them through preconceived negative concepts of Asperger Syndrome, failing to understand that this is not normally associated with learning difficulties, and therefore limiting their expectations of pupils’ ability.

*Luke*: *It’s like sometimes they think because you’ve got, you know Aspergers, like you’ve got to be thick or a retard of some sort and so they put you in all the wrong sets…*

 *(T2 line130-132)*

*Joe: Yes well what I think is that with some of the good ones they sort of know their stuff like in lessons what to teach you and everything but no one tells them about Aspergers or anything like what you might do and not to send you out.*

*(T 2 line 143-146)*

*Joshua: Don’t they know that some of us know as much as they do. I tried telling that teacher but he made such a fuss so I don’t speak to him anymore. In fact I might change classes you see. I think that’s been a problem for me. You know …teachers and everything. I mean I know we’re Y7 but* ***we are not thick.*** *They just don’t get it*

*(T2 line 159-164)*

Luke attempted to rationalise and make sense of teachers’ attitudes towards him by attributing this to lack of understanding of his ASD. It seems that he perceived this to account for his placement in low achieving sets, prior to any assessment of his abilities, and he expressed frustration at this. It could be inferred that this apparently negative reaction of teachers to the label of Asperger Syndrome may lead pupils to develop a negative self-image, particularly in relation to their learning. Joshua demonstrated his resilience to this in his ability to sustain his positive view of his abilities. However, his relationship with his teacher appeared to be adversely affected by their seemingly negative views, as he had actively withdrawn from any association with them.

More positively Sam and Joe described the reassurance they experienced when form tutors understood their ASD and were willing to listen to their worries and anxieties. As is frequently apparent throughout his account, Sam’s opinion was closely influenced by his mother’s views and his feeling of reassurance was heightened by an awareness of her approval of his form tutor.

*Sam: My form teacher is alright I think as well. My mum says he knows things about autism cos she’s told him. I think she likes him so that’s good as well. He says I can go to him if anything worries me in school and he keeps checking up on me …stress and everything you see. (T2 line 249-253)*

*Joe:**my form tutor’s good and I like telling her things in tutor group lessons. She listens to me about stuff you know like the bus and everything.*

*(T2 line 238-240)*

Luke stressed the importance of being ‘liked’ by teachers, suggesting an awareness of their feelings and the impact of these on their motivation to understand him, both as an individual and also the way in which he is affected by his ASD. Although Luke recognised the advantages of being popular with his teachers he inferred that this requires effort on his part and this encourages reflection on the on-going challenges pupils with ASD face in all aspects of the school day, as little comes easily to them.

*Luke: Yeah. Like if you try your hardest they will like you. Think so. It’s best if they like you that’s why I couldn’t do what Joshua does you know telling them what he thinks and all. You want them to like you then it’s better. They might try to ‘get you’ then*

*(T2 line 280-283)*

**5.4.5 RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS**

The final superordinate themedraws together emerging themes relating to pupils’ relationships with their mainstream peers, as this aspect of school life presented as significant in the accounts of all participants. Pupils’ experience of developing peer relationships is explored, together with the importance they attach to this and their differing understanding of the concept of friendship. The more negative aspect of peer relationships is considered through pupils’ accounts of their fear and experience of bullying.

**a) The importance of friendship**

Most participantsregarded developing friendships with other pupils, particularly on moving to their new school, to be positive and desirable. In the following extracts, before their transition to secondary school, pupils suggested some of the advantages they perceive in having friends.

*Joe: Mates……that’s what would be good. Mates go out with you like to town and stuff on the tram so you can go on your own and not with your mum. And they stand at the bus stop with you and laugh and stuff. That’s what happens at big school you get some mates and they come round your house but you don’t play out. That’s what my brother does.*

*Luke: Well I’m not that bothered really but if it would get you to go out on your own that would be good like grown up and you could go where you wanted like to the pictures and stuff*

*(T1 line 347-354)*

*Joe: Having friends to go out with and hang around with like at playtime or go out at lunch time. Oh yeah I know .. like on the bus with you talking about well…. whatever really instead of laughing at you with everyone else. They did on the visit we did and it wasn’t good ..believe me.*

*(T1 line 4-8)*

Here the boys presented a somewhat idealistic view of friendship, which is suggestive of observation of others rather than their own experience. They seemed to associate having a friendship group with an emerging level of autonomy and freedom to access activities independently. There appeared to be an assumption in Joe’s account that relationships with others would develop more easily at secondary school, and he showed recognition of the change in nature of friendship for older pupils. These extracts suggested that the boys viewed the advantages of friendship to be very practical in nature, as they make no reference to any emotional or reciprocal aspects of the relationships. I reflected that this may be due to gender specific attitudes rather than necessarily ASD related.

In his account Joe alluded to his previous difficult experiences of peer relationships and suggested that having a friend would help prevent negative behaviour from others. In the exchange below the perceived link between having a supportive peer group and becoming less vulnerable to bullying from others is more explicit, as Sam seemed to regard this as an unequivocal fact. He rationalised the lack of support he has received from his peers in the past by identifying them to be not *‘proper’* friends. This experience appeared to have impacted on his ability to trust others, and lead him to question whether friends would choose to support him in the future.

*Sam: Friends stop you getting bullied I would think they would like well protect you and tell for you.*

*(T1 line 20-21)*

*Luke: They get you most when you’re on your own don’t they Sam. Well I’ve never been got but that’s what people tell you. Don’t be on your own ….like on the way home and everything. So if you had some real good friends they would stick up for you if anyone tried it on I think.*

*Sam: Yeah….. you’re right but would they run away or would they be on the bully side. You don’t know do you. Not sure really cos well it’s never worked before but then I suppose like my friends before weren’t that proper …just who I sat with, not like out in the playground.*

*(T1 line 342-349)*

Powerful features of this extract include the reciprocal nature of the interaction between Sam and Luke, together with Luke’s apparent empathy with Sam’s fears to the extent that he offers him very considered advice.

The pupils’ evident eagerness to form friendships, together with the advantages they recognised in having positive relationships with their peers, led them to express anxiety over their ability to make friends, as they recognised that features of their ASD were potential barriers to this. In adopting her familiar largely confident and reassuring role within the group Jess attempted to calm the anxieties of others. She again stressed her need to be seen as *‘like everyone else’* suggests that in having friends her differences will be less obvious.

*Jess: Well I’m not going to school, my err new one with any of my friends so I’ll have to get new ones I suppose. I mean like you need to get some friends like right away so they can go round with you and be like everyone else. [ ] I don’t think you need to worry about it at all I mean there’ll be lots to choose from*

*Luke: Yeah Jess but what if like no one likes you*

*Joe: Yeah and if they like you know .. think you’re too weird to be friends with and so on. I mean I haven’t really got any proper friends at my school and they’ve known me for well you know for ever and they just keep out of my way cos of my stuff you see*

*(T1 line 309-319)*

*Jess: Some friends might not mind I think. I mean I’m your friend now, well we all are and we don’t care if you fiddle and like have weird teeth and everything we just are friends so you should just try anyway.*

*(T1 line 330-332)*

Although earlier Joe appeared to assume that friendships would come more easily to him at his new school, here he began to reflect on this and develop a less positive view based on his previous experiences. Notably he tried to understand his lack of success in relationships as due to his personal differences rather than to any failure in understanding and acceptance from others. Jess’ understanding of friendships can be questioned in the light of her initial response, as she appeared to objectify friendships, viewing them as something that can easily be acquired without acknowledging the complexity and reciprocity involved in developing friendships with others. In the statement Jess also demonstrated some insight and empathy into the feelings of others in understanding that Joe may be worried about his personal appearance. An unconditional acceptance of difference amongst the pupils in the group was also clearly evident in Jess’ response.

Discussions during the post transition focus groups suggested that pupils became more interested in, and aware of, friendships following transition to secondary school, but for some their experiences in their new school were less than positive.

*Joshua: When I started this school. I thought well …this will be the time to make some friends but what you find is they don’t like the same things so then you try to like say football or something but they get it right away that you don’t know anything about it and they err. … they don’t like say playing Transformers and Dr Who so you don’t have stuff to do together and in the end you just get left on your own anyway so what’s the point I say*

*Luke: Yeah that’s right you need to say .. find the right people but they don’t seem to be around.*

*(T1 line 358-366)*

Although he frequently presented himself within the group as aloof and self-confident, here Joshua exposed a degree of vulnerability in his desire for friendship with others. He alluded to his past difficulties with friendships and regarded his move to secondary school as an opportunity to address this. His eagerness was reflected in his attempts to share the interests of other pupils but he was intuitively aware that his lack of knowledge would be evident to them. Joshua appeared hesitant to divulge his own particular interests to the group, possibly regarding them as inappropriate to the image he presents of himself to others. His negative experiences appeared to have reinforced his sense of social isolation. Luke confirmed Joshua’s perceptions and suggested that the secondary school may not provide sufficient opportunity for the development of friendships for pupils with ASD, as their difficulties and differences may be accentuated in this environment.

The view that friendships become more important and significant for pupils once they start secondary school is reinforced by the comments of Jess who, in contrast to the accounts of other pupils above, appeared in her view to have experienced significant success in her peer group relationships. In fact her first comments on joining the post-transition group related to friendships and she felt that for her it was most positive feature of secondary school so far:

*Jess: Well I’ve made lots of new friends which is cool. Some are in the IR bit and some in my form as well. And well it’s good cos you have well you know people to hang around with at break and everything and well the ones not in the IR they don’t seem to mind if you are.*

*(T2 line 6-10)*

The eagerness with which Jess described her success with new friendships*,* led me again to question her understanding of the reciprocity of relationships. She described having new friends as *‘cool’*, indicating that this is viewed as positive within her peer group and fitting within a social norm, to which she aspires. Her description also highlights the distinction that seemed to exist in her school between IR pupils and those in the mainstream and implies that, although Jess was aware of her differences, she perceived herself to be accepted by her mainstream peers.

**b) Fear and experience of bullying**

The negative aspect of peer relationships, that of bullying and the fear of bullying, emerged as a key concern for pupils both before and following transition, whether or not they had experienced this personally. Prior to moving to secondary school only one pupil described experiences of physical bullying and one had experienced name calling. However all pupils highlighted a fear of bullying, or rumours of bullying, at secondary school as one of their main anxieties about their transition and as a major cause of dissatisfaction with their new school.

For one pupil his previous experience and subsequent fear of bullying dominated his account and appeared to overshadow his perceptions of all aspects of school life.

*Sam: You know it’s my biggest worry… my mums and mine… don’t you. You know I had to leave my last school cos of it don’t you. Only that wasn’t just the bullies it was the teachers as well cos….. you know they didn’t believe me and then when they did they didn’t do anything about it. And then they chased me and I ran away and ….out of school and everything like at the end of the day…and … well my mum got cross cos I was well… so scared. So I didn’t go back again. It all blew up really.*

*(T1 line 602-610)*

Although Sam described one particular instance of bullying here, he implied that this was a culmination of incidents he had experienced over time. He presented a vivid sense of the mounting fear he suffered, causing him to run almost blindly from school, unaware of any dangers. The nature of his experience, and the intensity of emotion it provoked for him, appeared to have led to an on-going sense of panic about the possibility of bullying in school and the surfacing of repeated memories of bullying incidents. It is also evident that the impact of his experience diminished his confidence in his relationships with his peers and with adults in school. His account suggested that he was no longer confident that adults would trust his views or act upon them to protect him in the future.

*Jess: What did they do to you…. hit you and things or just names*

*Joe: Names are just as bad Jess …. They can hurt you just tormenting you know.*

*(T1 line 611-613)*

Jess’ response suggested some discrepancy in the understanding of bullying amongst pupils, as she appears to perceive verbal bullying to be less significant than more physical incidents, whilst Joe recognised the potential impact of both.

Below Sam continues his account:

*Sam: Well they took my bag …with all my PE stuff and they hid it and I couldn’t do PE and then they threw it back at me at the afternoon in the cloakroom and laughed at me and then they said I couldn’t do PE anyway cos I was too fat and they wouldn’t want a fat kid in their …team so I might as well not do it. Then one of them poked me …you know .. like…here and then he kicked me as well so that’s when I ran away I think anyway. But that was one of the worst times anyway.*

*(T1line 614-620)*

Sam’s account served to illustrate that, although lack of social understanding or unusual or unconventional behaviours can cause children with ASD to be susceptible to bullying behaviour from others, their physical skills can also cause them to be vulnerable. From his narrative it was apparent that many aspects of Sam’s self-identity have been influenced by the comments and behaviour of others. This has also contributed to his lack of confidence in lessons and other social situations, exacerbating his anxieties and further decreasing his opportunities to develop relationships with his peers. As he suggested earlier, Sam recognised that a supportive friendship group could protect him from incidents of bullying. This caused me to reflect on the potentially negative cycle in which pupils can become entrapped in which a lack of friends increases vulnerability to bullying, in turn impacting on confidence and engagement in social situations which then limits their opportunity to form and sustain positive peer relationships.

As he recognised himself, it is perhaps unsurprising that Sam’s vulnerability to bullying by others continued into secondary school, although the nature of this changed. Here he alluded to the differing challenges pupils face in their social relationships as they approach adolescence. For pupils with the social differences associated with ASD the subtleties of changing social rules and expectations present an increasing challenge as they attempt to make sense of the complexities of the social world of their peer group. Their failure to negotiate and understand this continually shifting social environment potentially increases their vulnerability to bullying from their mainstream peers.

*Sam: Well…. No surprise really but it’s the bullying again. Not the same people cos one of the real problem bullies from the other school he sticks up for me now. Girls – they’re the problem now and that surprises me a bit really. That’s a new thing and they can be really nasty. You know like they pretend to be your friend and that’s good cos well .. you want to have friends and girls well that’s different you know cos of fancying and girlfriends and everything. Then they change and pick on you but not like when anyone can see or do anything and it really upsets you cos they all….*

*(T2 line 295-303)*

It is evident that bullying, particularly for children with additional needs, is a major concern in schools, as evidenced within the accounts of pupils here. However it was apparent that rumour and myths surrounding bullying at secondary school had also influenced the of pupils’ perceptions. It could be assumed, due to the nature of their differences, that the children here would not be fully attuned to the social discussions on secondary school taking place amongst their peer group. However it was evident that they had been aware of discussions and suggestions from other pupils, or possibly adults and older pupils, and incorporated this information into their preconceptions regarding secondary school.

*Jess: I think it might be worse at big school. Don’t want to worry you or anything Sam but well they tell you things don’t they like about what happens. On the bus seems to be the worst from what I’ve heard anyway so I’m going in the car I think*

*Luke; Lucky you then. I’ve heard that its break times when they don’t have like teachers in the playground like they do now so no one is looking out for you. Or like dinner ladies at dinner time. Then I think you would need somewhere to go to be safe. Especially from the bigger kids. They will pick on us I know… I just know it.*

*(T 1 line 628-636)*

As pupils disclosed their anxieties and experiences of bullying behaviour, in common with several of the worries and concerns discussed in the focus groups, the pupils themselves attempted to offer advice and reassurance to each other.

*Luke: Don’t you think they want to annoy you though? [ ] At school you just need to keep out of the way when it happens to you I don’t think you’ll ever.. well …like stop them.*

*(T2 line 312-318)*

*Joshua: Don’t let it worry you or get to you. Just ignore them I say.[…] If you get upset it makes them worse. It’s just about being different from them. They don’t seem to like it but why would you want to be like them…..that’s what my dad says anyway and that sort of …..gets me through it you could say.*

*(T1 line 621-627)*

Both Luke and Joshua appeared resigned to the fact that other pupils may behave negatively towards them. Joshua had clearly attempted to make sense of their attitude by relating this to his own perception of his differences and his understanding that, to others, difference is often unacceptable. In the above extract from Joshua he revealed the apparent contradictions in his approach to his ASD, and the attitude of others around him, by revealing a vulnerability in his need for a means to ‘get him through’ school, whilst maintaining his sense of equality with others.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Here the narratives of pupils participating in the study have been analysed, interpreted and subsequently presented within interconnecting superordinate and emerging themes to form a representation of the experiences and perceptions of the group on their transition from primary to secondary school. Each theme has been illustrated by extracts from the narrative accounts of pupils. In acknowledging the idiographic commitment of IPA I have also sought to represent the individual accounts and experiences of pupils and the way in which they have attempted to interpret and make sense of these in the context of the focus group environment. The role of other pupils in enabling, prompting and encouraging contributions from pupils, particularly those more reticent, has been evident and arguably often powerful. In view of this I have sought to preserve elements of the interaction between pupils within the extracts presented.

**CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I consider the outcomes, implications and limitations of the research. Firstly the themes emerging from the analysis and interpretation of pupil’s experiences of transition to secondary school are considered in light of their relevance to the research questions and with reference to key points from the literature review. Issues relating to my choice of methodological stance are then reviewed, including reflection on the suitability and limitations of the chosen mixed methods approach, combining the use of IPA with focus groups. I move on to reflect upon the potential challenges that the outcomes of the research present to the prevailing professional discourse around ASD, and transition to secondary school for those with ASD, in addition to possible implications these hold for future practice and to my personal conceptualisation of ASD. In conclusion the limitations of the research are discussed, together with possible implications for future research studies.

In light of the increasing number of pupils with ASD included in mainstream schools, this study sought to address the apparently limited amount of available research focusing specifically on the personal experience of transition from mainstream primary to mainstream secondary school for this group of pupils. The research aimed to capture the perceptions and experiences of a small group of pupils during the period of transition, including their concerns, hopes and expectations prior to the move and their experience of their first term at their new school. The implications of their views and experiences for future professional practice were then to be considered. The research is set within the wider context of inclusion into mainstream school for children with ASD and considers the barriers which remain, as experienced from the personal perspectives of the pupils.

6.2 EMERGING THEMES IN RELATION TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed to explore the following research questions:

**What are the experiences of children diagnosed as having autism spectrum disorder during their transition to secondary school?**

**How can these experiences be used to inform professional knowledge and practice?**

My interpretation of the experiences and perceptions described by pupils illuminated a range of themes. It was evident that some themes, including those relating to their personal experience and understanding of autism and relationships with their peers, pervaded pupils’ experience of school, emerging both before and after transition. Other themes regarding their hopes, expectations and concerns prior to transition, and experiences of support provided once at secondary school, emerged in context and it was possible to consider whether the experience of secondary school fulfilled the preconceptions of anxiety or hopeful expectation expressed by pupils before their move.

6.2.1 ANXIETY

Existing literature suggests that children and adolescents with ASD are more likely to experience high levels of anxiety than typically developing young people (Attwood 2007, Moore 2007), a perception supported by the personal accounts of those with ASD ( Jackson 2002, Lawson 2001, Grandin 2011). In addition, literature exploring the experience of secondary school for pupils with ASD (Humphrey and Lewis 2008) generally constructs the mainstream secondary school environment as largely incompatible with their needs and likely to contribute to their levels of anxiety. As would therefore be predicted, anxiety emerged as a key theme within the accounts of all pupils throughout the period of transition. For some this presented as a more pervasive experience than for others and the apparent underlying sources of anxiety varied between individual pupils.

The factors which emerged from my interpretation of pupils’ accounts as contributing to their anxiety were drawn together within the following themes:

**a) Social challenges**

Research literature suggests that the anxieties experienced by children with ASD are often linked to their difficulties with social reasoning and social naivety (Attwood 2007, Humphrey and Lewis 2008) and this was reflected in the views of the pupils here. The move to secondary school presents all children with a wide range of unfamiliar social experiences to understand and navigate. Ashton (2008) found that small trivial details concerning the negotiation of social situations at secondary school dominated the conversations of Year 6 children, regardless of attainments or abilities. Similarly pupils here focused on the detail of situations, such as the school dining room, but I would hesitate to describe these as ‘trivial’, as for the pupils they were of obvious importance. It could also be suggested that, for some participants, anxieties regarding how to behave in social situations, mirrored those that would be expected of many children in an unfamiliar setting, and in fact demonstrated a social and self-awareness in needing to be perceived by others as conforming to social expectations, which could be viewed as contradicting the accepted view of those with ASD.

For some pupils these worries receded following transition and were not mentioned again. However for others their anticipated anxieties surrounding particular social situations appeared to be confirmed by their experiences at secondary school. The social vulnerability and naivety of pupils with ASD was very evident in situations demanding cooperation and group work, such as PE lessons. Here pupils provided insight into additional factors relating to their autism, including sensory issues and poor motor co-ordination, which also contributed to their intense anxiety and increasing awareness of their differences.

The feelings and experiences described by the participants suggested that the social demands of school cause significant anxiety for pupils diagnosed as having ASD. However, it could be argued that, for some pupils, these anxieties differ in intensity rather than in nature from those experienced by children without ASD. For some their anxiety seemed to relate, not exclusively to negotiating social situations, but also to the reaction of others to their behaviour. Some pupils demonstrated an unexpected self-awareness of their difficulties and differences, prompting reflection on the impact of their experiences on their social confidence and the possibility that they may become avoidant of social situations due to their perceived lack of success.

**b) The school environment**

*Practical challenges*

In common with most other transition studies (Ashton 2008, Dann 2011) pupils expressed a range of worries relating to the more practical and environmental aspects of secondary school, including navigating a large new school building and following complicated timetables. Some pupils demonstrated an unexpected insight into the fact that these are concerns that affect all pupils, not just those with ASD, suggesting that although they viewed themselves as different from other pupils they also recognised their similarities. Although these anxieties were obviously at the forefront of the pupils’ minds before transition, they were not mentioned in post transition discussions, suggesting either that these worries were largely unfounded, or successfully addressed, or that they were surpassed in significance by other concerns.

*Sensory challenges*

Although the experiences and anxieties outlined so far could arguably resonate with all children, I would propose that issues relating to sensory sensitivities and experiences are particularly pertinent for children diagnosed as having ASD. There has been an increasing professional awareness, based largely on autobiographical accounts of autistic individuals, of the impact of differences in their sensory processing (Bogdashina 2003, Moore 2007, Grandin 2011). Specific research relating to sensory issues (Leekham et al 2007) has indicated that children with high functioning autism have a high incidence of sensory processing differences, a significant finding relating to pupils taking part in this study.

Some pupils vividly described their sensory sensitivities and at times, sensory overload, as a source of anxiety. For some the intensity of their sensory experiences, often in routine situations such as moving around school, conveyed a sense of overwhelming anxiety. Their accounts suggested that sensory overload, or the anticipation of adverse sensory experiences, presented as a significant barrier to their engagement with lessons and other aspects of school life, such as the dining hall. I reflected that a further source of stress for some pupils lay in their awareness of the socially or behaviourally inappropriate response they may have to sensory over-stimulation and their efforts to control their reaction to distress.

In the light of these sensory sensitivities it emerged that, in concurrence with the views of Humphrey and Lewis (2008), the noisy, busy and often chaotic environment which pupils encounter on transition to secondary school setting can contribute very significantly to their stress and anxiety. Although it has been suggested that we should be cautious about interpreting behaviour to be a result of sensory differences without taking other factors into account (Menzinger and Jackson 2009), the narratives of pupils here appeared to confirm a clear link between sensory overload and behaviour, which if misinterpreted by teachers forms a further barrier to their learning, as it potentially leads to exclusion from lessons.

*Behaviour of other pupils*

An arguably less expected source of anxiety highlighted by pupils here was the negative behaviour of other pupils, particularly once at secondary school. References to behaviour of other children linked to the formation of social relationships, or to attitudes to ASD, can be found within the literature (Jones and Frederickson 2010, Locke 2010), but there is little which focuses on the impact of the general classroom behaviour of other pupils on the stress and anxiety experienced by children with ASD. When listening to pupils accounts I considered their views in the context of my professional experience that children with ASD are, at times, placed in lower achieving class groups on transfer to secondary school, as their abilities are not always evident or recognised. As these often tend to be classes where there is the potential for lack of engagement with learning, or disruption due to inappropriate behaviour, this suggests that pupils with ASD are increasingly likely to be exposed to this source of anxiety. This was clearly evident in the experiences of pupils here and gains some support in the anecdotal evidence provided by those with ASD (Simpson 2010). It is accepted that children with ASD have a preference for rules, structure and predictability, together with a strong sense of justice (Attwood 2007) and pupils here expressed their need to follow classroom rules and their mounting anxiety when they anticipated that other pupils would fail to do so.

Pupils also described anxieties relating to the impact of their peers’ behaviour on the attitude of class teachers, the possibility of being viewed as associated with others who were misbehaving, and the perceived injustice of whole class sanctions. I was also aware of tensions for pupils in managing their response to the disruptive behaviour of others, varying from controlling an impulse to intervene personally to correct, or to become actively involved in order to be socially accepted by their peers. These worries appeared to affect their concentration, forming a significant barrier to their learning. In addition, noise and disruption caused by other pupils impacted on the sensory and attention difficulties of some pupils, again preventing their full engagement with learning, as suggested by Humphrey (2006). Unsurprisingly, in view of these concerns, pupils expressed a feeling of reassurance and security when placed in classes taught by teachers who were able to effectively manage classroom behaviour.

*Feeling safe*

In concurrence with the views of pupils with ASD in studies relating to their experience of secondary school (Tobias 2009), pupils here expressed anxiety over the availability of a quiet space in school to offer a safe refuge from the hectic environment and increasing social demands of secondary school. This was regarded as a major factor in the support provided by secondary schools, and was recognised by some as an improvement on the smaller primary school environment, where a supportive ‘safe haven’ was not always available for pupils. Interestingly pupils also valued the presence of understanding and consistent adults at such times suggesting that they did not always seek social isolation. When available, pupils described this space as providing a sense of security enabling them to manage the school day, and their own emotions, more successfully. Evidence of this provision in secondary schools supports the view that some schools are modifying their environment in order to give pupils with ASD a more positive experience of education (Humphrey and Lewis 2008)

**c) Teaching and** **learning**

Wainscott et al (2008) suggest that most children with high functioning ASD cope with academic demands of school, but not the social demands, and Ashton (2008) found that the social and environmental aspects of their new school were uppermost in pupils’ thoughts prior to transition to secondary school rather than academic work. In comparison here, all pupils described anxieties about the learning expectations at secondary school, with most concerned that lessons would be too difficult for them and that the pace of teaching would not take account of their understanding or specific areas of learning difficulty. This demonstrated an arguably unexpected awareness on the part of pupils of their learning differences, leading me to reflect upon and question the impact of this on their self-esteem and motivation as learners and whether they had felt able to communicate their views to adults at primary school.

Following transition, some graphically described their increasing anxiety caused by an overwhelming sense of confusion in lessons compounded by their inability, or at times reluctance, to convey this to teachers. Some pupils inferred that to ask for support, or additional explanations, in class would further emphasise their differences within their peer group. In contrast, for others the stress they described related strongly to disappointment and frustration, when lessons did not live up to their expectations in terms of novelty and challenge, and teachers appeared not to recognise and acknowledge their potentially positive difference from other pupils in terms of their specific abilities. Some pupils perceived this to reflect the teacher’s negative view of the learning ability of those with ASD, which I sensed could potentially impact on their perception of themselves as learners. However, within the literature on secondary transition it is suggested that secondary school teachers tend to underestimate the academic capabilities of *all* pupils as they move into Year 7 (Evangelou 2006), indicating that this is not a reflection of teacher misconceptions relating specifically to the ASD.

The anxieties and concerns that pupils raised over teaching and learning at secondary school may suggest a failure on the part of some teachers to recognise the learning and educational implications of ASD (Powell and Jordan 2012) and also a lack of awareness of the individual pupils’ learning strengths and weaknesses. As suggested previously, as themes emerged from the data it became clear that these were very closely interwoven and here clear links are evident between the themes of ‘Anxiety’, ‘Understanding and Acceptance’ and ‘Identity and difference’.

**d) Change and loss**

Within the literature concerning transition from primary to secondary school the theme of loss is frequently raised (Jindal- Snape 2008, Ashton 2008) and loss can be seen as integral to the process of change (Lucey and Reay 2000). It would be reasonable to hypothesise, given the accepted view of ASD as involving inflexibility of behaviour and resistance to change, that the children in this study would voice more intense anxieties than typically developing pupils about change to preferred routines or familiar environments. When interpreting pupils perceptions of the changes involved in secondary school transition it was necessary to bracket my own preconceptions regarding the impact of the enormity of this change, as the views pupils expressed served to significantly challenge these. Here pupils’ worries centred largely on the loss of familiar adults, a view which mirrors that found by Ashton (2008) when discussing transition with children without additional educational needs, and can be seen as suggesting an attachment to social relationships seemingly at odds with the accepted social impairment of ASD.

In addition, in contrast to the work of Dann (2011), who found that some pupils with ASD made reference to missing primary school following their move to secondary school, pupils here expressed little regret at leaving behind their primary school, either before or once established in their new school. When reflecting on this unexpected outcome I would suggest that this could allude to the overall quality of their experiences at primary school, a measure of the relative positive nature of their secondary school experience to date, or a reflection on the tendency for those with ASD to live in the ‘here and now’ (Grandin 2011).

It is clear from the above discussion that, as could be predicted given the high levels of anxiety associated with ASD, this emerged as a key theme within the experience of all pupils in this study for a variety of underlying reasons, some more predictable than others. However, with perhaps the notable exception of the impact of sensory differences, it could be questioned to what degree the anxieties expressed by children here differ from those experienced by children not having ASD. In addition it can be questioned whether a certain level of anxiety should be regarded as an inevitable part of the transition process and, as adults, should we allow children to experience this (Lucey and Reay 2000) and support them in managing it in preparation for other transitions they will experience in the future.

6.2.2 HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS

Amidst the largely negative discourse around transition presented thus far, the narratives of some pupils here offered more positive views of their forthcoming move to secondary school. Although most available research studies relating to secondary school transition emphasise the challenges and anxieties experienced by pupils, particularly by children with ASD (Jindal-Snape et al 2006), there is some reference in the literature to the ‘*excited anticipation’* experienced by children during this phase (Lucey and Raey 2000 p. 192), a view supported by Zeedyk et al. (2003), who reported that transition leads to anxiety but, children also positively anticipate the new opportunities it presents.

**a) Opportunity**

Following their initial visits to new schools most pupils described their excitement at the new opportunities presented to them. Although this has been identified by other researchers working with children preparing for transition to secondary school (Ashton 2008), I would argue that it was a more significant factor here for the children with ASD, as many of the opportunities anticipated related to their special interests, including science or IT lessons and resources, therefore heightening their enthusiasm and excitement.

Other pupils viewed the move to secondary school as an opportunity for freedom from the intense adult supervision they had grown used to and described the potential for anonymity within a larger school setting. The chance to experience a degree of independence and increased responsibility, although tinged with anxiety for most, was also mentioned in terms of travelling to school independently, again resonating with the concept of transition as linked to the development of autonomy and independence as suggested by Lucey and Reay (2000).

**b) A fresh start**

When discussing transition to secondary school with parents, carers and teachers I am aware of a frequent perception that enabling pupils to maintain their existing peer friendships will support their transfer to secondary school, a view that is upheld in literature concerning successful transitions (Evangelou 2006). In contrast here, most pupils appeared to view the move to secondary school as an opportunity to forge new friendships and to leave behind those peers who held negative views about them, most often relating to their ASD. This suggested an awareness of their failure to form successful peer relationships whilst at primary school and it was interesting to observe that no pupils referred to regrets at leaving, or hopes of maintaining, current friendships. It was difficult to separate this emerging theme from those of ‘Relationships with peers’ and ‘Identity and difference’, as not only was the possibility of new friendships raised but also the hope that moving to a new school would provide a fresh start away from the experience of bullying and from their perceived identity, not only of ‘autistic’ but also of ‘victim of bullying’. In contrast to suggestions in the literature that children with ASD present as anxious about not knowing anyone at their new school (Maras and Aveling 2006), for some pupils here this appeared to be tempered by a prevailing sense of hope that relationships would be more positive at their new secondary school.

Also, in my experience, the prospect of pupils with ASD encountering unfamiliar adults at secondary school can be a source of anxiety for parents and other adults supporting them, as well as for the pupils themselves and this was true for some pupils here. However, diverging views were expressed in this study, as for some children the prospect of moving away from adults in school who know them well is presented in a positive light and as a step towards independence. One pupil described the apparent tension she faced in recognising the advantages of being in a small school, where she is known to all of the teachers, whilst also realising her developing need for independence from adult attention and supervision and therefore welcoming a fresh start amongst adults who did not identify her solely by her needs. This resonates with the view expressed by Lucey and Reay (2000) who suggest that transition presents the child with a dilemma which is central to the process of growing up, in that in order to gain a level of freedom and autonomy from adult regulation there is a need to relinquish some adult protection. Another pupil looked forward to making a fresh start away from a teacher who appeared to dislike him. He hoped to make a better impression with new teachers, unexpectedly revealing an understanding of the feelings of others and a desire for the approval of adults.

**c) Realisation of hopes**

When analysing and interpreting the narratives of pupils it was possible to detect some divergence in their views as to whether their hopes and expectations had been met by their experiences of secondary school. Whilst some pupils were positive about the new learning opportunities at their new school, for others the excitement and optimism generated by pre-transition visits, was largely unfounded. The reality of lessons, particularly science, which for some was linked to their areas of special interest (Atwood 2007), did not match the opportunities they anticipated and provoking a sense of disappointment and frustration, which appeared to overshadow some of their positive experiences. Ashton (2008) describes similar findings, stating that *‘it is all too common to hear students talking enthusiastically about their exciting induction day, only to find on arrival that lessons are rarely like that’.* (p.180). Ashton also suggests that, if pupils’ expectations are not met, their disappointment can lead to disaffection with school, a situation which was apparent for some pupils here after only a short time in school. I sensed a possibility of missed opportunity on the part of teachers to recognise and harness the strengths and interests of pupils with AS in order to maximise their engagement with learning, as suggested by writers such as Maloney (2010) and Grandin (2011), or to enhance peer group perceptions of them.

However when seen in the context of earlier accounts of pupils’ confusion in secondary school lessons it must be acknowledged that tensions and contradictions exist between pupils’ desire to move on and be challenged in terms of their learning, whilst retaining the reassurance of a familiar approach to teaching. This further emphasises the value of accurate teacher knowledge of individual pupils at an early stage of transition, including their relative strengths and weaknesses in terms of learning, and the willingness and capacity of teachers to adapt their approach to take account of these.

On a more positive note, some of the hopes pupils expressed regarding increased independence from adult supervision were in some part realised, particularly relating to less structured times of the school day, with most appreciating the opportunity to be allowed to be alone, if they chose, and to follow their own agenda. This led me to reflect upon the often intense support schools offer to, or maybe inflict upon, children with ASD in school, particularly during breaks from lessons when they are sometimes perceived to be at their most socially vulnerable. It can be questioned as to whether, as professionals, we always specifically consult with pupils themselves over what they would prefer and, within reason, adapt our provision in the light of this rather than adopting a fixed approach based on their diagnosis.

In describing their hopes and expectations the pupils here presented a challenge to accepted, often largely negative, views of transition most usually held by parents and other adults. Pupils appeared to view some aspects of transition from a more optimistic perspective, interpretingwhat are often raised as concerns as opportunities.

6.2.3 IMPACT OF SUPPORT

A key theme in the discussions emerging between pupils following their transition to secondary school related to the support they had received during the transition period and during their first term, the impact of this on their experience of school and their inclusion within their peer group, and generally how effective they had perceived this to be. Throughout their narratives a sense of pupils attempting to rationalise and make sense of the support offered to them by schools emerged.

**a) Preparation**

As an educational psychologist I am aware that, as a profession, when working with pupils with ASD we often make reference to their need for a carefully planned transition from primary to secondary school. The views and experiences described by pupils here led me to question whether we always give enough consideration to what this involves for individual pupils and who do we consult as the ‘expert’ on this matter.

As awareness of the significance of transition to secondary school has increased over recent years, most schools now adopt structured transition programmes to enable pupils, particularly those considered to have additional needs, to cope with the move. Research literature suggests a positive association between transition interventions and adjustment to a new school (Maras and Aveling 2006, Tobias 2009). As part of this preparation many schools, as evidenced by the pupils here, utilise widely available workbooks to encourage pupils to collect relevant information about their new school and to help them to provide information about themselves to their new teachers. Despite the proliferation of such interventions (Al-Ghani et al 2009, Greater Merseyside Regional partnership 2003) the pupils in this study suggested that they regarded them as an enjoyable exercise, but no substitute for experiencing their new school in person. They also attempted to make sense of teachers’ lack of understanding of their individual needs by presuming that they had not read information they had provided for them prior to transition.

However for some pupils’ accounts of their experiences of pre-transition visits to secondary schools suggested that these did little to allay their fears and anxieties. In fact for many they served to confirm, or even intensify and escalate, their apprehension by exposing them to the reality of the noisy, and seemingly chaotic, secondary school environment or to experiences they had not previously considered such as PE lessons, exemplified by comments such as *‘I think I saw the worst bits’.* As mentioned earlier thehopes and expectations that pupils took from these visits were not always realised, leading to a sense of disappointment and frustration with the reality of school following their transition. In light of this one pupil appearedunexpectedly perceptive, if not somewhat cynical, in believing that schools had deliberately presented themselves favourably to new pupils in order to ‘*sell it to them’*.

The common practice for children with additional needs, who adults expect will find the transition process more challenging, is for them to visit their new school several times prior to their move. As professionals we presume this to be beneficial in familiarising pupils with their new school environment and with teaching staff. Support for this is widely present in research literature (Ashton 2008, Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008). However, some pupils here suggested that this exposed them to increased anxiety and also reinforced their concept of being different from their peers. This raises the *‘dilemma of difference’* regarded as a central tension within special education (Cigman 2007) in that we can treat all children the same in this situation, neglecting individual needs and differences, or we can offer additional support thereby emphasising their differences in a potentially negative way.

**b) Support for learning**

Pupils in the study described having varying levels of teaching assistant (TA) support in lessons following their move to secondary school and this appeared to influence their experience of school. Whilst some acknowledged this as valuable from a practical viewpoint in terms of understanding the content of lessons, teacher instructions and expectations for homework, it was sometimes perceived as a barrier to both social interaction with peers and to engagement with subject teachers. Jordan (2008) draws attention to this issue and suggests that often the support provided to enable inclusion of children with ASD can serve to make the child more isolated from their peers, as support assistants are rarely given training to help children develop more positive relationships with others. Humphrey and Lewis (2008) make reference to the *‘visibility’* (p 12) of additional support and the impact of this on peer perception of pupils with ASD, as it serves to highlight the notion of pupils’ difference. These more negative views appeared to gain support from the experiences of pupils in the current study. In addition, the presence of direct TA support in class was described as both a physical and social barrier to interaction with peers, as pupils felt excluded from any informal chat or social opportunities while closely supported by an adult.

When given TA support in class, pupils also perceived this to influence their relationship with class teachers and to isolate them within the class. I would argue that these views support the findings of Humphrey and Lewis (2008), who suggest that the provision of support staff impacts on the nature of teachers’ approaches to children with autism. Eman and Farrel (2009) found that the presence of a teaching assistant may impact on the class teacher’s perception of their own role, allowing them to abdicate responsibility for teaching the pupil, as they come to regard the TA as having the expertise, both in terms of knowledge of ASD and of the pupil themselves. This presents as a potential vicious circle in which decreased interaction leads to decreased confidence, which in turn further restricts interaction and acceptance of responsibility.

In considering these findings relating to the impact of the role of the TA, both in the literature and within themes emerging in this study I reflected on my experience, when working with the autism outreach team in delivering training on ASD within this LA, on the profile of staff attending training provided. A high number of attendees on training courses are TAs and, particularly within secondary school settings, requests for staff training are frequently aimed at TAs rather than teaching staff. As the availability of training is thought to impact on teacher confidence in meeting the needs of pupils with ASD (Parsons et al 2011) it would appear that this is a balance which needs to be addressed.

**c) Pastoral Support**

It was clear from the experiences of the pupils that secondary school staff had sometimes been proactive in attempting to provide pastoral support interventions, although the pupils involved did not always view these as positive. Although the use of ‘buddy’ systems to support pupils socially during the first few weeks in their new school may be viewed as helpful by many children with ASD, here it was seen to impinge on their desire for social isolation or serve to reinforce their self-image as different from others and in need of additional support. As suggested by Wheeler (2011) in basing support on the ‘syndrome’ rather than the individual *‘in trying to support him teachers and professionals had in fact created more barriers’* (p 249). This again reinforces the importance of staff knowledge and understanding of individual pupils and also raises the question of whether, as professionals, we consult pupils on their views and preferences in terms of support or simply assume that they will accept these and see them as supportive.

The provision of individual mentors for pupils is suggested in the literature (Tobias 2009) as an effective intervention to support transition. Although this did not appear to be available to many of the pupils in the study, those who had contact with a key adult or adults in school, for example in the IR base, valued this as a source of advocacy in times of stress or anxiety. One pupil mentioned ‘social skills groups’ and attempted to rationalise his inclusion in this intervention. He questioned whether this was beneficial, perceptively recognising that other children involved were not able to act as role models. He also queried whether these were helpful, as in his view most other pupils don’t appear to follow social rules at secondary school so doing so would further emphasize his differences. Although this is an intervention so often recommended to support pupils with ASD in understanding the social expectations of school and the wider community, as professionals we should perhaps question whether they view these as effective and are we actually drawing attention to, rather than accepting, their difficulties and differences, as Jordan (2008) suggests, rather than focusing on allowing them to develop their talents.

6.2.4EXPERIENCE OF AUTISM

Although this could be viewed outside the direct remit of the research questions to be addressed by this study, the flexibility of IPA as a research stance allowed a clear theme to emerge relating to the way in which pupils understood and negotiated their differences relating to their diagnosis of ASD. I felt that it was appropriate to explore this aspect of pupils’ narratives, as their understanding of their ASD was an integral part of their lived experience, which forms the focus of IPA research. Also, as Humphrey and Lewis (2008) propose, the way in which pupils understand their ASD impacts on their sense-making of their educational experience and I would suggest it can therefore be viewed as a key influence on their successful transition and subsequent inclusion into mainstream secondary school.

**a) Identity and difference**

An unexpected outcome of the research study was the emerging sense of identity between the participants as a group of children with ASD, who accepted each other’s differences and difficulties with interest but almost without question or comment. In addition the development of relationships, and potential friendships, was evident. This could be seen to support the view expressed by Dann (2011) that pupils who have the same kinds and level of difficulty can be supported in developing reciprocal and mutual friendships. However the relationships between pupils in this study seemed to develop spontaneously, without the support or encouragement of adults, and appeared to be based on a shared understanding of the challenges they face. Macleod and Johnston (2005), in their description of a support group for individuals with Asperger Syndrome draw attention to the relief felt by an individual at meeting other people with similar difficulties, as other members of the group appeared *‘reassuringly familiar’* to her (p.87). When reflecting on the ease with which pupils involved in this research interacted with each other it seems that they may have experienced similar feelings.

The concept of ‘difference’ arises within many of the themes emerging form pupils’ narratives and here the ways in which pupils appear to negotiate their perceived differences within the school context are considered. For, although the pupils clearly identified closely with each other, there was an apparent divergence between their individual attempts to make sense of their diagnosis. Pupils’ attitudes varied from acceptance of ASD as part of their individuality, regardless of their awareness that others perceived them as ‘*odd*’ or *‘weird’*, to resignation at having the diagnosis accompanied by a strong belief that this did not make them any different to other pupils. Only one pupil appeared to view his ASD in a distinctly negative light and interestingly this was the pupil for whom bullying had impacted so strongly on his experience of school. I interpreted this to suggest that he had, in part, constructed his understanding of ASD through the negative behaviour and feedback he had received from other pupils and, for him, being different had come to be seen as undesirable and unacceptable.

**b) Disclosure to others**

The differing attitudes shown by pupils towards their ASD led to debate within the group as to whether it was beneficial for other pupils to be aware of their diagnosis. This exposed a degree of tension with regard to their need to be perceived by others as ‘fitting in’, particularly when linked to the fear of bullying, and the feeling for others that attempting to ‘fit it’ compromised their sense of identity as ‘autistic’. For some there was a sense of wanting to be seen as less different to others but resignation at being unable to achieve this, as Luke comments *‘I can’t make myself be anything else , can I?*’ The dilemma of ASD as a hidden disability was also raised, as highlighted in other research studies (Brewin and Renwick 2008), as some pupils questioned whether their difference was obvious to their peers and, if so, it would therefore be better to explain why, whilst others felt that they were able to maintain an appearance of ‘normality’. It was also evident that most pupils possessed a sense of extreme self-awareness and concern over how they were perceived by others.

Overall, after discussions and sharing of ideas, a general consensus seemed to develop suggesting that it was advantageous for teachers, as well as their peer group to be aware of their diagnosis. However this seemed to be driven more from a sense of providing an explanation for their behaviour rather than to enable them to develop more positive relationships as a result of increased understanding, as is suggested to be a result of sensitive disclosure to peers in examples in the literature (Guss 2000, Frederickson et al 2010).

**c) Acceptance and understanding**

The level of understanding and acceptance pupils perceived from others, particularly their teachers, emerged as a key aspect of their experience of ASD. Their beliefs concerning teacher understanding, of both ASD in general, and themselves as individuals, emerged as an important factor in their experience of transition to secondary school. Powell and Jordan (2012) suggest that, although there is a proliferation of training opportunities aimed at providing teachers with a basic knowledge of autism and the ways of meeting the needs arising from it, there are still numerous examples of teachers in mainstream schools who do not fully appreciate the nature and extent of a child’s difficulties. The accounts of pupils here appeared to largely support this view, as many attempted to make sense of their teacher’s attitudes to them, or their behaviour, as reflecting a lack of understanding of their specific needs. In reflecting on this emerging view from a personal perspective, as a professional who spends a significant amount of time involved in delivering training relating to ASD to teachers and teaching assistants, I regarded this as a cause of concern, frustration and disappointment. Although I recognised that this is the pupils’ perception of how they are understood, and may not therefore accurately reflect the true nature of individual teacher’s knowledge and understanding, it is the pupils’ personal view which forms their reality and impacts on their experience of school.

It is suggested that children with ASD challenge the expectations of teachers in terms of their learning (Tutt et al 2006) and also that the relationships between teachers and pupils are affected by the teacher’s confidence in their ability to meet the child’s needs (Eman and Farrel 2009). In addition the views of some pupils here suggested that teachers had negative preconceptions of ASD, causing them to fail to recognise their learning strengths and therefore to lower their expectations and to provide less academic challenge in some lessons. This resonates with the views expressed by Grandin (2006, 2011) who suggests that success for those with ASD can be dependent on having teachers who recognise their potential. More generally links can be seen to the developing movement within the autistic population which makes reference to the assumptions of *‘lay people’* and their conceptualisation of autism as confining (Huws and Jones 2010). The attitudes and reactions of others towards pupils with ASD and how these are perceived by them can be pertinent to the way in which the pupils construct their views of themselves and develop their self-identity (Humphrey and Lewis 2008).

I perceived an emerging sense of awareness within pupils’ accounts of a tendency for teachers to include them within a defined category of pupils identified as having special educational needs, distinctly separate from other pupils in their classrooms. The impact of this on the pupil’s sense of identity within the class and within their wider peer group was clear. Tensions emerged as pupils shifted between wanting their differences to be recognised and understood by their teachers, whilst not always wishing to these to be obvious to their peer group. This draws us back to the concept of schools needing to develop a flexible approach to inclusion (Wedell 2008), identifying and catering for the diverse needs of pupils and acknowledging that, even within what are often referred to as categories of SEN such as ASD, pupils are not a homogenous group (Frederickson 2010 et al) and there can be extreme differences in their needs (Jordan 2008). The experiences of pupils here appeared to confirm the findings of Brewin and Renwick (2008) in emphasising the importance of teachers having, not only an understanding ASD, but also of the consequences of ASD for individual pupils and how they are affected by the challenges related to this rather than simply reacting to the label with preconceived ideas. Above all pupils expressed their motivation to be ‘liked’ by their teachers, demonstrating their insight into the emotions of others and their similarity to their peers, and suggesting their desire for others to see beyond their ASD and to appreciate them as individuals.

6.2.5RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

Within the research literature it is suggested that peer relationships for children with ASD can be seen as a key element in determining the success of their inclusion into mainstream schools (Humphrey and Symes 2011). This was reflected in themes emerging from pupils’ accounts in the current study, as the importance of friendships, and concerns over bullying, presented as key features in their experiences both prior to and following transition to secondary school.

**a) The importance of friendship**

Pupils’ worries about friendship groups, including the possibility of forming new friends when moving to a new school, is evident within the literature on transition, for children both with and without ASD (Ashton 2008, Dann 2011). Although the difficulties with social interaction generally associated with ASD suggests that those affected may find establishing and maintaining friendships challenging (Bauminger and Shulman 2003, Macintosh and Dissanayake 2006 (b), Humphrey and Symes 2011), a range of literature, including some personal accounts of those with ASD, reflect their desire for friendship and social interaction (Bauminger 2003, Howard et al 2006, Lawson 2001). Prior to transition, most pupils here appeared eager and positive about the prospect of forming new friendships at secondary school. However, I felt for some this was tinged with uncertainty due to previous experiences, and anxieties remained over how to establish and maintain relationships. Pupils recognised several advantages of having friends, including protection against bullying and the potential opportunity to access activities outside school independent of adults, but above all to appear socially accepted and less ‘different’ to others.

It is suggested that, despite their difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships, children with ASD show more interest in having friendships with their peers once at secondary school (Howard et al 2006). However, with the exception of one pupil, none of the children here made any reference to friendships formed in their new school and this led me to question why they failed to establish friendships, even though they recognised the potential advantage of this and expressed a desire to do so. Potentially this could be due to the attitude of other pupils to those with ASD, for as Jones and Frederickson (2010) suggest, students with ASD are significantly less well accepted by peers than others with similar levels of ability. This view is supported by one pupil who also appears to take personal responsibility for this lack of acceptance, perceiving his lack of friendship to be his *‘own failure*’ as he is ‘*just a bit too weird’.* Alternatively it could be related to lack of social reciprocity on the part of the pupils themselves, as it is suggested in the research literature that peers of ASD pupils show increased levels of social initiation when compared to peers of other children with SEN but these social advances are not always accepted (Humphrey and Symes 2011).

In addition, secondary school may provide a less stable base for the establishment of friendships (Humphrey and Lewis 2008), as the difficulties pupils experience can be accentuated in this complex social setting and the opportunities for forming relationships are decreased due to pupils spending less time in a form group setting. On reflection, I would suggest that an interaction between each of these factors could be seen as influencing the formation of friendships for the children here. However, having come to know the pupils over a period of time, and also in relation to my own sense making of their experiences, in general there was a sense of hesitancy or avoidance in pursuing relationships amongst their mainstream peers, which appeared to be rooted largely in their perception of previous rejection by their peer group. Pupils tended to accept their social isolation as one pupil suggested, friendships became *‘just not the most important thing I think’.* I reflected that the only pupil to retain an evident interest in establishing friendships was Jess, the only female participant. It was possible therefore to hypothesise that this difference was gender related and it emphasised the importance of recognising the influence of pupils’ individual, non ASD related differences when considering their experiences and views.

Also emerging from pupils’ accounts was a sense of their differing understanding of friendship. Howard et al (2006) propose that the deficits in social interaction associated with ASD should be separated from the understanding of, and desire for, friendships. However I would suggest that for pupils here a desire to make friends did not necessarily reflect an understanding of friendship. Chamberlain et al (2007) propose that children differ in the meaning they attach to the concept of ‘friendship’, and that those with ASD generally see themselves as more socially involved than their peers report. This resonates very clearly with the experiences of Jess, who perceives herself to have made many friends at secondary school whilst demonstrating in her narrative that she did not in fact have what Lawson (2001) describes as the *‘know how of friendships’* (p 16). However I also felt that it was necessary to acknowledge her feelings towards those she perceived to be her friends for, as Locke (2010) suggests, the friendships formed by adolescents with ASD may not be considered as high in quality within normal models of friendship, but may be appropriate for them personally, and just as valuable in terms of their overall development.

When considering the experience of school friendships described by pupils I was drawn to compare this to their interactions within the focus group setting. Relationships between individuals emerged in their early meetings and they appeared to sustain these over a period of several months. Jordan (2008) suggests that the main purpose of mainstream education in terms of inclusion is to gain from *‘cooperation and collaboration with typical peers’* (p 12). However the comparison between pupils’ social experiences in the school and focus group environments raised the difficult question of whether the mainstream environment, even when preferable in terms of educational inclusion, necessarily enables those with ASD to form social relationships or, as Chamberlain et al (2007) suggest, do mainstream environments increase the risk of social isolation and rejection for these pupils. This has implications for the provision of opportunities for those with ASD to interact with, and form relationships with, other children with similar difficulties, as here they appear to be accepted and understood and may find it easier to find those described by one pupil as ‘*the right people’*. It could be argued that if mainstream schools, and society in general, adopted a more inclusive stance, embracing difference and diversity rather than stigmatising it, children with ASD could be accepted by their wider peer group and the necessity to provide opportunities for those with the diagnosis to interact together would become less relevant.

**b) Fear and experience of bullying**

Research studies suggest that children with special educational needs, particularly those with ASD, experience a higher frequency of bullying than their mainstream peers (Norwich and Kelly 2004; Wainscott et al 2008; Humphrey and Symes 2010), and vulnerability to bullying is presented as a key feature of children with ASD (Attwood 2007). This has been attributed to lack of social acceptance, linked to specific characteristics associated with ASD (Symes and Humphrey 2010); factors including physical clumsiness (Wainscott et al 2008); and poor social skills, leading to increased social vulnerability and naivety (Sofrondoff et al 2011).

All pupils here described fear of bullying, or rumours of bullying at secondary school, as a worry prior to their transition and, in line with other research studies (Humphrey and Lewis 2008, Jindal- Snape and Foggie 2008), a major cause of anxiety following their move. A potential difference between the views expressed here and those voiced in other research on children’s experience of transition (Ashton 2008) is that pupils described definite ‘worry’ in relation to bullying as opposed to curiosity as to whether this would exist. I reflected that this may indicate that, in addition to their previous experiences of bullying behaviour, the children in the current study possessed some awareness of their vulnerability which intensified their fears. The pupil’s comments lead me to question whether myths and rumours perpetrated by other pupils, which may be interpreted and believed quite literally by those with ASD, had contributed to the construction of these worries (Lucey and Reay 2000, Jindal-Snape et al 2006).

Pupils’ accounts suggested that, although they were all aware of bullying at primary school, it had not affected them all personally. Alarmingly all pupils could recount experiences relating to bullying following their move to secondary school, whether this had involved them directly or whether they had observed incidents involving other pupils with ASD. This lends support to the suggestion of Dann (2011) that incidents of bullying for pupils with ASD increase on transfer to secondary school.

The lasting impact of the experience of bullying suggested by Reid and Batten (2006) was clearly demonstrated in the account of one particular pupil, whose experience of being the victim of bullying pervaded his narrative on his experience of school, both before and following transition. The nature of his experiences, and the intensity of emotion it provoked for him, appears to have led to a consistently heightened fear of the possibility of bullying in school and the surfacing of repeated memories of bullying incidents (Sharpe et al 2000). He appeared to have come to accept the experience of bullying as an inevitable consequence of attending school.

It is proposed in literature concerning the relationship between ASD and bullying, that children with ASD may fail to identify bullying behaviour, particularly if the bullying is verbal rather than physical in nature, and therefore fail to report it. It is also suggested that they can be susceptible to more subtle types of bullying and find it hard to distinguish this from teasing (Reid and Batten 2006, Humphrey and Symes 2010). Within the accounts and interactions of the pupils in this study I gained a sense of their developing understanding of bullying, including awareness of the bi-directional link between social acceptance and bullying. More concerning was an underlying sense of resignation on the part of pupils that they would encounter bullying behaviour from others in school and a degree of acceptance of personal responsibility for this due to their differences

 6.3 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Here I reflect on the suitability and limitations of employing a mixed methods approach, combining IPA with the use of focus groups, as a means of data collection in addressing the research questions. The compatibility of the two approaches is also considered.

**6.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA is essentially concerned with the understanding and making sense of significant life experiences for participants from an ‘insider perspective’ (Larkin et al 2006). As the research question to be addressed by this study involved an exploration of pupils’ perceptions and experiences during their transition to secondary school, long recognised as an important change in the lives of most pupils (Bloyce and Frederickson 2012) and a significant experience within the context of their education, it seemed appropriate to adopt this methodological stance. Also inherent in this choice was an awareness of my personal views and preconceptions regarding the transition process, particularly for pupils with ASD, due to professional knowledge and experience. I was aware that it would therefore be difficult for me to achieve a purely objective stance and that employing IPA would allow me to reflect on my interpretation of participants’ accounts.

As the research process progressed, through both collection and analysis of emerging data, the use of IPA allowed me to explore my own relationship with the research question (Shaw 2010). IPA allows for the interpretation of research data from the researcher’s own perspective, and suggests that the researcher’s perceptions may in fact be necessary to enable participants to make sense of their experiences (Smith and Osborne 2008). I was therefore able to reflect on the transition experiences of pupils in the context of my personal professional experience of secondary schools, from the perspective of negotiating the secondary school environment as a visitor and observing both this, together with lessons and teaching approaches, whilst taking account of the needs of pupils with ASD. My knowledge of ASD, and experience of working with those diagnosed as having ASD, also influenced my interpretation. On reflection this could be viewed as a major influence on my selection and presentation of themes during interpretation and analysis. For example in selecting to include themes which I felt were of particular relevance to those with ASD, such as sensory challenges, whilst excluding those pertinent to most pupils, such as homework demands. The use of IPA sanctioned the emergence and interpretation of pupils’ reflections on their experience, rather than simply the experience itself. I also found that my interpretation and attempts to make sense of narratives and contributions was influenced by my increasing knowledge of the pupils themselves gained as the research process progressed.

IPA is suited to broad and open research questions (Smith 1996) and, in view of the open nature of the question in this study, when analysing data through the use of IPA additional key themes, not directly related but however inextricably linked to the research question, emerged, for example pupils’ experience of autism itself. This led me to question whether these themes would have achieved such significance within my analysis had an alternative methodology been employed. If so I would argue that this would have diminished the insights achieved into pupils’ experiences and the impact of these.

**6.3.2 Focus groups**

The concept of involving children having ASD in focus groups could be regarded as a challenging concept, due to the dependence of this approach on social interaction between participants. However, it was hypothesised on the basis of earlier studies and professional experiences, that the presence and prompts of other children might be valuable in encouraging responses from children with ASD. The data emerging from the groups held in the research study clearly exemplified how pupils were able to encourage responses from others who would otherwise be assumed to be inhibited or less able to express their views (Barbour 2007). It also demonstrates how the experiences and ideas voiced by individuals prompted others to either confirm their views or to feel able to contribute similar concerns of their own.

It became apparent that taking part in the focus groups allowed pupils the opportunity to question others in the group about their anxieties and to tentatively ask for advice. I would suggest that in this way the group began to take on an almost emancipatory role, suggested as a potential outcome of focus groups by Wilkinson (2004), in that pupils appeared to be offered potential solutions and coping strategies for situations in which they had perceived themselves as helpless, ranging from coping with bullying situations to approaches to homework. However I was aware of a need to achieve a balance between allowing pupils the opportunity to share experiences and worries, and raising these in the awareness of others, thereby serving to increase their level of anxiety.

Focus groups can be considered as unsuited to situations in which more sensitive topics are explored due to the reluctance of participants to make disclosures in group situations (Warr 2005). In contrast, pupils here appeared to feel comfortable in discussing sensitive topics, such as their views on their differences or experiences of bullying, possibly due to their perception that others had shared similar experiences. This also suggested that pupils found the focus group setting, involving others who had experienced similar challenges and supportive adults, as a safe and non-critical environment in which to share their experiences.

It is suggested that participants can be unaware of what they think or feel or remember about an experience until a group discussion, when the stimulus of other people’s sense making efforts, bring these thoughts feelings and memories to light (Tompkins and Eatough 2010).This seems particularly relevant for those with ASD as, due to the nature of their differences they may have difficulty in recognising feelings or if able to recognise them in themselves they may struggle to find the words to describe or communicate them effectively. The fact that others in the group were able to identify and describe experiences and feeling prompted the recognition of similar experiences for others suggesting that the group interaction was able to bring personal experiences into the light.

**6.3.3 Limitations of methodological approaches**

Combining the use of IPA with a focus group methodology is a relatively new concept and presents a challenge to the idiographic commitment of the approach. However more recent literature suggests that, with some modification, the two approaches can be used with some success and I was encouraged and supported by the suggestions of Tompkins and Eatough (2010) in developing an approach to analysis that encompassed both methodologies. Although this was a challenging approach to adopt, both conceptually and in terms of time spent, I concluded that, as each of the methodologies had such potential in terms of this study, it was relevant and worthwhile to attempt to combine the two. I would suggest that a degree of success was achieved in this as, although the data was collected in a group situation I felt able to represent the individual narratives of pupils in line with the idiographic commitment of more traditional IPA approaches.

The use of IPA here was arguably further challenged due to participants having a diagnosis of ASD, and potentially therefore being unable to provide detailed, descriptive accounts of their experiences, or to be able to reflect on these in a meaningful way, due to difficulties with communication skills and social understanding. However, this view was largely unfounded and the participants continually challenged this view of ASD by providing detailed narratives of their experiences and thoughtful reflections on the impact of these on their perception of transition and inclusion in the mainstream school setting.

When reflecting on my analysis and subsequent representation of the current research study I found it valuable to refer to the guidelines for quality evaluation of IPA studies suggested by Smith (2011 p 17 and p 24), and the criteria suggested by Yardley (2000), for assessing the quality of qualitative research, against which to consider my methodological approach. When considering the research process in light of the above I felt that it had met the criteria suggested in terms of its clear focus on a particular aspect of the experience of pupils with ASD, and had demonstrated sensitivity to this issue throughout each stage of the research, including demonstrating an awareness of the existing related literature. I also believed that the data generated during the focus groups was strong, and that I had selected appropriate extracts from all participants in order to both demonstrate the prevalence of each theme and to exemplify variation in pupils’ experiences and perceptions. Within my narrative I had aimed to demonstrate the detailed knowledge I had gained of pupils’ experiences of their transition to secondary school and to interpret, rather than simply describe, these whilst acknowledging that interpretations are influenced by my own knowledge and experiences.

**6.4** CHALLENGES TO PROFESSIONAL VIEWS AND UNDERSTANDING

**6.4.1 Understanding of autism**

It could be argued that listening to the experiences and feelings described by pupils here serves to both enhance and challenge some of our accepted professional views of the difficulties and differences experienced by those with ASD. As Billington suggests:

..while the children with whom we work may have been represented or positioned ‘lesser’, for example with deficits of knowledge skills or aptitudes, they are surely not ‘lesser’ in terms of their experience. (2009 p 8)

If we return to the accepted key difficulties that define ASD (Frith 2003), and on which much of our professional understanding is based, and consider the skills demonstrated by the children participating here in the light of these, it is apparent that they serve to contest our understanding in many ways, arguably lending further support to the views expressed by emerging disability studies research that professionals often take a ‘reductionist’ view of ASD (Wheeler 2011).

Firstly the pupils’ willingness and capacity to engage with the research process could in itself serve to challenge our expectations of those with ASD. Their ability to describe their thoughts and experiences, sometimes using language to create imagery and to evoke empathy in others, contradicts the view of those with ASD having impaired language ability, even if only in its social use.In an environment in which they felt comfortable, and accepted, pupils’ social anxieties were less evident and they were able to interact in a very reciprocal way, demonstrating social understanding and the ability to form relationships with each other. Some also revealed an unexpected interest in developing friendships, although arguably without a conventional understanding of this concept, rather than always seeking isolation in social situations. Pupils also demonstrated an awareness of social conventions, frequently expressing a desire to be seen as following these in an attempt to mask their differences, and often taking personal responsibility for any perceived social failures.

One of the main deficits attributed to those with ASD is a lack, or delayed development of, theory of mind (Baron-Cohen 2000), suggesting an inability to understand the thoughts, feelings and emotions of others. On many occasions the pupils here demonstrated a clear ability to attribute feelings and emotions to each other, offering and asking for advice within the group, and to other people they come into contact with, including their teachers and other pupils. Above all, as Billington (2006 a) suggests, the strength of feeling experienced by children with ASD was more evident here than any deficits or impairments.

**6.4.2 Difference not deficit**

The abilities and strengths demonstrated by the pupils in this study, some of which could be regarded as unexpected in the light of their diagnosis of ASD, raises the issue discussed by Billington (2000, 2009) concerning the necessity of labelling or pathologising children in order to support and understand them. Such discussions are on-going in the literature relating to ASD, with several writers suggesting that autism or Asperger Syndrome is best regarded as a difference rather than a disorder (Baron-Cohen 2002, Alldred 2009). It was evident in the views and experiences of pupils here that they had met with preconceptions and judgemental approaches from others due to their diagnosis of ASD, and some felt they had become, as suggested by contributors to disability studies research (Molloy and Vasil 2002, Wheeler 2011) suggest, defined by their diagnosis.

When relating this discussion to my professional experience I am aware that there remains a drive within the LA in which I work, from both teaching staff and parents, to actively seek a label or diagnosis for children who are seen as different therefore positioning ASD firmly within a medical model of disability. Historically there has been a link between diagnostic categories and the availability of support and resources but, although attempts are being made to severe this link in this LA, the drive for diagnosis appears to continue unabated. I would suggest that, as professionals, we need to consider more often whether this is adherence to a medical model of ASD is wholly necessary or whether we can meet the differing needs of pupils by adapting environments, and adopting more accepting attitudes, without the need for a label. However the adoption of a more social model of disability in relation to ASD is not uncontested, as some writers, and parents, argue that it is particularly difficult to apply to those individual who are more profoundly affected by their ASD (Trivedi 2005, Muggleton and Seed 2011). In addition, although acknowledging that the term ‘difference’ is a more neutral and value free description of AS, Baron-Cohen (2002) suggests the term ‘disability’ may continue to be required in ensure support and access to provision. However, if children are to be labelled, it appears that a shift in attitude is needed away from the largely negative discourses around autism as confining or *‘transgressing normality’* (Huws and Jones 2010) in order to help prevent the formation of negative preconceptions and stereotypical views.

**6.4.3 Approaches to primary to secondary school transition**

I would argue that the experiences described by pupils here pose a challenge to professionals’ approaches to transition to secondary school, particularly for those pupils with ASD. Although it remains clear that this transition is a cause of apprehension and anxiety for pupils, we should not adopt a wholly negative discourse around this issue and must acknowledge that some pupils approach the move with a degree of hope and positive expectation, if not excitement. As practitioners, we should therefore aim to achieve a balance in our approach by addressing their anxieties without stifling their hopes. The experiences described by pupils in this study mirror, in many ways, findings in the literature relating to transition to secondary school for children both with and without ASD (Ashton 2008, Jindal-Snape 2006). This supports the suggestion of Dann (2011) that for children with ASD the transition experience may not be ‘qualitatively’ different, that is the issues arising for them may be the same as for other pupils. However there may be a ‘quantitative’ difference, as the anxieties and problems they experience may be more intense. It could be considered whether this quantitative difference is due wholly to individual characteristics relating to ASD or whether the impact of previous experience plays a more significant role. If we consider the experiences of Sam, his fear of bullying presented as pervading all aspects of his thoughts on transition and his account of life in his secondary school. It could be questioned whether this was related to his perceived social vulnerability in relation to his ASD or attributable to his previous experience of bullying whilst at primary school.

6.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

Yardley (2000) suggests that the real validity of a piece of research lies in whether or not it tells the reader something that is interesting, or useful. In addition to addressing the research question relating to the experiences of pupils with ASD during the period of transition to secondary school, this study also sought to investigate any implications for future professional practice which could be identified through these experiences, therefore hopefully providing both interesting and professionally useful information for the reader.

As Billington (2009) suggests, our current professional practice may need to be reconsidered in view of non-professional knowledge emerging from the accounts of those with ASD. It must be acknowledged that any implications for practice or policy which can be drawn from such a small scale study should be regarded with caution. However I would suggest that the findings from this study resonate with the views expressed in the growing range of autobiographical accounts of those with ASD. It should also be acknowledged that, although the value of contributions for pupils with ASD themselves cannot be underestimated, they should be seen in the context of the views and experiences of a wider range of a stakeholders in the transition process including parents, teachers and other involved professionals.

Guldberg (2010) refers to the need for enabling environments in educational settings for young children with ASD and suggests that account should be taken, not only of physical environment, but also all aspects of how teachers and practitioners work with children, including communication and social interaction styles. It appears that such enabling environments continue to be necessary throughout the education of children with ASD and, although this is acknowledged as difficult within the complexity of the secondary school context, there are examples within the recent literature of positive and effective practice (Morewood et al 2011). Although it is not within the remit of this study to focus in detail on recommendations for secondary school practice to help further facilitate the inclusion of pupils with ASD, it appears evident that the presence of educationally enabling environments would help to ease anxiety over transition.

I am aware that, as a result of conducting this study, I have reflected upon and adopted changes to my own practice when working with pupils with ASD, and those supporting them, during the period of secondary school transition and I have attempted to incorporate my interpretations of pupils’ experiences when providing training to school staff. I would suggest that, although inevitably interlinked, implications for future practice may lie in the following areas:

**6.5.1 Recognising and managing anxiety**

When supporting pupils with ASD during their move to secondary school, and supporting them following their transition, it is evident that their anxieties should be acknowledged and addressed, where possible, and it should be recognised that some of their anxieties and worries may not always match those presumed by adults supporting them. It is necessary therefore to allow pupils a means of expressing their individual concerns and for these to be accepted by adults, however trivial they may appear. The experiences of pupils in this study suggest that introductory visits to new schools, an integral part of the transition process, have the potential to raise or confirm anxieties, as well as reassure, and should therefore be planned carefully. The importance of presenting realistic expectations for pupils is also evident, as disappointment in the reality of some lessons was seen to contribute to disaffection and potential disengagement with learning. Although the hopes and expectations held by pupils should be recognised and encouraged, some pupils appear to need support in maintaining these at a realistic level. Other pupils experienced lessons which, although potentially motivating for many, exposed and confirmed their anxieties demonstrating a need for adults to be alert to, and accommodating of, individual pupil differences.

The importance of addressing rumours and misconceptions may be particularly important for children with ASD due to their tendency to interpret information literally. Unfortunately one potential subject of rumour, the possibility of increased bullying at secondary school, appears to have been experienced as a reality in varying forms by the pupils here. I would suggest that this is a significant issue to be considered by all practitioners and, although not within the direct remit of this study, it presents as a pervasive cause of anxiety for those directly affected which, if not acknowledged and addressed, has clear implications for the success of their inclusion in mainstream school.

It is important to acknowledge that anxiety relating to transition is not confined to these pupils with ASD and can to some extent be experienced by all pupils (Zeedyk et al 2003, Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008 ), although some suggest that factors causing stress differ for those with ASD ( Maras and Aveling 2006). If this is made explicit in professional practice any support and preparation need not always be seen to emphasise difference amongst pupils.

Arguably one theme to emerge from pupils’ accounts, which clearly differentiates the anxieties of those with ASD from those of other students, is the, at times overwhelming, impact of the sensory environment of secondary school on their ability to fully engage with learning and other aspects of school life. This is confirmed by many autobiographical accounts of those with ASD and is undoubtedly one of the most challenging issues to address in the secondary school context. Although adjustments can be made for pupils I would suggest that increased awareness of the impact of sensory differences, on both the leaning and behaviour of those with ASD on the part of adults in school is essential, together with the individual sensory profile of pupils likely to be affected.

**6.5.2 Increased awareness and understanding**

Pupils here clearly valued the experience of having adults who demonstrated understanding, of both themselves as individuals and of their ASD. Above all pupils resented the preconceptions evident to them in the attitude of some school staff. I would suggest that this has implications, not only for the increased access to, and availability of, training on ASD for school staff, but also for the content of training. Arguably a further shift is necessary away from portraying ASD as a deficit, a medical pathology, or category of special educational needs, to representing it as a ‘difference’ is evident in the Inclusion Development Programme (DFS 2009).

Tensions are also evident in the question of which adults in school have the ‘expert’ knowledge and understanding of ASD and of individual pupils, qualified teaching staff or teaching assistants. This has implications for teacher confidence in meeting the needs of pupils with ASD, the relationships they develop with pupils, and the way in which those with ASD are perceived by their peers if the presence of a teaching assistant forms a potential barrier to social interaction or a confirmation of a pupil’s ‘difference’. I would argue that teachers should access training on ASD alongside their TA colleagues in order that they may feel more confident in taking responsibility for pupils with ASD in their classrooms. However as Powell and Jordan (2012) suggest such understanding must be accompanied by good teaching as without:

*the capacity to motivate and involve, the knowledge of how to structure situations to promote learning, knowledge about autism will not translate into good practice* (p. 15)

The issue and potential value of raising ASD awareness amongst mainstream peers (Frederickson et al 2010) is acknowledged by some schools, particularly, in my personal experience, by those schools which have an integrated resource base for pupils with ASD. However the diverging views on whether pupils would prefer others to be aware of their diagnosis emphasises the need for teachers and professionals to listen to the views of individual students before adopting what they perceive as supportive approaches.

**6.5.3 Communication and consultation**

As suggested above the differences apparent between pupils with ASD indicates that generalisations cannot be made as how to most effectively support the transition of each individual pupil. This raises the issue of how adults involved can be made aware of these differences and needs, which however small could contribute to the success or failure of the move. In my experience it is becoming relatively common practice during this period for information about pupils to be shared between schools in ‘Communication Passports’ but these can only be effective if they are shared with all staff coming into contact with pupils and if they are acted upon. I would suggest that at this time it is essential that professionals recognise that *‘the real experts are those people with autism’* (Exley in Hesmonhalgh and Breakey 2001 p 10) and that pupils are consulted, not simply as a tokenistic gesture but in order to gain a clear picture of how they experience school and the ‘interventions’ which adults presume will improve this. Parsons et al (2011) suggest that there is a need for greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners to establish what works best for pupils with ASD in classrooms. I would argue that greater collaboration with pupils themselves is also needed and this study suggests that pupils with ASD can be consulted directly and have valuable contributions to make when planning and developing good practice relating to secondary school transition.

It was not possible here to make a direct comparison between the experience of transition for those pupils with ASD and their ‘typically developing’ peers. However, evidence in the literature suggests there are similarities between the experience of transition for pupils with ASD and that of pupils without additional needs and also some differences, arguably at a quantitative level (Dann 2011). In addition there are the unique experiences for individuals, which may be shaped and influenced by personal characteristics associated with ASD, such as sensory sensitivity, or by their previous experiences of school. When considering this I was drawn to the conceptual framework suggested by Norwich and Lewis (2005) as a means of addressing the commonalities and differences between pupils described as having special educational needs and those who do not. They propose that firstly the pedagogic needs common to all students should be addressed; followed by those specific to a particular group of pupils and thirdly the needs that are unique to individual pupils should be considered. This frame work could also be adopted as an approach to secondary school transition in firstly recognising and addressing the common needs and concerns of all pupils as they move to secondary school, followed by those needs specific to pupils with ASD, and finally the unique needs of individual pupils. For some very individualised transition programmes may be necessary, as we should not presume that all services will suit all pupils.

Although not linked directly with the experience of transition, the apparent success of the group setting as the basis for this study suggested an area for future practice. Although social groups for pupils with ASD are a commonly utilised intervention approach, in my experience these most often focus on the specific teaching of social awareness, understanding and functional social skills. The availability of a group setting, in which pupils are free to determine the nature of discussions and to explore their concerns, worries and views with others, could be perceived as providing an emancipatory environment in which pupils can come to develop their identity and understand their ASD and the affect this has on their lives.

6.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study sought to elicit and interpret the experiences and perceptions of small group of Year 6 pupils diagnosed as having ASD on their transition to secondary school. The outcomes from the study, both in terms of methodological approaches and key themes emerging, suggest that further research in this area would be valuable. Initially, as this study involved only a very small group of pupils, it would be of interest, in the context of increasing numbers of pupils with ASD included in mainstream schools, to explore the experiences of a wider group of children with ASD on their transition from mainstream primary to mainstream secondary school. It must be acknowledged that a differing methodological stance would be necessary if a larger number of pupils were involved and therefore the depth of narrative would be compromised. In the light of high numbers of parental requests for placement within specialist integrated resource provisions in this particular LA it may also be beneficial, within the local context, to carry out a comparative study of transition experiences between those children who gain a place in an integrated resource unit and those who move to a mainstream secondary school without the support of a specialist provision.

The narratives of pupils here suggest that the experiences of children with ASD during and after their transition to secondary school reflect, in many aspects, the experiences described in the literature of children without ASD, or any other type of additional needs. It could be valuable therefore to directly compare the experiences of these groups of pupils in future studies in order to clearly identify any issues uniquely associated with ASD and, as suggested by Dann (2011), to discover how qualitatively different the transition experience is for pupils with ASD. In view of the perception of approaches to preparation for transition described by pupils participating, an action research approach could also be employed to examine the effectiveness of transition packages aimed at pupils with ASD and to modify these in response to research findings.

As suggested previously the experiences and perceptions of pupils themselves form only part of the picture in relation to their transition. It would be valuable to access the views and experiences of other stakeholders, most particularly parents and mainstream secondary school teachers, both before and following transition in order to determine whether their hopes, concerns and worries reflected those of the children involved and to what extent those emerging before transition were realised following the move to secondary school.

Finally the current study reflects the experiences of pupils only until the end of their first term at secondary school, often described by school staff as a ‘honeymoon period’. I would suggest that, when considering my professional involvement with a range of secondary aged pupils with ASD, difficulties in managing the complex environment of school may only emerge after a significant amount of time in the setting. It would be of interest to investigate the possibility of more longitudinal research on the impact of transition experiences on the success of inclusion in mainstream secondary schools for pupils with ASD.

In terms of methodological approaches the outcomes of this study suggest that the use of focus groups with children with ASD, although initially presenting as a challenging research concept, appears to have been an effective means of eliciting and encouraging narratives concerning their experiences and perceptions. I would suggest therefore that this approach is a valuable way in which we, as professionals, can listen to the voices children with ASD and in this way gain a clearer insight in to their views and experiences. The adoption of IPA as a methodological stance acknowledged my professional involvement, and personal commitment and interest, in the research area and allowed me to interpret pupils’ experiences in the light of my own understanding. I would suggest that this is a valuable approach to adopt in the exploration of the specific experiences of those with ASD.

6.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study aimed to capture, and interpret, the perceptions and experiences of five pupils diagnosed as having ASD during their transition from primary to secondary school, using a qualitative mixed methods research approach. Although generalisation should be viewed with caution for studies adopting an IPA stance, I would suggest that the themes emerging from this analysis can contribute to, and at times challenge, our professional understanding of ASD, and of the experience of transition to secondary school for pupils having this diagnosis .

Pupils voiced a range of anxieties regarding their change of school but they also approached the transition with a degree of hopeful expectation, which I would argue serves to oppose the generally negative adult discourse which most often surrounds the transition to secondary school for pupils with ASD. From the perspective of pupils here it can be questioned whether their needs during this period of their education were fully met, or their expectations fulfilled. It could be suggested that their experiences present a challenge to the views of some professionals and researchers, including Warnock (2007) who describes the transition from primary to secondary school specifically for pupils with ASD as *‘traumatic and even catastrophic’* (p.xii), as in many ways they can be seen to reflect the experiences of typically developing peers, as described in the literature.

It can be argued that the divergence of experience amongst pupils here suggests that, as practitioners, we should be wary of basing preparation for transition, and the way in which support and interventions are organised for pupils once at secondary school, on their diagnosis of ASD alone and move to a more detailed consideration of, and approach to, the individual needs of all pupils during this period, regardless of their label or diagnosis. The benefit of this may prove to be more generally advantageous in supporting inclusion in secondary schools. As Jordan (2008) suggests, valuing difference in the education system and enabling people to be the best they can, rather than valuing conformity is a way forward and that:

Understanding and getting it right for children with ASD can be a way of getting it right for everyone (p.14)

Pupils’ narratives suggests that a shift in focus is required within professional practitioner views and discourse around ASD, moving away from the associated deficits and difficulties to the interaction between the pupils and the learning, social and sensory environment of school. Although training for teachers and other professionals is vital in order to develop their understanding of ASD, and the issues faced by those with the diagnosis, those providing training need to be mindful of presenting a balanced view, as the experiences described by pupils here vividly emphasise the potential impact of negative preconceptions and highlight the importance of recognising the individual strengths of those with ASD, rather than defining them by their diagnosis.

One such strength made evident by the current study is the ability of those with ASD to communicate their views, when allowed the means and opportunity to do so. The depth and intensity of pupils’ feelings regarding their experiences of school, and of their ASD, lends support to the view that they should be firmly positioned as the ‘expert’ voice in contributing to our professional understanding of ASD. It is clear that the voice of those with ASD can offer a valuable contribution to future research into their experience of education. Also the means by which we support their educational inclusion should be based on the views of those with ASD themselves, as well as those of their parents, teachers and other practitioners. As Humphrey and Parkinson (2006) conclude:

Through meaningful collaboration between researchers, educators, parents, other professionals and individuals with ASDs themselves, we can develop more effective provision for those on the autistic spectrum which allows them to achieve their full potential. (p.83)

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**Appendix 1 Ethical approval**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ms Kathryn Charles182 Springfield RoadSheffieldS7 2GJ |  | Head of SchoolProfessor Peter HannonDepartment of Educational StudiesThe Education Building388 Glossop RoadSheffield S10 2JA |
| 01 August 2013 | **Telephone:** +44 (0114) 222 8091**Fax:** +44 (0114) 279 6236**Email:** j.booker@sheffield.ac.uk |

Dear Kathryn

## *Re: Secondary School transition for pupils with high- functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome: Accessing and using pupil and parent views to inform planning and preparation*

***(Please note that, with the approval of my tutor, my thesis title changed following this review)***

Thank you for your application for ethical review for the above project. The reviewers have now considered this and have agreed that your application be approved with the following suggested, optional amendments (ie it is left to the discretion of the applicant whether or not to accept the amendments and, if accepted, the ethics reviewers do not need to see the amendments):

|  |
| --- |
| Information Sheet: 1st. para. – half of this introduces the study in negative discourse; is this necessary? Could you not merely begin with the more neutral section half way through that first para.? Otherwise could run the risk of influencing research responses.Final para. – this inserts a positive discourse; again, is this necessary?Check for variable size of font.Kathy could also consider finding ways of obtaining formal consent from the children themselves, rather than just from the parents.  |

You may now proceed with your project. Please find attached the relevant forms giving ethical approval.

**Appendix II**

**Parent/Carer information letter and participant consent form**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|   |  |

Dear Parent/Carer

As part of my studies at the University of Sheffield I am carrying out a research study on the transition to secondary school for pupils with autism and Asperger Syndrome and I would like to invite your son/daughter to take part in this project.

Before you agree to your child taking part it is important for you to understand why the research is taking place and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with your son/daughter and with others if you wish. Ask either myself or another member of the Autism Service if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

**Purpose of the project**

The move from primary to secondary school can be a difficult time for some children with autism or Asperger Syndrome, as well as a time of excitement. Teachers and other professionals involved in supporting pupils during this time are aware that careful planning and preparation is needed to ensure that their move to secondary school is a positive experience. Rather than this preparation being based entirely on a teacher or professional view of the needs of pupils at this time, we plan to explore the hopes, expectations, worries and concerns of the pupils themselves in order that these can be taken into account.

Over recent years staff from the Autism Service have found that the ‘Transition Groups’ held for Year 6 pupils during the summer term, prior to their move to secondary school, have been very valuable in giving children an opportunity to talk about this transition and to express their concerns and expectations. They have been able to discuss, with both adults and other children, what they would like to know about secondary school and what they feel they need in order to prepare them for their change of school. This research project aims to capture these views and to use them in order to help inform our future practice in supporting pupils during this time. The project will take place during two of the weekly after school ‘Transition Group’ meetings. A follow–up session is also planned towards the end of their first term at secondary school, during which pupils will have the opportunity to describe their experiences at their new school.

**Why have you been chosen?**

Your son/daughter, (*name of child*), has been chosen to participate in this project as they are currently in Year 6 and are due to move to a mainstream secondary school in September of this year. (*Name of child*) has been known to the Autism Service during their time at primary school and we would value their views on the forthcoming move and their early experiences of secondary school.

Several other Year 6 children, who choose to attend the ‘Transition Groups’ during the summer term, have been asked to take part.

**Do you have to take part?**

It is up to you and your son/daughter to decide whether or not they wish to take part. If they decide not to take part in the project (*name of child*) will still have the opportunity to attend the ‘Transition Group’ sessions in the normal way. If you do decide that (*name of child*) wishes to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. You can still withdraw at any time without this affecting your child’s attendance in the group or any other support they require from the Autism Service during their move to secondary school. You do not have to give a reason.

**What will happen during the project?**

The project will take place during the ‘Transition Groups’ that are held during the summer term. The project will begin during the third session in order to allow pupils to become familiar with staff, other pupils and the routine of the session. Pupils taking part in the project will spend a short time within two of the sessions discussing their views, concerns and expectations for their move to secondary school with staff from the Autism Service and with each other. This will take the form of a ‘focus group’ with an adult leading the group and suggesting topics for the discussion, while allowing pupils to discuss the ideas and issues most important to them. It will not be dissimilar to ‘Circle time’ or ‘Social Group’ activities they experience in school. Discussions will be recorded in order to allow the researcher to analyse responses at a later time.

It is planned to revisit the project towards the end of the Autumn term to explore the experiences and views of pupils following their move to secondary school using the same process described above.

Staff from the Autism Service are aware that a social setting can cause anxiety for the children we work with. If any child within the group becomes anxious or distressed they will not be expected to participate. Nor will any pressure be placed on children to contribute their views if they do not wish to. The groups are well staffed by adults with knowledge and experience of working with children with difficulties associated with autism spectrum disorders and should a child wish to leave the group for any reason both adult supervision and a suitable room will be available.

Pupils participating in the project will have a direct opportunity to express any concerns or anxieties they have regarding transition to secondary school to supportive staff from the Autism Service. With the permission of parents the Service will therefore have the opportunity to intervene to help address these. The follow-up session will provide staff from the service with awareness of any issues arising for pupils during their first term at secondary school and an opportunity to offer advice and support where necessary.

It is hoped that this work will benefit children with autism or Asperger Syndrome moving to mainstream secondary school in the future by allowing adults supporting them an insight in to their hopes, anxieties and experiences and the opportunity to modify their practice, where necessary, in the light of these.

**Confidentiality**

All the information we collect relating to your son/daughter during the course of the project will be kept strictly confidential. They will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

The audio recordings made of group discussions will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your permission and no one outside the project will be allowed access to original recordings. All records, both recorded and written, will be held and analysed by the researcher and will be destroyed appropriately on completion of the project. On completion of the research anonymised information will be shared with school staff, with parental and pupil permission, where it relates to potential areas for improving the experience of transition from primary to secondary school for pupils with autism spectrum disorders.

The research will be published as a University Thesis (Ed D Educational Psychology).

This project forms part of the Ed D Educational Psychology course at the University of Sheffield. The project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield School of Education department’s ethics review procedure (every academic department either administers the University’s Ethics Review Procedure itself, internally within the department, or accesses the University’s Ethics Review Procedure via a cognate, partner department). The University’s Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University’s Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

Should you wish to raise any complaints during the project please contact the researcher, either in person or through the contact details provided below. If any specific complaint is not handled to your satisfaction please contact the University’s ‘Registrar and Secretary’.

**Contact for further information**

Kathy Charles, Head of Autism Service

Prince Edward Primary School

City Road

Sheffield S12 2AA

Supervisor:

Professor Tom Billington

Sheffield University School of Education

Sheffield S10 2JA

Finally, thank you for taking the time to read this information and for agreeing to take part in this project. We look forward to see you and (*name of child*) in the summer term.

Yours sincerely

Kathy Charles

# Appendix III

# Transcript 1 – Pre- transition focus group

(Early part of transcript contains pupils discussions during ‘Ideal self’ based activity)

**Let’s start by talking about Pupil 1**. **Secondary School is going well for them. It’s been everything you hope it will be for you when you go. So what do you think is going well for him? Do you have any ideas?**

**Joe** Err well go on ….I’ll start then. I think they’ve made some friends. That’s a good thing. Well I’d say it would be for me anyway cos that’s not going too well for me at the moment, well right the way along in school I suppose. Having friends to go out with and hang around with like at playtime or go out at lunch time. Oh yeah I know .. like on the bus with you talking about well…. whatever really instead of laughing at you with everyone else. They did on the visit we did and it wasn’t good ..believe me.

**Sam** Yes like new ones cos….. cos there’s kids they didn’t know before like at his other school you know. You get to make new friends – that’s a good thing. That would be going well. I think he’s happy with that. Well I would be

**Joe** Yes they don’t know if you’ve been you know weird ( *pulls faces*) or anything. You can, well they can well forget people who errm dissed them before you know….. at their old school. They won’t get tormented like before. Things will be different you see. That’s the way I hope at my new school

**Sam** Well I would think that’s the main best thing for him like they’ve got friends and so he’s not getting bullied any more or anything like at his old school. Friends stop you getting bullied I would think they would like well protect you and tell for you. I mean like with the teachers. They could well … you know when they don’t believe you.. I mean teachers not other kids …well if he had some friends they would like back him up.

**Joe** What like back him up… up the wall or something that’s bullying as well

**Sam** No listen… I mean stick up you know for him and everything. Tell the teacher what happened so they know and sort it out. Cos if I think that’s like being me when I move then if things were going well it would be different from my old school when there was a lot, well….. I would say a lot of bullying. And of course no one to sort it out for me so then my Mum had to and it didn’t go well after that you know.

**Joe** Tormenting you could say instead you know. Sometimes they say in my school tormenting not bullying. Still not good though is it. Like calling you names and kicking your bag and stealing your ruler and things. He’s not being tormenting by the other kids. Tormenting,…tormenting

**That is a good word Joe.**

**Sam** And the other thing is ….well people wouldn’t know about Aspergers, that he’s one. Err got it I mean, then they wouldn’t pick on him like they do you see. I mean like I don’t want people to know about my Aspergers thing cos then well …well you know they would think I’m a retard or something and like well I’m not really. I mean for most of the time I’m okay in school and then it’s like **Bang** and something really gets to me and then I like explode and everything .. Oh I can’t explain but you know they would think I’m more weird if I said I had a… an actual thing like a mental thing.

**Josh** Then you’re just weird stupid if they don’t know why…likes big freak or something. If everything is what they want then they’ll only have good lessons. That’s what

**Can we talk about Aspergers a bit more? Do you think it would be good for other people to know that someone has Aspergers?**

**Sam** I think he wouldn’t want them to know – not the other kids at all. I mean it’s just not what you want to be though is it .. I mean different and everything and them treating you as if you’re different . Not like everyone else when really you are you know. I mean sometimes you go off on one if you get stressed and all but well you still like want to be the others and do all the same stuff like going out and stuff. They wouldn’t want to be your friend if they knew. Then there would be more of the bullying I’d say.

**Jess** Well my Mum says that being autistic has got me my place at my school so I’d say it’s a good thing and I think everyone will know about me – that I’ve got it cos I’ll be a resource kid. I don’t think I’d mind so much in school so I will say that everyone knows about Ben and they don’t care. That’s best if people don’t care. I don’t care that you’re Aspergers so why should anyone else. It doesn’t make you feel any different really does it ..I think so anyway and we’re just the same but we get more help I think and that’s a good thing. And anyway – what can you do about it now. Get unautistic or something

**Luke** Tell that to my teacher at school. He goes on about it all the time but I can’t make myself be anything else can I….. on and on like it’s something I did wrong or something.

**Can you tell us some more about that Luke?**

**Luke** Well you see like sometimes I think it’s a good thing cos if I well you know need to use my time out then it’s good cos he lets me because of it ….Aspergers I mean. But well sometimes they give you this lady in lessons and she tries to help me to understand stuff and like I want to say well just go away out of my face like I know what to do I just don’t want to do that stuff and go and boss someone else around. Then when I get cross my teacher says I get help because of Aspergers

**Jess** Yeah but like if teachers know then you don’t get in trouble so much do you. Well sometimes I don’t. And you get to go out of class sometimes

**What do you think Sam? You were saying that people would think you’re ‘weird’ was it?**

 **Joe:** It’s not that I mind being weird you know….. It’s quite good really. I mean I think people think well that’s just Joe and well so do I really. That’s just me, Joe. I think I would be different without the Asperger thing but hey ……Sam don’t worry if people think you’re weird it’s okay you know but sometimes best if they know why I think. Then you get away with it a bit more.

**Josh** Like science he means

**Joe** Yes and no ….. no PE or literacy, well no writing anyway

**Josh** Maths

**Luke** I’ve been on my visit and seen the science labs there. Cool, experiments and chemicals and stuff. The teacher was clever as well so he will be good. Not boring. He was called Dr something - he must be clever. Cos sometimes at my school now they don’t know that much about say well space or physics and so on. So yeah his lessons are good err good the best I mean

**Sam** I think the best lessons like at school get better like art and things cos you have proper lessons in them in proper rooms not just like in your classroom with your own teacher like Miss P teaching everything. Yeah and lots of materials so you don’t have to borrow things and share all the time like from other classes. We have to do that all the time at my school and it’s a real pain ‘go and ask if you can borrow the scissors. Bring them all back’ What a pain.

**Josh** It really needs to be the bad lessons that get better in my opinion. That would be good but erm let’s be honest no chance. I mean they’ve got to get their act together really I think and like teach you stuff that’s not boring. But you know when you tell them that in lessons you know that you’re bored with all that kid stuff well that just leads you into trouble so it gets you nowhere in the end. Not sure really how big school teachers will take that but well you have to try I guess or you’ll just be bored for ever in school and learn nothing that you can’t get off the internet.

**Luke** The ICT suite – that’s brill in my new school. That will be good Yeah so that would be a thing that’s going well. Lots of computers to use and I think you can go to clubs for ICT as well. You know like after school and everything so that’s a good thing as well.

**Jess:** Clubs and things will be good… you can try new things out and see if you like them. Do you think you need to go with a friend through? I think that’s best they you know what to do mmm….. good though

**Joe** Teachers though won’t shout. He, they has got…. (P)

# Jess Come on R keep talking. Tell us what he’s got

(Groans)

**Joe** Well Miss T – like to help in class

**Is that someone who helps you at school Joe?**

(nods)

**Luke** I don’t get anyone to myself only the not clever, well you know special needs they get that or ADHD. He would though to make things good. Like to you know help

**Joe** Yeah write stuff or if you get stuck

**Sam** Help yes that’s a good idea. Like if you need help to find your way round or if you get lost or anything. Like to stop that happening cos it is big school I mean at the end of the day

**Jess** At my school, my new one there’s err colours on the doors like on each corridor cos there’s like three corridors on different floors and that helps you and if you get stuck they said you can have your timetable in colours as well. (Pause)

**What else is going well for them do you think?**

**Sam** People er well listening

**Jess** Do you mean the teachers Sam?

**Sam** Yes well not perhaps but erm mainly if you not following the rules you know they will listen and not ignore him or

**Josh** Yeah Sam

# Luke He goes on the school bus and then out places. You know like after school with his you know like….. mates. Yeah he’s got lots of mates to do stuff with and they like ask him to go with them as well In the car though. His mum takes him sometimes though

**Joe** No ……on his own now anyway cos he’s like mates …

**Josh** He doesn’t get homework

**Jess** He will though cos everyone does. Well they do at my school so I think everyone does.

**Joe** Not too much then and it’s err like ……easy so he can do it

**Jess** I Know….perhaps he’s got an IR like me. It’s for people with Aspergers or well autism I think but not for anyone else. You go in there but not to stay and they like help you with stuff. It’s good and you get extra visits from everyone else and someone else from my school’s going as well

**Sam** Rules…. that would make it good I know. His school has got rules so everyone like err knows what to do without the teachers telling them all the time and if they got them wrong then the teachers would like errm tell them and see them doing it, if they did I mean. So like say bullying. I think, well I know actually cos we asked my new school has got a lot of bullying rules and my mum says that if you don’t follow them, the bullies I mean then err well I’m not sure what happens to them. Perhaps they have to go to the Headmaster or something. I think that’s what happens at big school. So anyway that would be good.

**Joe** He’s got, errr he knows well (pause)

**Jess** Oh go on Joe it’s only words (indistinct mumbles)

**Joe** He says know the rules like no graffitti. Yeah cos like I mean if you didn’t know the rules, well not like that one but anyone then you could get into trouble.

**Josh** I think he likes having different teachers

**Joe** Yeah knowing rules like not having your mobile in class. And like sticking up for the children if a burglar comes in

(laughs)

**Jess** Oh Joe that’s like errr not going to happen like not ever

**Josh** Like I said more teachers, you listening?

**Why is that a good thing Josh?**

**Josh** Well then say if… say one teacher has it in for him then another one might like him. Like you could get into mischief in a lesson then the next teacher won’t know so you get away with it. So lots of opportunities for mischief I say

**Joe** Only one rule at his school so he remembers – that would be no litterbugs

Laughs

**Luke** You can’t do that. Like there has to be well lots of different ones like not to move out of your seat unless they tell you to.

**Josh** Yes and always wear uniform unless it’s non –uniform day

**So are we saying that rules will be a good thing?**

Yeah(Nods)

**Joe** No little kids to be pain and get him in trouble. No don’t count that cos my little sister goes to my school.

**Let’s think about Pupil 2. Can give them a name? Joe would you like to choose?**

Nick – that’s like my friend

**Ok that sounds good. Now things haven’t gone well for him. All the things you might be worrying about have happened to him. Let’s find out what they are and next time we can think of ways to help stop them happening**

**Joe** Err well I’ll start again I think well …..no one likes him

 **Josh** Yeah they think he’s weird and stuff so like they annoy him

**Sam** Well I think that like well in the first week he has lots to worry about and then it will get better like when he gets used to it. It’s important to stick it out, you know just get on with it and then it will get better or errm get sorted out. That’s what I talked about with my mum anyway

**Joe** Yes but in that week at first well you might get lost or miss the bus or something so you’re late

**Sam** Mm well it is very big, much bigger so you might get lost.

**Josh** Yeah bet he gets lost

**Luke** Yeah not get to your lessons. Then you’ll be in trouble

**Josh** Detention!!

**Joe** Er well you could just follow everyone else cos like everyone in your class is well …..will be going to the same lesson. Won’t they? I think that’s how it works anyway

**Josh** you could just … I don’t know … miss it

**Joe** So perhaps he’s just keeping getting lost and so then he’s unhappy

**Sam** Well he should well he should ask someone like a teacher. My school is I think they said the biggest in (*the city*) so it will confuse everyone I think and I might have to ask someone

**Joe** Mmmm Weird

**Sam** Well I know I have to say it –bullying. He’s been getting bullied

**Joe** Bullying!

**Luke** Well that’s probably the worst thing. That’s going to make him the most unhappy of all

**Joe** Yeah it’s like kids from his old school tell everyone that, well about things like what happens in PE and then they torment him for it all the time. And like the things he says, you know like random things and fiddling.

**Sam** Don’t they have like policies though in big schools. I think that’s what they said when we went. Like they stop bullies and people getting bullied and they might even get excluded or expelled even and then they will have to stay at home. Once I stayed at home because of being bullied you know so then it would be their turn.

**Joe** Polices?

(laughs)

**Josh** Just ignore them anyway or I would just anyway

**Jess** You can’t really you know Josh. You have to try to stop it somehow or it gets worse and worse all the time. Then what would you do

**Josh** They’re bigger as well so scary!

**Luke** Unless perhaps they don’t let that happen. My school the new one has buddies (p) you know the bigger kids and you could get them to help if you told them. If they’re OK though. You get one if you’re like well Aspergers like me or special needs or anything like that I think.

**Sam** You would be telling though and other kids wouldn’t like that so I would always tell a teacher if I was calm about it. If they know you tell then they wouldn’t like you and then you’d not have anyone to go around with like outside

**Luke** At playtime Yeah cos you need to have someone to talk to or they pick on you more if you’re on your own all the time.

**Joe** Like not getting wound up. He gets wound up (pause) I think anyway. And (pause) school will be messy which is very annoying! The building and everything, everything everywhere

**Josh** Litterbugs!

**Jess** Yeah and like people don’t look after things and they might get broken or messed up so you can’t use them anymore like things outside. Well girls will be all right and in the IR (pause) it is messy though anyway with coats everywhere so things might get lost

**Sam** Mmmm he gets stuck in lessons I think cos they’re too hard and teachers go too fast and don’t help him

**Joe** Yes and like he hasn’t got any.. well help person at all and he well daydreams. Then you get into trouble “stop fiddling and listen Joe” all the time like over and over

**Jess** If he was going to be in my school though he would get help if he gets stuck

**Josh** Yeah J – your school, your school all the time your school

**Sam** Lessons might be hard unless well things like you’re good at well say like I’m good at maths but if you’re not and they do things like that you didn’t do in your old school and everyone else did then you’ll look stupid and everyone will laugh at you and tease you. And If you’re mad then you get angry with everyone and you might have to walk out and then, well then you’d get into trouble cos there wouldn’t be places like well like the heads office or anywhere to go to or go to to well you know calm down a bit. Sometimes I think that you could do with somewhere like that so you can go and well sometimes you get so cross that it makes you cry and then you can’t stop (pause) sorry everyone

**That’s okay J. Thank you**

**Joe** All I can say is PE

**Jess** Changing in front of boys I was going to say anyway. That’s just not on and smelly or what I’d say horrible

**Josh** You don’t do that when your big Jess – weird.

**Does anything else about school worry him?**

**Sam** Homework

**Joe** Buses

**Homework then?**

**Sam** Well you might. Or he might get lots of it

**Joe** Or not remember what to do with it cos of not listening – bet that will be me

**Sam** Yes so if you get a lot you might not have time to do it or you might rush it and get it wrong

**Josh** If you forget it … it you might get detention. Like I think he gets detention all the time and that’s why he’s so fed up

**Jess** I think that perhaps they might let you off err like at first you know when you’re new and if they know about your problems and things (pause) er perhaps I’m not sure though

**Sam** You would need to get nice teachers then though and some might be nice but other ones will be stricter and not let you off at all

**Josh** Or boring, boring. Teachers I think are boring and like when you’re supposed to be listening so you have to trick them by like looking at them but thinking about just anything else like your PS3 or something and then they think you’re listening. You can nod and ‘hmmmm’ as well if you want. Time to stop. This is boring me now as well. It’s got to be time to finish.

 **Luke** One thing though you know before we said rules like it being good to have them and everything

**Yes, go on**

**Luke** Well if you didn’t know the rules and you kept breaking them or if other people kept breaking them then you would be worried. So I think that rules are a worry.

**Sam** Yeah like what do you do if someone doesn’t follow the rules. I mean that’s errrm stress isn’t it

**Joe** Don’t tell them though what ever you do. That’s trouble. Like when they turn on you for it

**Josh** But if you break the rules then you’ll get done by teachers so what. Anyway lets stop

**Ok let’s stop for now. You’ve all done really well. Thank you**

**(Break)**

**We have written down all the things you are looking forward to or think will be good at secondary school and all of the things you have told us that are worrying you. Now you will have the chance to talk and think about these again. Let’s start with the good things first. Tell me about your hopes for making friends**

**Jess** Well I’m not going to school, my err new one with any of my friends so I’ll have to get new ones I suppose. I mean like you need to get some friends like right away so they can go round with you and be like everyone else. So yeah there’ll be lots of girls to make friends with and go out with you know like after school. I don’t think you need to worry about it at all I mean there’ll be lots to choose from

**Luke** Yeah Jess but what if like no one likes you

**Joe** Yeah and if they like you know .. think you’re too weird to be friends with and so on. I mean I haven’t really got any proper friends at my school and they’ve known me for well you know for ever and they just keep out of my way cos of my stuff you see

**Tell us a bit more about that Joe**

**Joe** (shakes head)

**Josh** tell us about your stuff Joe. I think he means you know his noises and well the things he does don’t you. I do stuff as well like everyone laughs at my voice. So go on tell us

**Joe** Well I don’t mind if I make noises and well just be me …odd. But I think everyone else does so I would have to try to be like not Aspergers or something but that’s not me really but I might need to do it if I wanted to have some friends and that would be good you know to stop the tormenting. Don’t think it’s going to happen though.

**Jess** Some friends might not mind I think. I mean I’m your friend now, well we all are and we don’t care if you fiddle and like have weird teeth and everything we just are friends so you should just try anyway.

**Sam** It will be good to get away from bullies. I mean the ones that bully you

**Joe** mmm..torment you and diss

**Sam** Yeah whatever you call it any way it’s …. I just hope I can get away and make some new friends so they don’t get to me.

**Do you think that having some friends will help with that Sam?**

**Luke** They get you most when you’re on your own don’t they Sam. Well I’ve never been got but that’s what people tell you. Don’t be on your own ….like on the way home and everything. So if you had some real good friends they would stick up for you if anyone tried it on I think.

**Sam** Yeah….. you’re right but would they run away or would they be on the bully side. You don’t know do you. Not sure really cos well it’s never worked before but then I suppose Like my friends before weren’t that proper …just who I sat with, not like out in the playground.

**Joe** Mates……that’s what would be good. Mates go out with you like to town and stuff on the tram so you can go on your own and not with your mum. And they stand at the bus stop with you and laugh and stuff. That’s what happens at big school you get some mates and they come round your house but you don’t play out. That’s what my brother does.

**Luke** Well I’m not that bothered really but if it would get you to go out on your own that would be good like grown up and you could go where you wanted like to the pictures and stuff

**Josh** When I started this school. I thought well …this will be the time to make some friends but what you find is they don’t like the same things so then you try to like say football or something but they get it right away that you don’t know anything about it and they err. … they don’t like say playing Transformers and Dr Who so you don’t have stuff to do together and in the end you just get left on your own anyway so what’s the point I say

**Luke** Yeah that’s right you need to say .. find the right people but they don’t seem to be around. I mean some kids are nice to you for a bit but then I get fed up with them and like well I had this friend in my class last year and that was good cos we went to his house and we played with his Lego and then in school when he told the other kids they laughed at him and so he didn’t ask me again.

**Jess** That’s sad Luke. But I think friends are good so there will be some at the new school cos there are so many new people and they won’t know stuff like that.

**Sam** Yeah and no one will know if you’ve been like away from school or that you’ve been like the bullied one and stuff. Cos well there will be new people who don’t know things about you and then they might well like you more I suppose.

**Something else you are looking forward to is the lessons at your new school. Tell me something about that. Is that after your visits? Joe?**

**Sam** Yeah tell us Joe. I think I am looking forward to doing design and technology cos you do food there and I like cooking and baking with my mum and you et proper ovens and everything. But then you have to remember your stuff they said. Like ingredients and if you forget you have to buy them so I hope someone will remind me or I’ll worry about it.

**Luke** Science will be best

**Joe**….. and music. I’m good at music but no one at my school knows so I’m waiting to get to big school to do it in a proper room with proper instruments and everything and they have recording equipment and stuff so you can record yourself and everything so that will be good

**Josh** like we said, me and Luke, science will be good cos you’ve got proper labs and experiments and teachers and technicians and everything so that will be great . Really interesting not just boring talking and pretend experiments like at primary. You even have those burners to set fire to stuff …cool

**Jess. What do you think?**

**Jess** Yeah well we saw all that stuff but mostly they talked about the resource place we’ve got and how we can go there in the morning and at lunch and things so I didn’t really think about lessons much. Anyway I don’t know if I do everything cos of the resource ..I mean you do stuff there I think and not with your class all the time. It kind of feels safe there though but too away from everything else sometimes. Like it will be good to have somewhere to go but I don’t want to be there all the time and miss out on stuff everyone else does. Then people will think I can’t do things cos of my autism and I’ll get left out again.

**Sam** That’s good though Jess you know I think. My mum and me went to look at somewhere with that kind of thing but I didn’t get in she said. You’ll be safer from the bullies in there and they will look after you so that’s the main thing.

**Luke** yeah and you need somewhere to go if you get upset like Sam said before. So you’ll be okay there. Like I know it’s off the subject but well hey …that’s what I do. That worries me. Not the off the subject but nowhere to go for ‘chill out’. I mean what do you do if you can’t take it anymore. Like the noise and so on or ..or if you get so cross you’ll like …explode.

**Joe** I think I can go to the Learning base .. they call it that…. but I won’t feel like learning so that’s a worry as well.

**Jess** see I’ll have that all the time

**Josh** Cos of being a resource kid .. we know. Well I suppose it would be a good idea- just so you know there’s always somewhere. I haven’t got one now but when I get to my new school there will be more things to get cross and well… worried about so… yeah… it would be a good idea. But… wait.. they would have to let you go there so how would they know like you really needed to. That’s confusing for me

**Sam** They showed us…. me and my mum where I could go – this room that the special needs person sits in you know if I get upset or worried. So really that’s better than at little school because there you have to sit on the corridor with everyone looking at you so well I think that’s a better thing about secondary school. I think I would feel safer there cos err … it’s like out of the way and no one can see you and tell people

**While we’re talking about this can you tell me the kind of things that make you cross or upset in school. Things that make you feel as if you need somewhere to get away.**

**Josh** Carry on talking about good things at new school first. Different teachers will be good like I said before. I don’t think my teacher likes me. Ignores me or gets angry when I tell him things like in science. It’ll be good to get some new ones and see if they like me a bit better. I mean I can’t stop if I know things that I’ve looked up. So my thinking is that if you get stuck with one teacher who doesn’t like you then you’ve only got one lesson with them not like the whole day and week and so on like now. You get to change you see and someone must be good and kind of get you. Like not mind if you know things and tell them and if you have to do things on time. Like once I was waiting like forever to get my turn to talk and he kept saying ‘ 2 minutes’. More like 2 hours so I asked him for his watch to time him and he err… got so cross. I mean it was only a joke but he doesn’t get me at all.

**Sam** I don’t get that. I mean you have your teacher and if you like them and your mum does then it’s okay. If there’s lots then they all have to know all about you and some won’t be bothered if you don’t see them that much. I think that’s more a worry than a good thing. It worries me and my mum says it worries her so …… I don’t know.

**Jess** well in schoolnow I mean everyone knows you…….that’s a good thing but you know sometimes you think ..why does all the teachers talk to me and watch me. It would be good to be like everyone else sometimes you know then they wouldn’t notice you so much. Perhaps you can hide a bit more when the school’s bigger. They have lots of other people to watch.

**Luke** good teachers will be good. I mean the ones that know their lessons. I mean like real clever science teachers and proper IT people not just your own teacher like we have now.

**Sam** What about like what happens when your teacher’s off … on a course or something and then you get someone else. At my school they tell me or my mum so I know and….and it’s always the same someone else. I mean the same teacher who takes over so I know her so it’s not so much of a shock. And she knows me. So will that be the same. I hope it’s the same

**Joe** Yeah but you need to have you know like I said a…… helper you know like to help you on your own or when the teacher’s busy and like to tell you what to do. I need to keep my helper

**Sam** Well that would be good if you get stuck. You have a helper don’t you Joe but I don’t get one cos I don’t think I’m that you know special needs as some kids are. But if you get stuck it would be bad and if you get things wrong then you look stupid. I don’t want to look stupid so I hope a get a helper. That might stop you getting bullied as well cos they might look out for you and stop it happening.

**What do you think Joe? Would you like to still have someone to help you when you move school?**

**Joe** Well sometimes you see ….the errr… tormenting can get worse if you get a helper or if you have to go out of class for groups and things… cos err then they like know about you. The other kids I mean. They like know that you’ve got the autism or something and then the tormenting might get worse cos they think they can pick on you and that’s when the name thing starts.

**Josh** They could do your writing though couldn’t they. That would be good. I never want to have a help person but if they could do your writing that would be the best thing ever.

**Jess** that doesn’t happen Josh well it can’t all the time. I don’t think I get any choice I think in having help cos that’s what you get in the resource. In lessons as well I know they said so you don’t have to worry about getting stuck or understanding or anything like that. I hope they’re nice ….. they should be nice to you and ..and they could like sort things out like if you have a problem or anything

**Sam** you know like in classes ..like lessons. Do you sit in tables like you do at school now. Only what happens if you get a bad table …. I mean like bad like other people not following the rules or messing around and things. Or not listening so you can’t listen. Only then you might get the blame or you might…… well not be able to do your work and that

**Josh** that would be tempting I think and……. cool sometimes

**Jess** that’s when your help would be good cos they could shut everyone up and tell them off and then you could get on. Only then I suppose your friends might not like you any more cos it would be your fault you know…for having a helper and they wouldn’t want to sit with you again.

**Joe** do they have helpers the same at secondary school. I’m worried about that now…I think. I think I really need to have one or I’ll be stuck. I mean can it be the same one. I like Miss S. Can I have the same one. Miss S likes me and she could come with me I’m sure she would.

**Luke** don’t be daft Joe, it’ll all be new people there you know. Everyone will be different. No one comes with you in grown ups. I wish my teacher could but that doesn’t happen...grow up

**You seemed worried about some of the other things that will be different. Can you tell me about some of them?**

**Sam** Well you have to do different things I expect. Like it’s a long way off isn’t it. Well mine is anyway so if my mum can’t take me and I know she can’t cos she hasn’t got a car. So well you have to get the school bus from the corner. I don’t do buses on my own yet.

**Luke** But you know I think that…..well I think perhaps you could say that the bus is a good thing. You see like now I go with my mum and well…. not all my friends do so sometimes I think it looks a bit daft, you know like still babyish. It’s grown up to go on the bus and you would have to have your own money as well I think. You have to sort of sort yourself out but….that’s okay I think. Once you can do it for school then I suppose you could like ….. do it anytime and then you would be able to go out places.

**Joe** Yeah I will have to go on the bus as well and you know well....with me being slow and that…err walking and getting ready you know well.. what if I miss it. Does it wait for everyone… till everyone’s there or does it just go. I mean I don’t know about things like that. What happens and stuff. I might just have to walk like before but it’s a long way.

**Sam** What if they really stop you from thinking and doing your work … the others on your table I mean and then you would get into trouble

**Josh** we’ve past that Sam …keep up …you’re so slow you know. Buses and things now that’s what we’re on about.

**Sam** Yeah well I’m worried about how big it is ..you know the new school. Everyone says you won’t get lost but how do you not do…I’m sure I will and then what happens. I mean if you get lost then you might get err.. or like be late for your lessons and then you’ll get in trouble and then upset and so it will be awful I think. I could be anyway.

**Joe** yeah that when you need to get your helper person cos they will like be coming to lessons with you and you can follow them

**Sam** Yeah but if you don’t have one like me…I..what if you need the toilet. It could be anywhere and do they let you go out of lessons anyway

**Luke** I think now I think……you get a map like Jess said before. But I mean you can’t carry that around with you… I mean you would look stupid. Yeah and I think then it would be kind of err obvious that you are a special needs kid and other people would laugh at you and then bullying could start. You just have to .. what you would say …mix in with everyone else. Not be obvious or stick out and then they don’t know. That would be best. It’s all very confusing when it’s so big. They say you get used to it but when there’s so many people about it’s just very confusing and you can’t think straight to find where you need to go and well.. another thing is your stuff. Like they say you can have this locker like cupboard place to keep things in the day but well , what if you can’t find it again and like if your PE kit is in it well.. what would you do

**Joe** and yeah we get those I think .. those lock-up. But you have to get a key and then try to look after it. Some chance for me. I’ll have to worry about that as well I suppose. You could just carry your stuff …could you

**Josh** you know when you go in. You think …wow. That’s not a school it’s more like a …well posh offices or something. I know I might get lost but it’s exciting and… they might not find you.

**Sam** Does anyone know about timetables when you move. They gave us one when we went and it’s a bit of a muddle I think. What I think is it’s good to know what to do and where you should be but well …not as complicated and confusing. I hope someone helps me. I mean it’s so much easier now .. you just do whatever everyone else does

**Jess** that’s so you remember what to take with you… you have to understand it you know. Keep it in your planner when you get it.

**Josh** What about homework then. Bet you’re scared of that. I’m not cos if I can’t do it. Lets face it that’s not likely is it, especially science or maths anyway then I’ll get out of it somehow. I’m thinking up excuses right now all ready to go.

**Sam** I worry that I might not understand what you have to do and I know Jess says to write it in your planner and that but what if you don’t understand in the first place and then what chance have you got of understanding it when you get home. I think you should just work faster and get it done in school myself. I don’t get why its work at home anyway.

**Joe** Well you know when I went to my school they said you can go to a club place and do it before you get to going home and then you don’t have to worry. Not sure when it is though or where you have to go or anything. Sounds like a good idea to me.

**Jess** what if you forget it as well .. you know like next day. You forget your book and they will get really cross I think. You’d have to tell them and they will be cross so you will have to say the right things to make them not cross.

**Joe** That’s scary Jess. I am err… def… going to do mine in the club if I can then

**Sam** They will have rules you know. I mean about homework and everything and you will have to stick to them or you get detention. Not everyone sticks to the rules at my new school cos when went ..me and my mum you know.. well in the yard people didn’t stick to the rules but …you know.. err like no one saw them so they got away with it and that’s not right is it. … I mean rules need to be stuck to I think. Even if you’re bigger.

**Luke** You wouldn’t tell on them would you Sam. Oh god …you would I know or you’d tell them and that would really get you in trouble. You know like being ‘rule police’ and everything. You will get bullied you know. You won’t be popular with the big kids.

**Jess** shush Luke. Sam will get upset you know. But anyway Sam it’s true. You have to ignore it

**Sam** Yeah but… what if they get away with it .. they need to stick to the rules. Rules are good you know to like well.. keep order at school and if everyone sticks to them then you feel safer. Like no bullying rules.

**Joe** no litterbugs and no being messy

**Bullying is something you all seem to have mentioned. Tell me more about your worries**

**Sam** You know it’s my biggest worry… my mums and mine… don’t you. You know I had to leave my last school cos of it don’t you. Only that wasn’t just the bullies it was the teachers as well cos….. you know they didn’t believe me and then when they did they didn’t do anything about it. And then they chased me and I ran away and ….out of school and everything like at the end of the day…and … well my mum got cross cos I was well so scared. I mean I was scared enough to run across the road and I don’t do that on my own…not like ever. So I didn’t go back again. It all blew up really.

**Jess** What did they do to you…. hit you and things or just names

**Joe** Names are just as bad Jess …. They can hurt you just tormenting you know.

**Sam** Well they took my bag …with all my PE stuff and they hid it and I couldn’t do PE and then they threw it back at me at the afternoon in the cloakroom and laughed at me and then they said I couldn’t do PE anyway cos I was too fat and they wouldn’t want a fat kid in their …team so I might as well not do it. Then one of them poked me …you know .. like…here and then he kicked me as well so that’s when I ran away I think anyway. But that was one of the worst times anyway.

**Josh** Don’t let it worry you or get to you. Just ignore them I say. I mean they call me all sorts of things.. well you can imagine can’t you (laughs)… fatty, specky and all that and a lot worse I can tell you but well what can you do. If you get upset it makes them worse. It’s just about being different from them. They don’t seem to like it but why would you want to be like them…..that’s what my dad says anyway and that sort of …..gets me through it you could say.

**Jess** I think it might be worse at big school. Don’t want to worry you or anything Sam but well they tell you things don’t they like about what happens. On the bus seems to be the worst from what I’ve heard anyway so I’m going in the car I think

**Luke** Lucky you then. I’ve heard that its break times when they don’t have like teachers in the playground like they do now so no one is looking out for you. Or like dinner ladies at dinner time. Then I think you would need somewhere to go to be safe. Especially from the bigger kids. They will pick on us I know… I just know it.

**Sam** I think it’s when they know that you’ve got something. Like Aspergers or something or like ADHD or anything like that. It sort of gives them an excuse so you have to keep it a secret if you can I think that’s always best. I don’t tell anyone ..well teachers have to know I suppose or they think you’re well .. odd or strange. Or you might get into trouble for doing things you can’t help. You know like saying stuff or doing weird things and that.

**Joe** Don’t you think they know anyway though. I mean they can tell if they see you can’t they. People, other kids I mean … well they think I;m weird but I think it’s cos of what I look like and things I do and like noises and things. So can’t they just tell. I don’t think you can keep it a secret Sam.

**Josh** What you mean like ….you can look err… Aspergers. Is that how they know. I mean if you looked something like that then you would know and everyone right from when you’re little not just like … last year I think with me. That’s not right Joe and anyway look at Luke. He looks well…….. you could say just err .. normal like everyone else and we know he’s not. I mean you wouldn’t look at him and say ‘here comes the special needs kid with the autism’ would you. No Joe they can’t tell by looking at you it has to be something else but…not sure having it a secret is such a good thing Sam. I get away with much more now they all know in school.

**Joe** If they don’t know then they think you’re weird. Girls look after you in my class if you’ve got something and they stick you for you as well and…and… you get your helper.

**Jess** well like I said I needed everyone to know to get in the resource so …no choice really. My friends don’t mind I don’t think but well my friend she’s got Aspergers as well so we both don’t mind.

**Luke** It’s just not being on your own that’s important and if they know about the autism then sometimes you are. Thing is on your own is best …but that’s when you could get the bullying so it’s hard to know what to do really. I think teachers should know about it though so they can help you and perhaps … well get you and understand you a bit better. And …yeah.. you don’t get into trouble so much for odd things you do I suppose.

**Joe** do you think all those teachers.. do you think they will be really strict. Like telling you off if you don’t listen and stuff like that. I mean I like my teacher cos they err she well you sort of know what you can get away with and like err it’s the same every day like school and everything so you know what to expect and no surprises. When you go it will be different all the time and that’s hard for me. Like what’s coming next will be a worry.

**Sam** Yeah but like… Joe.. that would be better if they were strict the err…teachers cos then everyone would behave themselves so that’s less of a worry. As long as you do what they want you won’t get in trouble and everyone else will behave themselves as well. Strict is best I think

**Joe** not if they shout at you. That’s when you need to get out.. if they shout you know. Even not at you… just shout. They need to be kind… just kind to you.

**Josh** Long as they’re not boring they can be as strict as they want. Sometimes you know where you are if they’re strict. What you can get away with and so on I feel.

**Joe** You know like for understanding things you know like in err… lessons and everything well I’m worried about that I think

**Jess** Joe (shakes head)

**Luke** go Joe don’t take any notice.

**Joe** Yeah well if they you know give you a book and ask you to read it …what if you can’t? That’s what I want to know and it’s been bothering me since we went cos in this form room place they had piles and heaps of books on the back and then they gave them out. Well I didn’t even open it cos ..well it just looked so hard. So I’m not sure what you do then

**Sam** that’s what you have to do. Read things and then they ask you questions. They do that in every lesson….. I think so

**Luke** yeah lots of reading I know so it will be hard and then so will maths be I think. Like lots of new stuff

**Are there any other lessons or times of the day that worry you at your new school**

**Joe** I would say dinner and PE. PE most

**And the rest of you**

**Jess** No not PE but definitely dinner. I mean …where do you queue up and worst of all who do you sit with. What if no one wants to sit with you and everyone else is talking to each other and you get ignored. What would you do …sit on your own or go to a table with some people. I don’t know at all. And what sort of things do you get to eatand will they laugh at you .. at what you eat I mean

**Luke** Why would they laugh at it and anyway ..just sit on your own if you’re that worried. It’s not about talking is it .. it’s about eating. I take sandwiches anyway so I won’t be buying anything. If they let you do that …I don’t know. Now I’m worried…I can’t err eat school dinners and the dining room is noisy at our school but I’m sort of use to it now .I bet it’s much worse in that café thing ..err place they’ve got.

**Joe** PE is my very worst thing in the world. My Mum’s told them I think so they know. I mean I can’t do it and then the changing rooms are horrible when you look in and what if people watch you when you get undressed and…it just takes me soooo long. My teacher lets me take my time and sometimes I don’t do the lesson cos it’s nearly finished when I’m ready.

**Sam** Yeah and outdoors there’ll be football and stuff and they will laugh if you’re no good. Teams and things will be a worry I think. You know in the changing rooms does the teacher stay do you think cos that’s when well…. I’ve heard the bullies can get to you as well. Like making fun if you get undressed and of your things and stuff and beat you up. You have to have the right things. That’s important so tell your mums then they don’t have the excuse to do it.

**Josh do you want to tell us anything else that is worrying you**

**Josh** suppose they still have assembly times do they. That’s the one thing at this school that’s been well you could say a real problem for me. Like well … for a start you have to sit on the floor in the hall. And well ..just look at me for goodness sake .. I mean that’s not easy is it like when you’re so…big…biggish anyway. So yeah that’s what gets you fidgety in the first place and then if you like well can’t stop yourself when they come out with all that rubbish and you just have to say something and then of course that doesn’t go down well so you get sent out. Nightmare I’d say. So yeah that would be a problem I think.

**Luke** well yes it would because it would be different if they do have assemblies cos everyone would be bigger than us and everything and err.. where would you sit and so on. Yeah different so I’m not sure about that at all.

**Sam** I don’t do assembly any more either. Do you think they will tell them or will I have to tell them when I go. I can’t do it you know. Perhaps they don’t have them.

**Luke** that makes you think doesn’t it. I mean do they like tell them about your problems and things or do you tell them if you want to.

**Jess** didn’t you have to do that thing where you write about yourself and stuff and what you like and everything. I think they give that in but I’m not sure. Did you do one…anyone

**Josh** No way …not writing

**Perhaps that’s something we could work on next time if you think it would help**

# Appendix IV

# Transcript 2 – Post transition focus group

# This time we are going to talk about how things have been going since you moved to your new schools. Think about your experience of school so far and decide on one good thing to tell us.

**Jess**: Well I’ll start

**Josh:** Oh-oh nothing changed there then

**Jess:** Yeah OK **…..**cos Well I’ve made lots of new friends which is cool. Some are in the IR bit and some in my form as well. And well it’s good cos you have well you know people to hang around with at break and everything and well the ones not in the IR they don’t seem to mind if you are. Well some of them don’t but if they do they want to come in with you. You know I think they want to see what goes on you know, the way the other kids are. Well not me but you know the real autism ones cos like they kick off sometimes and everything. Anyway it’s been good I think that has so far.

**Joe**: I well I….haven’t made any friends. Not really …or at all I suppose. Well not new ones and then the ones from my old school. Well I don’t think they were proper friends really I’m not sure but well errr from my class the boys I mean. Well they’ve mostly gone all cool you know and stuck with other kids now. They just you know they just well diss you and everything most times. You know teeth and so on

**Group:** – giggles/ah Joe

**Joe:** Yeah well there is this one boy but he’s weird as well but he talks to me sometimes, he’s quite nice really so if I wanted to have him as a friend I suppose I could but well I don’t know if I’m bothered really

**Jess:** Yes well ..like I was saying ..I mean that’s a shame and everything Joe. You should have come to my school cos they don’t allow dissing. I’ve made some friends in the IR but there’s not many girls there so it’s good but I like being in my form the best

**Thanks Jess perhaps Joe could tell us more**

**Joe:** (shakes head)

**Luke:** At my school well they like, they think they can help you to make friends, like buddies you know the way they do. What they do is I think they decide before you get there who is going to help look after you. I mean like errr…… they decide and what if you don’t want to be looked after or if you don’t like the person. And they might not like you or know about what you are like..err you know the Aspergers stuff and everything. So anyway I don’t know if it’s the right person they choose. Like my buddy person that they put me with doesn’t like science as much as me

**Jess:** Not hard Luke…… freaky

**Luke:** alright so…….so he keeps on talking about cars. Well I like cars …

**Sam:** You don’t watch Top Gear all the time though do you I remember. Do you remember Joe last time (laughs) the football match you know Fox and ….

**Tell us some more about your buddy Luke**

**Joe:** Well like I was telling you about the err …dissing and everything. It puts you off you know. I mean like on the bus and stuff and then when one person starts it the others join in so I keep my head down. I mean it’s not bad but you….

**Jess:** You should tell you know Joe. Are they in your year? You should tell someone. It is best if you get some friends. Just try to get some I would. Don’t worry about the teeth thing. Like my hair mmm you know… just ignore it and then if you get some friends then they will stick up for you.

**Luke:** Yeh well my buddy thing he stays with me at break and everything but well we both just get a bit fed up with it but he thinks he needs to be with me cos he well …… volunteered I suppose. Anyway it’s only for another week I think and then we will be free to do what we want. Don’t get me wrong I think he would stick up for me and nothing has gone wrong with everyone else. You know no …..well bullying or anything which is what my mum was worried about. You know like for Sam. But it’s just been a pain. I mean sometimes you don’t feel like it do you. Not getting away and everything and he just doesn’t seem to get it. Following the rules I suppose. In class… tutor group class…. I sit by this kid and he’s odd. Not like us odd but really kind of freaky odd and his buddy has left him alone more I thinks cos he doesn’t speak much so I mean I talk to him. I think they’ve sat us together. Mmmm you know I’m not that bothered about friends really, not like Jess is anyway. It’s just not the most important thing I think.

**Joe:** Like me odd you mean like …… strange

**Luke:** Idiot ….no. It’s just your voice and stuff. He’s really odd that kid.

**Jess:** That’s cruel. You’re dissing now

**Luke:** Soz Joe.

**Let’s stick with friends. Tell us something about your experience Josh**

**Josh:** I’m just not that interested really I suppose. Well I mean in the past you know at the other school I tried to get on with people but then they don’t seem to well …..sort of like me at all so I suppose it’s my failure. I suppose I’m just a bit too weird for them in the end….. Well (long Pause) there isn’t as much homework as I had predicted. In fact sometimes I only get one piece a night. And , wait for it, I know some pretty good excuses to use when you don’t do it. You know if there’s something really good on TV that you want to watch and you don’t have time.

**Joe:** Tell us then

**Jess:** We get lots but…… listen we’re on about friends you know. Keep with us Josh.

**Sam:** My mum makes me do it downstairs where she can see. I would do it though cos if you don’t ……. Well you just wouldn’t risk it. We can do it in school as well if we want. They have like this club you can go to at dinner and then they help you if you want as well. Some boys in my class go.

**Joe:** we get that as well in LSU and I go cos it’s easiest and then you don’t have to go out and get dissed. Sometimes we don’t get enough so I go anyway. It’s best to keep out of the way

**Josh:** You can go if you like I do it at home if I feel like it or get detention if they catch me.

**Sam:** You know you said about friendsand stuff well.. did you know we didn’t finish. In my class the girls are the worst for not bringing their homework and not following the rules about it. It’s a worry I think. Cos if you …. You know make the teacher cross they can be like not your favourite anymore and like not like anyone in the class and that gets everyone in trouble and that’s a worry. I mean if that happens then you don’t know what to do cos it’s like not fair when you do yours and everything. I get scared a lot of the time really that the others, well it does seem to be the girls will get us all into trouble with teachers and sometimes when you like feel that worried it’s hard to think

**Luke:** Yeah like detentions. They can get you detentions so if say on your group if you’re working in a group then if some of them are messing about and it’s not you then you have to worry that the teacher will get cross and then everyone in the group looks the same and might get detentions. It’s best if you don’t work with the messy about ones. Say like when I’m in maths I’m ..it’s in errr well I have to say the top set in my school so they don’t really mess about that much but you know that well my writing isn’t well good at all……

**Josh:** Just like me. They can’t read it but I’m not really bothered cos I know what I wanted to say so that’s their problem not mine

**Luke:** Yeah so like well …if you’re put in like what’s a bottom set then you get the messing about from the other kids and them you can’t work and you might get into trouble.

**What about the rest of you. What’s your experience of homework? Do you get much?**

**Luke:** Well like Josh not as much as they let you think there will be. But it’s a pain to do and it’s sometimes hard. But not science of course. You wouldn’t believe how easy science is at our school. I’ve done most of it before or read about it on the internet so you know how we all really looked forward to science and proper lessons and everything well it’s not that much different apart from when they show you experiments. It’s just the same as Y6 but easier. I have to tell everyone that I’m disappointed in it actually.

**Joe:** Yeah Luke know all

**Luke:** Well I think so and I will do something like be a scientist or physicist or something – well like Josh I suppose. What’s your science like? It’s like sometimes they think because you’ve got, you know Aspergers, like you’ve got to be thick or a retard of some sort and so they put you in all the wrong sets then they suddenly think, or your mum goes in, and they think hey…. err yeah… he doesn’t just talk strange he knows some stuff so if you’re lucky they will swap you. But if you get stuck with the thick bunch then you’ve no chance I mean because they just can’t behave themselves at all in lessons. All I wanted to do was to get on with my work in science cos we were like you know doing some good stuff for once but there was so much noise I couldn’t do it so it really got to me and I started to make you know some noises to stop it bothering me so much and stuff and put my hands over my ears and then can you believe it ….They sent me out of class. Well he did anyway that rubbish teacher

**Joe:** Yes well what I think is that with some of the good ones they sort of know their stuff like in lessons what to teach you and everything but no one tells them about Aspergers or anything like what you might do and not to send you out. That’s rubbish Luke I think

**Josh, D asked about science at your school. Will you tell us please?**

**Josh:** No not really, nothing to say. D knows how good I am at science so that’s it really.

**Sam:** Well….that’s that then so back to homework then. You know like don’t you that you have to do it. I like to do it at first. You know when I get in so I remember better.

**Jess:** Don’t you write it in your planner. I get help to do that so it’s good. But if I didn’t then I might not remember what to do all the time so I think it’s good that I get that help.

**Josh:** We’re doing space again, can you believe – so crap, boring, boring, boring and they don’t know what to do with it anyway so even more boring. We even made models – planets and things – so crap. Like we don’t know anything babies and retards. Don’t they know that some of us know as much as they do. I’m Aspergers you know… not thick. I tried telling that teacher but he made such a fuss so I don’t speak to him anymore. In fact I might change classes you see. I think that’s been a problem for me. You know …teachers and everything. I mean I know we’re Y7 but **we are not thick.** They just don’t get it

**Jess:** – swearing, swearing

**Luke:** Listen to Jess. We still have the same rules you know. We do don’t we?

**Joe would you like to say something?**

**Joe:** Well…… the good thing that’s what we’re on about isn’t it. I would say is science. Ha Josh! Like the experiments. Very different from little school. That’s what my sister calls it – little school and big school. And trips. Trips are fun but I was worried about it but I think my mum sorted it out.

**Sam:** Well in experiments or practicals they call them in my school you have to remember the rules They like tell you at the start like when you get in Year 7 and then they remind you. But it’s a worry you know that some kids well you know they mess around. I’m not sure that they will remember and that’s well a worry really. It could be dangerous. Other kids well they can be a pest really but they errr…don’t like it if I say anything so I just keep quiet if I can you know.

**Luke:** Design and technology – that’s good as well. Like wood and things. I do it in a small class so that’s better. It’s good to do different things sometimes but some of the machines look a bit scary if you really look. You have to wear goggle things as well so that’s a bit weird and at first I wouldn’t put mine on so they thought I wouldn’t be able to do it but then when they told me what could happen I thought I would and I suppose it’s been okay but they feel strange on your face and everyone looks wierd as well like …like well aliens or something cos you can’t see their eyes properly.

**Joe, Josh: –** freaky, freaky face

**Jess:** shut up you two….. freaky face yourself

**Sam:** Yeah my mum actually sampled my fruit salad cos we’re not doing wood, well you have to call it resistant materials you see, and she thought it was very good.

**What about your teachers? You have a lot more of them now.**

**Josh, Sam, Joe** Boring/ strict/ OK

**Explain that please Josh? You find your teachers boring.**

**Josh:** Well I would have to say that some are but – hey I can cope with that. You just have to put up with it and not tell them…. that’s what I’ve learned anyway. They talk to you like you’re stupid sometimes and that I can’t put up with though so I have to tell them about it. I have to say it doesn’t go down well with some of them I can tell you. You know when you read stuff and they say that we haven’t got a sense of humour. I mean like us with Aspergers or whatever. Well just take a look at my teachers. Hey…not all so bad but ….. How many times do you have to get in trouble for just saying what is true.

**Luke:** I …well I don’t think that you should do that at school. It’s going to get you in trouble. Keep quiet. You don’t want to get into trouble any more than you need to do you

**Jess:** Should I carry on then.I don’t always have much to do with the actual teachers, you know the ones that …. that teach the lesson at the front. The IR staff help me in most lessons, with someone else, not just me. So if I get stuck I can ask them instead you know. They are all nice to me and the same people I see in the IR in the morning so they know me and everything as well I suppose. It does make you feel better when there’s someone who’s nice to you I suppose. Sometimes it gets a bit much though I think. But then you know if anything went wrong I think they could help you or tell someone so err.. that would be good. You don’t feel like you’ve got to sort it out on your own you know

**Tell us what you mean by that Jess**

**Jess:** Sometimes you want to sit with your friends like though and there isn’t enough room for me and my support. It will be good when I can just do that like everyone and then chat and stuff. I mean I don’t want to get in trouble but sometimes I wonder what they are all talking about you know in a chatty lesson and I’m stuck working all the time. And I don’t think the teachers really care anyway cos they don’t really look at my work. They just talk to the help person not to me most of the time. But like once I hadn’t remembered my homework and the IR person they well told the teacher and everything so I didn’t get a detention or anything.

**Sam:** Well**…**I think that teachers can be strict but that’s kind of good I think. If other people, kids, ….pupils I mean, if they well misbehave you know then if the teacher’s strict they tell them off. That makes me feel less stressed, worried you know. Like if a grown up doesn’t tell them I might be well you know tempted and like my mum and well this help, from the Autism place Ian his name is, well they say that if I tell people off myself that.. that might bring back my problems you know like I’ve had before with the bullying.

**Joe:** my form tutor’s good and I like telling her things in tutor group lessons. She listens to me about stuff you know like the bus and everything. I mean it’s good on the bus cos you don’t have to walk to school and you do it on your own. A bit scary at first I thought it was but now it’s OK and more like everyone else . But that’s the trouble .. the everyone else . It would be better if it wasn’t for them but I like it … going on the bus and stuff. They kind of helped you to know how to do it before you got here .Like they said in that book to try it out and to practice and everything so we did.

**Sam:** My mum takes me to school still ..mmm its good a bit but the other kids go on the bus so sometimes that would be good as well but it could be scary and worrying if you had to do it on your own. My form teacher is alright I think as well. My mum says he knows things about autism cos she’s told him. I think she likes him so that’s good as well. He says I can go to him if anything worries me in school and he keeps checking up on me …stress and everything you see.

**Do you feel happy to do that Sam. Tell us about a time you have needed to go to your teacher.**

**Sam:** Yeah Mr G I told him about the work in maths and how confusing it was and how I didn’t understand when the teacher told us what to do in our books. He said I wasn’t listening but I just felt confused because it wasn’t like we did at our old school. It was a different way and I was completely lost and you were supposed to show your working out but I couldn’t do the working out so I kept getting in a panic and then I couldn’t do anything about it. I just sat there and looked out of the window and then you get in trouble for being lazy and not working. I don’t like the maths teacher now. He doesn’t get me.

**How did your form tutor help?**

**Sam:** Well he said he would talk to Sir and well I think he did because he did try to help me once and then he sent this helper over to see if I was OK but then next lesson he just went off in a rush again and I was lost. I think Mr G is going to try to get me changed sets so it’s not as hard. I mean I’m good at maths when I understand but if they don’t help you understand and they are so strict that they scare you then your lost I think.

**Josh:** Everything’s writing though I find you know writing this and then that even if you’re in a lesson that’s not about writing like say geography. I mean it should be a really good lesson cos it’s like more interesting that a lot of them but you have to write all sorts of stuff in your book and so if you like me like use your left hand and errm it gets all smudged then it’s hard to do and slow as well and that can make them think you’re thick as well when really it’s just about the writing. I forgot as well that makes the strict ones crosser then ever cos they say they can’t read your writing

**Luke:** You sort of know where you stand with the strict ones though… teachers again. Like if you try your hardest they will like you. Think so. It’s best if they like you that’s why I couldn’t do what Josh does you know telling them what he thinks and all. You want them to like you then it’s better. They might try to get you then and like well not get you like get you but well … you know the not being daft or stupid but the whole autism stuff. Like how you need things explained or freak when it’s windy in the windows

**Sam:** I think I would like to say some more things that have worried me if that’s all right. Is it? I mean it hasn’t all been good for me so far you know.

**Josh:** we’ve talked loads about bad stuff what about other good stuff I think

**Yes Sam of course that’s OK. Thank you for asking.** **Tell us your experiences**

**Sam:** Well…. No surprise really but it’s the bullying again. Not the same people cos one of the real problem bullies from the other school he sticks up for me now. Girls – they’re the problem now and that surprises me a bit really. That’s a new thing and they can be really nasty. You know like they pretend to be your friend and that’s good cos well .. you want to have friends and girls well that’s different you know cos of fancying and girlfriends and everything. Then they change and pick on you but not like when anyone can see or do anything and it really upsets you cos they all stick together and you are on your own and you don’t know what to do.

**Jess:** Did you tell on them or anything. What did they do. The girls in my school can be scary like when they stand around and watch you go past and then whisper about you. Is that what you mean. That gets to me

**Sam (**shakes head)

**Joe:** Well yes I think bullying, well…. not bullying perhaps, name calling you know dissing, that has been well I would say quite a lot of a problem. You don’t have to let it worry you, that’s what I found. Swearing and names – spaz that’s bad though. I mean we’re not spaz like they think.

**Luke:** Don’t you think they want to annoy you though? It’s not like real bullying like fighting or hurting you. I don’t think I would always tell on them for that. Not unless it was really bad cos like you want people to like you not tell tales. Sometimes on the bus it can be scary though cos they are sometimes bigger kids. I walked once after it had happened so my mum went into see my form tutor. At school you just need to keep out of the way when it happens to you I don’t think you’ll ever well …like stop them.

**Jess:** I’ve seen real bullying going on in my school though and I think that’s a worry cos they said they would be good at sorting it out. When they don’t then it worries you for in case it does happen to you sometimes. There’s a boy in my year and his mum’s kept him at home cos of Y 10s and what they did. Not sure what it was though cos I don’t know him. You just like to think that teachers will like sort it out for you…. you know. Tell us about the girls Sam don’t just stop.

**Josh:** Ginger must be the worst though. Do you get that Jess? Bet you do! I get fat, pudding and things but you just get used to it. What do they know - thickos

**Jess:** Sometimes but well you do just have to get used to it ( shugs)

**Joe:** Teeth – that’s it for me (D and J laugh)

**Josh:** The way you talk, not you - me I mean. Some Year 8’s followed me in the playground, well like you don’t call it that…

**Joe:** No they would laugh even more – spaz

**Josh:** But outside anyway. They started talking, shouting really in this well really posh voice…… said it was like me. Well I don’t see it. So anyway I didn’t like it so I told my form tutor and well I don’t go outside much anymore. But that’s fine I suppose I don’t care. They let me go to see the mentors about it but I don’t think they did anything to the others they try to get me to talk about it and give me stuff to say to them or what to do.

**Did you find that helpful?**

**Sam:** Well they sent me to them mentors at my school for the girl problem when my mum told them about it. They sort of listened to me and we talked about bullying and what it is and everything. I think someone had told them about me …. You know how I am and the autism and everything. So that’s what they wanted to talk to me about …I mean like it was my fault or something. I just wanted them to be my friends that’s all and look where it gets you.

**Jess/ Joe:** ah Sam/ girls ..rubbish/ thanks Joe

**Luke:** I mean I know that we were meant to go on to bad, or well not so good things now but….. well I think break times at my new school are better actually.

**Tell us why Luke**

**Luke:** Well… you know how at juniors you have to go outside no matter what. Unless it’s raining of course. And then at lunch time or dinner time the dinner ladies well they shout a lot. I mean they can be very strict…..

**Joe** Yeah – stricter then the strictest teacher

**Jess** Yeah and like they try to make you play their made up games with other kids even when you really don’t want to at all …like cos it’s so boring and you just want to do your thing

**Josh** They didn’t make me – just sent me inside for being rude. That’s the best way to get out of it I’d say. Anyway like at secondary it’s better cos they just don’t bother you and you can do what you like

**Luke** Not go out of the grounds though. My plan is to go outside for one break so that keeps them happy and then I go to the library. That’s where you can go it’s too busy at break. You know the corridors and everywhere and like around the tuck shop place. So it’s quieter there and there’s some peace.

**Does anyone else have somewhere to go at break time?**

**Jess** Well I can go the IR of course but the other kids. You know the ones that are …. Well I don’t want to say really cos we’ve been talking about calling names and things. But well the ones who get help. I mean they’re not autistic like me but they’re not well you know ‘normal’ if you like. Anyway they have this special room to go to. They don’t have to go out so that’s good about my school. So it’s good to have somewhere to go to get away from other people, well mostly the kids you know, when you’ve had enough or if something upsets you. It’s good to have people you know will be nice to you I think. The IR gets very busy though so sometimes I just stay around with my friends. I don’t really need quiet so much …err not any more anyway but at first it was good cos you could go there if you didn’t know where you were going next or anything and there is always someone to help you.

**Joe:** Yeah and the café is really smelly at our school. First I didn’t go in so I didn’t have any dinner. Then like when my mum found out there was real trouble cos theysaid before I went that they would do something about that and then they well… they must have forgot I suppose because they didn’t and I wasn’t eating anything. So then someone went in with me and I went to the front of the queue but that was just as bad cos it still smelled and they all still shouted and pushed even more.

**Jess:** Tell us what happened Joe. Our café smells as well but it’s a nice smell.. mm pizza and stuff. Problem for me anyway at first til I made my friends was not knowing where to sit or who you know to well… to sit with. I mean you could stay with the resource kids but some of them are so yucky when it comes to eating and some of them even stay in the base for their lunch so I needed to finds someone to sit with and that’s not easy if you don’t know anyone.

**Josh:** Well I don’t think people would want to sit with me anyway so that didn’t bother me ..I just find a corner and sit on my own ….easier that way you see. And anyway once someone sat by me but then he soon moved away….I wasn’t bothered

**Jess:** Poor Josh

**Joe:** That’s gross. So anyway now I don’t go in at all cos of the smell and stuff and I take a packed lunch with my food in it that smells OK. So I have to go in the Diamond room to eat it and then I can stay there for all of lunchtime if I want. So they do cool stuff like games and computers and things so that’s better than going outside. And let me say that once when I got well you know errr …stressed up in PE then that’s where I went to and they let me stay there or a bit til I was calmer again and they said I can do that so that’s good

**Josh:** I go to the library to use the computers. That’s not going to happen at any primary school I know! So another reason why big schools are better. They have better stuff and they stay off your back.

**Anything else that’s worried you in your new schools? Before you started you were worried about things like getting lost or needing the toilet in lessons, forgetting your books, that sort of thing**

**Sam:** Yeah they have like daft rules that well if you forget them then you’re in trouble but like if you remember them then you can’t tell anyone else that’s forgot or breaking them so I don’t get that at all.

**Jess:** Yeah well like you know in my school well you have to walk one way round. Not like backwards or forwards silly (in response to A’s and D actions) but like round the school and up and down the stairs and you know like if you’re following everyone else then it’s easy but if you’re on your own I sort of panic in case I’m doing the wrong things and I might even get a detention or something …I don’t know

**Joe:** PE PE yeah PE

**Luke:** Detentions

**Ok Joe. Tell us about PE. Jess we’ll come back to you next**

**Joe:** Well I’m a bit slow. You know getting changed and so now they let me use the disabled toilet. I think that might be because of the smell I don’t know….same as like for the café

**Josh:** Smelly toilets or smelly changing room. Poo boys feet! Poo. Our café doesn’t smell like boys feet

**Sam:** Well at our school the changing rooms are really horrible and like well everyone looks at you, especially if your not well …….the fittest of people (Josh and Joe laughs), and they’re so messy like pumps and trainers everywhere and the lost property bin over flows and there’s stuff all over. What a mess and very noisy and everything with all the shouting so it’s awful really before you even get in the lesson. My mum says they’re not looking but you have to get changed so quick you get in a muddle so that makes you slower and then they laugh all over again.

**Luke:** Rugby – that’s got to be the worst thing. They never pass to me because they know I’m no good.

**Joe:** Well people actually groan if I get put in their group so how worrying is that. I mean put in it as well. I can’t find one by myself cos I know what they’ll say and ….and no one’s going to choose me are they? Other kids don’t like having me there because they know I’m no good. That’s what these boys told me anyway. They pushed me out of the line when the teacher put me there and then I didn’t know what to do about it so I just stayed on the edge thing and the teacher just didn’t take any notice.

**Luke:** Yeah you know like because I’m tall when we started people always chose me cos they said I must be good or fast or well something but they soon knew I wasn’t so now it’s back to normal…just last again.

**Joe:** The teachers shout. Not just at me I mean. They don’t shout at me. I think they get the message. You know with the toilet thing (laughs). They shout at anyone though and they make fun of people as well. The shouting is bad though I mean it makes you jump even if it’s not for you… you feel as if it is and you have to try to stop yourself from being upset. It’s hard that. I even cried once and then everyone laughed and I had to be sent in. Sometimes I feel like in PE I’m just upset for every second and If they would let you keep your watch on I would watch every second go past but you can’t so you just don’t know when it’s going to end

**Sam:** Groups are hard though I think – not just PE I mean. Sometimes in science or some other lessons they say ‘now get in a group of 6 or 4’ (puts on teacher voice) or whatever. Then what do you do. I don’t know whether to wait for someone to get me or to try to join in with someone. Usually one of the girls grabs me so I just go with that.

**Joe:** That’s easy though group things …..cos then everyone else can talk

**Josh:** Yeah Joe you’re just lazy and well fiddling

**Sam:** No listen. You see that’s just it people don’t listen to me when we are supposed to have ideas or plan things. I just don’t get it. They are always going down the wrong track but they won’t listen when I tell them. Then they like fall out with you or call you names or like turn their back on you so you can’t join in and it confuses me I can tell you

**Luke:** My mum says that you have to listen to other people’s opinions

**Joe:** Yeah Sam

**Jess:** You know like the toilet thing, asking to go I mean well it’s not so bad as I thought I mean well I don’t usually go in lessons but there’s this boy in my form and he needs to go all the time so he has like this card that says he can and the teachers just let him go so it’s nothing to worry about and…… the same with getting lost I mean it was a bit worrying but well you just go with everyone also and you’re okay I think. They were a bit silly thing to get stressed about cos in the end at my school anyway well …they got it sorted before you get there or if you do get stuck they kind of always help you … they don’t dis you or anything.

**Joe:** well….. well you know I got so worried about things like that but I couldn’t really say it… not what it was about you know and my mum took me to see this lady cos I was errm …well stressed and stuff so I wasn’t going to go at all …to school I mean like in the summer in the holidays before we started and she well told me stuff about thinking …not sure really but just that it was a worry for me.

**Luke:**  Did you get it sorted out. I mean is it as bad as you thought it would be. Mine isn’t I don’t think.

**Joe:** Yeah I suppose ..I mean I get one of those pass things like Jess said and I mean I don’t use it much cos the other kids they well notice and then that’s sort of embarrassing I suppose and well…. I did get lost once but that was cos I couldn’t keep up and they had gone without me and it was PE so that was a really bad day. But anyway they helped me I bit I suppose

**Does anyone have any extra help in school? I know that Jess does.** **How about you Josh?**

**Josh:** No don’t need any. I’m Aspergers you know not thick. How much longer?

**We’ll set the timer. 5 minutes OK or do you need time out?**

**Josh:** Time out . Time out. Come on Luke– Lego

**OK Josh – Time out and 5 minutes till we stop for break. OK everyone**

**Joe:** I have some help in the Learning Support. You can go there if you feel well you know angry or upset. I don’t go every day or anything. And I get some help with lessons as well. That’s in the Learning Support, LSU they call it, as well.

**Sam:** We have the SENCOs office. It was that lady who came in the summer, here you know. But she’s been off, sick I think. Anyway you can still go and they are nice to you. So it’s good to have somewhere to go to get away from other people, well mostly the kids you know, when you’ve had enough or if something upsets you. It’s good to have people you know will be nice to you I think. I don’t get any help in lessons though but sometimes there is a lady who helps another boy who’s got special needs I think you know with his learning and things. Not autism though ….and she helps me as well with writing in my planner and reminding things.

**Jess:** Well in the IR you can go whenever, at lunch time or break and they will help you. And you get help in lessons, like writing in your planner and things as well. And you get some lessons in the resource so you can miss other things like PE sometimes. Which has to be good. They teach you stuff like about autism or about how to talk to people and stuff. When you get to Year 8 though I don’t think you get as much cos you don’t need it. It’s annoying though when other people came into the resource. I like having help in class though. We didn’t do detentions by the way.

**Sorry Jess. Tell us about that.**

**Jess:** Well you get them for the whole class at my school so even if you don’t deserve it yourself you have to do it. I’ve had 4 up to now.

**Sam:** That’s not fair though really is it. I mean if you haven’t done anything. I don’t think I would do it if they told me to. I mean it’s just not fair. Have you told them that you’ve got autism and they shouldn’t do that to upset you like …

**Jess:** Then you’d get another if you didn’t do it and that would be yours. They all know anyway but you can’t be different all the time …you just have to be the same as everyone else…that’s fair. You just have to get on with it. It’s nothing to worry about though

**Joe:** Can I say fire alarms and bells?

**Others:** Fire alarms/ rings etc

**Joe:** Well worrying I think and yes well worrying. Everyone pushes.

**Luke:** Not worrying –just annoying. You should hear the bell at my school. I nearlyjumped out of my skin when I heard it on my visits. It’s more like a siren I think and it makes you feel you should run and hide somewhere but I’m more used to it now …now it just annoys me.

**Sam:** Yeah Like at my school it’s just like a signal for everyone to push and shove you when you’re on the corridors. Like you could lose your bag or something off your back cos they push you so much and there’s so much shouting like what you’re going to do at break and everything and they can grab you and push you along.. even people you’ve never seen before and all the girls are talking all the times. Stairs are the worst bit cos you have to remember which side you can walk up and down on and if you go the wrong side then it’s like you have to fight your way through. I still think it’s all really scary and I don’t think I’m getting used to it at all yet …well if ever

 **Luke:** You know like at my school like err where my form room is well at the end of the corridor right at the end well when you come out when the bell goes and you sort of look down the corridor to the stairs where you need to get to for your lessons and all you can see is all these kids… pushing and shoving and all crowded together like bobbing around and coming towards you and it makes you sort of panic a bit really cos you thing now well.. how am I going to get through that lot or even well will it be safe cos you never know what could happen do you. And all the noise and everything. Sometimes I think I’ll just stay where I am but then you get pushed out of the door with everyone else and you just have to hope for the best. You know make the best of things but it can be very hard I think

**Joe:** Oh and before we finish can we do uniforms?

**Luke:** Yeah they’re just so strict. No trainers, proper trousers and everything. So annoying. It’s just like so uncomfortable and just another way to get into trouble if you don’t get it right and the catch you.

**Jess:** well I don’t mind so much really so I don’t think it’s major problem.

**Can** **you tell me about something that you think has helped you at your new school?**

**Luke:** I think there’s things they do errm.. teachers and everyone I mean that wouldn’t happen if they didn’t know about the Aspergers. I mean like they have this room you can go to at lunch if you need to you know for a bit of peace and quiet. That’s helpful sometimes if you’re getting a bit stressed and you don’t want to go out with others being loud and stuff. You can just be quiet by yourself and like play on the computers if you want to. Yeah that’s helpful ….I didn’t get that at the old school.

**Jess:** I think they do stuff they think will help you but it doesn’t always work out. Like err.. we have the IR so that’s for lunchtimes and stuff which is good but the other thing they do is social skills…

**Sam:** Yeah we have that as well …it’s good

**Jess:** Yeah but Sam …I think it’s good but we do things like rules for talking to people and stuff like not interrupting or saying rude things but that would be okay if all the other kids ……I mean like the not in the resource or like not autistic kids had the same cos I mean they interrupt and say rude things as well but no one teaches them not to. They try to get us to follow the rules for being polite to everyone else but they.re not always polite to people are they so that’s not right in the end I think.

**Sam:** Yeah well you don’t get into trouble as much if you know the rulesso I think those social things..groups are a good thing really and you well do it with other kids who like…well I’m not sure if they have the same autism and everything but they are special needs kids. Suppose though they well they ….don’t know that stuff either so it’s not like you could copy them. I mean sometimes I have to remind them. Like we did this role play thing and this boy couldn’t do it cos it was about asking to join in a group and it wasn’t like with a real group of normal kids so it wasn’t a good practice really and no one knew what to do apart from the teacher so it didn’t work to help us at all.

**Joe:** Help .. getting help in lessons is good cos it can be hard to keep up when the teacher talks a lot and talks fast. Sometimes lessons like English is hard cos I think they think that you’re more clever than you are and then they go too fast so its hard to understand what they mean or what you have to do. Sometimes I just sit there and think well now I am confused, I mean really confused but if you don’t have someone who helps you then you just have to stay confused I think. There isn’t any other way

**Does anyone else have help in lessons? I know that Jess does**

**Josh:** Well you could say that they tried to give me some help but I do not want it or need it. I like the idea of a room to go to though to you know…keep you away from the rest of them and all the messing about. But no I don’t need help. That would make me look stupid and well I know I’m not so I’d rather not go that way If you don’t mind.

**Sam:** So you think we must be stupid cos we get help. That’s like well….. bullying I think cos you call us names. You can’t do that if you’re autistic as well. Like not to us you shouldn’t.

**Joe:** That’s awkward so let’s change the subject I think. What about the Learning Mentors. At our school they help you with things like if you get cross or angry or upset about everything so that’s good. And they made like a group of other kids like to help me and they know about the autism and stuff so I can go round with them if I want to.

**Sam:** I don’t .. well I wouldn’t want the others in school to know about the Asperger stuff cos then they would pick on you wouldn’t they. They would in my school anyway. I think it’s best to be kept quiet. It’s okay of teachers know though then you don’t get in trouble so much if you do weird stuff or say weird things like you do. I know it’s not really in school but for help then my mum does. She always checks that I’ve got my stuff. You see like all the books and stuff for the day and that stops me getting into trouble with teachers so that’s helpful but school didn’t do it err… my mum did. And I’ve like got this list in pictures that the help person did for me because it was getting a bit of a problem you know the forgetting stuff. It’s like a tick off list but I don’t always remember but that‘s a help as well.

**Joe:** you know don’t you thatit’s not well……cool but you have to not care. They’re going to know something’s up anyway if you act weird and stuff

**Josh:** Yeah not …err bothered is best . Just be as weird as you want… what can they do …oh okay then the bullying but just ignore them I say

**Jess:** Oh yeah I forgot. I used to have one of those and a picture timetable in my planner when I first got here. Sometimes you don’t remember what to bring to school so it’s good to have something to remind you. But most of the time I’m better now and I think so anyway so I don’t use my list thing as much but it did help me at first I think so.

**Joe:** Yeah but like they can help you with things if they know about the autism. Like when you can’t explain things when you’re cross but other kids need to know as well in case you do things wrong and if they don’t know about the autism they will think you’re well….weird or something.

**What do you think Luke or Jess – about people knowing about your autism?**

**Jess:** Well they sort of have to know in my school cos of the resource I mean like if you’re in there well you’ve got it haven’t you so if you mind well there’s nothing you can do is there …just have to get on with it I suppose. But well I wouldn’t tell anyone who didn’t know. I mean like when I go out or stuff like that. You know once when I was on the bus well my friend she told like err …everyone that I’d got this thing and it made me weird and do weird stuff and everything like and then she asked me to talk about my things and then they laughed at my voice I think it was but I don’t know why and so I don’t sit with her now but she’s well still my friend but I well …she doesn’t talk to me anymore she just laughs when I see her and talks to this other girl.

**Luke:** My mum tells everyone she can like all the teachers and all that.I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone but you know if you have all this stuff that Jess says like people to help you in class and all then everyone is going to know there’s something not right. But anyway if they know well what’s the fuss …better than being odd I think but well no that’s no fun either well whatever happens I suppose. Perhaps the teachers tell them I don’t know

**Is there anything else any one would like to share about their experiences in their new school**

**Luke:** Just good I suppose

**Sam:** Yes I would have to agree really. I mean although there is still the bullying I don’t think it’s so bad as it was

**Jess:** Well I really like it. It’s much better than I thought it could be

**Josh:** good apart from boring teachers and writing

 **Joe:** good apart from PE and err …other stuff

**Do you think anything helped you before you moved school? Visits to your new school for example?**

**Sam**: Yeah well like went all together but then me and my Mum…. we sort of went on our own. It was like a special invite thing and we met the special needs lady. That was good she was nice but then I didn’t see her again when I got there so well … what’s the point in that then I wonder.

**Joe**: Well you see like from our school well… everyone goes together and then all the special needs kids go as well ..together I mean. So you well get some extra visits to everyone else and they show you the special needs places to go and everything. That was good that day apart from they like made me tell everyone else in my class about it ..cos it was like before they got to go you know. So then well everyone knows you’re like the special needs don’t they and then well that’s more dissing again. But I have to say that the all together day was well … I would say quite terrifying really. That’s what I felt anyway but then I suppose that’s the way it is so you might as well know. But it does scare you and make you worry.

**Sam**: Yeah I was scared as well cos we saw a kind of well …incident I would call it. You know a bullying incident. Someone got done by a big kid in the playground and we say it all. So that was very worrying. But we went and told cos like with my mum being there and everything you could in the rules and… I think they were going to sort it out so that was good.

**Luke**: What scared you Joe. Was it noisy and things. That was what I thought was really bad.. all the noise and shoving and stuff like when the end of the lesson came. But I thought the lesson bit was good really. I mean it made you want to go then like as something different …like a bit exciting

**Joe**: Well they made us do a PE lesson so that wasn’t good. I mean everyone was shouting and I think they were excited but well .. for me it was the worst thing. I think I saw the worst bits of school for me anyway.

**Jess**: We got to go loads of times and sometimes you did quizs and treasure hunts around school so that was fun. But like it’s …..err not real is it. Not well…like it really is. When you go before like well everyone makes a fuss and is nice to you but when you get there you’re … well they don’t really take that much notice of you. You just have to get on with it I suppose. Like finding your way around and stuff.

**Josh**: They make like they’re selling it to you I think. Like sort of….. ‘come to our school and do all these exciting lessons and have this big posh new building’. Then when you get there it’s just well… school same as ever.

**Joe**: We had this like work book thing to do school but it was just writing down the things you had found out really like about homework and things. I don’t think it really helped me …not really

**Sam**: The learning mentor at my old school she come to see me at home and we did this work thing in a book about all the different lessons and where to put you things and maps and everything but well … it’s not like really being there. Not really

**Jess**: yeah like in my book you had to write things down about yourself and that was supposed to tell everyone … teachers I mean err well … all about you I suppose. But well I don’t know if they read it. I mean it’s not like they knew you when you got there at all.

**Luke**: well I liked doing mine but …not sure if it helped at all. I mean I put all sorts of stuff in it like about being good at ..well liking science and things but I don’t think the teachers took much notice. Oh yeah and like not liking pushing and things like on the corridors but they didn’t change anything …it didn’t make any difference. It made you find out things but them it made you worry about some things when you did.

**Jess**: What I think is teachers might know about you but I don’t think they think they have to bother with you when you’ve got your help person. They just kind of ignore you… and sometimes they talk to her and tell her what to do instead of me and then she tells me. Like I’m deaf

**Josh**: Well we’re just there now aren’t we so all that stuff doesn’t matter anymore. We’ll just have to make the best of it I suppose.

**Luke**: Come on Josh – it’s not all bad you know. Not so bad as we thought it might be but then well…. not as good either. It’s just like well…. school I suppose.

**Jess:** Well yeah it’s all okay really…..I mean yeah I like it and everything you know. More than..

**Sam**: well you’ve got all that help and stuff though you know Jess I mean we haven’t got help all the time like you … that’s got to make it better I think anyway.

**Josh**: too much though don’t you think? I couldn’t cope with all that people around and fussing all the time. Anyway I’ve said what I think all the way through.

**Yes thank you all for talking to us and to each other. I think it’s time to finish now**