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AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS AND PRIMARY-SECONDARY TRANSITION

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Transition from primary to secondary school has been a focus of concern regarding pupil anxiety, social integration, lack of progression and under-achievement, particularly for children/young people with special educational needs (SEN). Previous studies often over-depended on data from professionals and treated all SEN as similar. This study gathered data specifically from children/young people with autistic spectrum disorders and their parents (contrasting this with the views of professionals), adopting a more intensive case study methodology. A large number of transition support arrangements were identified. In 4/5 cases the arrangements were delayed and/or incomplete, with a number of specific problems. Despite the size and complexity of their new school, the children/young people were positive about transition, but wanted real inclusion in school activities. Parental evaluations of transition arrangements were considerably lower than those of professionals. Stakeholder perceptions of what worked and did not work were contrasted. Commonalities and differences in the relevant development needs of school staff were identified. Implications for future research, policy and practice are explored.

The transition from primary school to secondary school is a crucial time for children/young people (Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Smith & Kerr, 2005), and has concerned stakeholders for a long time (Huggins & Knight, 1997). Issues of continuity and progression between primary and secondary schools were highlighted in government thinking in the U.K. as early as the Plowden Report (1967). The transition process involves challenges for all children/young people, and for other stakeholders such as parents/carers and professionals (Johnstone & Patrone, 2003). For children/young people with special educational needs (SEN) in general, and those with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in particular, these challenges are likely to be more complex. There may be additional demands associated with decision-making about appropriate supports and resources in the new educational context. This study investigated the perceptions of transition of children/young people with ASD and their parents in depth.

There is evidence of a decline in performance by some children/young people after transfer to secondary school. Galton and colleagues (Galton & Willcocks, 1983; Galton, Morrison & Pell, 2000) found that although measures of motivation and enjoyment generally remained high during the first year at secondary school (and actually rose in the first few months), some children/young

people were achieving less in basic skills by the end of their first secondary year than at the end of their last primary year. Similarly, Croll (1983) found that all children/young people in all stages made some measurable progress in basic skills at primary school, but that some pupils in the first year after transition to secondary school showed losses. Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, and Trickett (cited in Mizelle, 1999) also reported that as children/young people made the transition into high school, many experienced a decline in grades and attendance. Hertzog, Morgan, Diamond and Walker (1996) found that after transfer some children/young people viewed themselves more negatively and experienced an increased need for friendship.

Also, transition to secondary school may be a source of considerable anxiety and emotional impact for children/young people (Shaw, 1995). Delamont (1991) found that children/young people about to make the transition to secondary school had expectations greatly influenced by *horror stories* communicated by their peers. Lucey and Reay (2000) suggested that children/young people with special educational needs were likely to find the move more daunting. However, they also presented evidence from case studies that this was not always the case, and school transfer could be infused by excitement at the prospect of *moving on*. This finding is similar to those of Graham and Hill (2003), and Zeedyk, Gallaher, Henderson, Hope, Husband and Lindsay (2003) who reported that transition leads to anxiety but children/young people also positively anticipate the new opportunities. The management of introductory visits had an important role in increasing or reducing anxiety, and children/young people were particularly sensitive to pupil-teacher interactions in the school being visited.

Frank and Jeffrey (1985) found that transition for children/young people with SEN often included three pre-transfer components: contact with senior secondary staff; pupil visits to the secondary school and parental involvement. However, practices often varied widely between feeder primaries to the same secondary school. Some primary schools believed that children/young people should transfer with detailed written records, whereas others preferred a *fresh start* to avoid the negative social labeling. Frank and Jeffrey advocated the former view - transfer of information from the primary school to all members of staff in the secondary school (not just guidance staff /senior management). The issue of what is then done with such information is a step beyond.

Studying five secondary schools and their feeder primaries, Hobbs, Kerr, Sylvester and Williams (1987) found wide variation in patterns of pre-transfer visits and methods used to share information. Within the secondary schools, they found a lack of continuity, repeating of work, and particular failure to meet the transition needs of children/young people with special educational needs. Needs for more curriculum liaison, social links and joint work were identified. Dee (2005) has explicated many strategies for facilitating successful transition.

However, previous studies have tended to gather data from professionals, by survey and from archival sources, rather than from the service users themselves. Additionally, those studies which addressed SEN issues did so in a general way, even though children/young people with different SEN might face very different transition challenges. No previous study focused upon the perceptions of children/young people and parents (contrasting these with the views of professionals) specifically for children/young people with autistic spectrum disorders. The investigation reported below addresses this gap in the literature, adopting a more intensive case study methodology.

Research Questions
1 What are the perceptions of stakeholders with regard to current arrangements to support the primary-secondary transition of children/young people with ASD?

2 What are the perceptions of stakeholders with regard to development of practice for the effective primary-secondary transition of children/young people with ASD?

3 What differences might be evident between different stakeholders?

METHOD
Sampling
The psychological service of a large local authority in Scotland is divided into four area teams covering the city, each roughly equal in size. A quadrant was selected on a convenience basis, as known to contain a total of five children/young people with ASD about to make the transition from primary to secondary school (note that pupils transfer to secondary school at the age of 12 in Scotland). This quadrant encompassed a wide range of socio-economic status. All five were male and their SEN has to be documented according to statutory requirements in the U.K. Key stakeholders were defined as the child, his parent(s)/career(s), the child's current primary school or communication support unit head teacher, the current speech and language therapist, the current school/educational psychologist, and a teacher in a position of responsibility from the proposed receiving secondary placement (including: mainstream secondary principal teacher of learning support, mainstream communication support unit head teacher [2], special school head teacher or deputy [2]). As there was some overlap in professional stakeholders across cases, 24 stakeholders participated.

Cases
Details of the cases are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Details of Cases

Case No.	Age at time of study (years)	Diagnosis	age at diagnosis (years)
1	12	Autistic spectrum disorder	8
2	12	Asperger's syndrome	10
3	12	Asperger's syndrome	8
4	13	Asperger's syndrome	7
5	13	Asperger's syndrome	7

Instrumentation
The core content of the interview schedules used was derived from key issues identified in the previous literature and the current research questions, adapted to create a differentiated interview schedule for each type of respondent containing both relatively closed and open elements. Solution focused approaches (De Jong & Berg, 2002; Wagner & Gillies, 2001) informed the construction and use of the interview schedules employed in the study. In particular, solution focused scaling was used to elicit the perceptions of participants in terms of where they placed themselves on key bipolar constructs related to the transition process for children/young people with ASD. An example item from the interview schedule for primary teachers is given below:

> *Please rate on a one to ten scale the following possible staff development / support inputs in terms of how useful you think they would be in helping you work even more effectively with children/young people with ASD. Please explain your answer wherever you feel you can.*
> *Help in strategies for responding appropriately to autistic behaviour.*
> *Not useful 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10 Very useful*

Draft interview schedules were piloted with a set of stakeholders for a child who had special educational needs associated primarily with physical impairment but with some autistic features (who was also about to make the transition from primary to secondary school), and revised accordingly. The complete set of interview schedules is available on request from the authors.

Data Analysis
Some interview responses were easy to categorize for the purpose of making comparisons between stakeholders, others were more difficult. Emerging themes were identified, and then all responses subjected to systematic content analysis using those themes, as advocated by Weber (1990). Inter-

rater reliability of coding in categories for comparison was undertaken and is reported in context below. Results are given in textual and numerical form, the latter including descriptive statistics where appropriate.

RESULTS
Diversity of Transition Routes
Five quite distinct transition routes with associated arrangements were identified (see Table 2 next page).
Thus a large number of possible transition arrangements were identified (frequencies >1 in parenthesis):
➢ Child individual pre-placement visit to secondary school, with parents (3)
➢ Further child individual pre-placement visits to secondary school (2)
➢ Special Liaison/outreach teacher visits to primary class (3)
➢ Secondary teacher visits to primary school (2)
➢ Primary teacher visits to secondary school
➢ Information passed from primary to secondary school
➢ Information passed from secondary to primary school
➢ Open day at primary school involving many parents and children/young people
➢ Open day at secondary school involving many parents and children/young people (2)
➢ Induction program (2 days) in secondary school while child still primary age
➢ Secondary teacher attended last case review in primary school
➢ Secondary teacher home visit

Table 2
Transition Routes and Arrangements

Type of Transition	Description of Transition Arrangements
Case 1 Mainstream primary $\Rightarrow$ Mainstream secondary	The Principal Teacher of Learning Support from the receiving secondary school visited the primary school one period per week in blocks of six weeks commencing in the previous October to observe all children/young people and liaise with teachers. The primary school completed a transfer information form for every child; the form had an appendix detailing the target child's special educational needs. The secondary school held an open meeting for parents of all transferring children/young people in May. The secondary school hosted a fully timetabled two-day induction programme for all transferring pupils in first week in June. The Principal Teacher Learning Support from the receiving secondary school attended the statutory review for the child in the summer term.
Case 2 Mainstream primary $\Rightarrow$ Secondary communication support unit	As the placement decision was delayed until mid-May, the normal policy of primary-secondary liaison for the child and parents to visit the secondary school was not implemented. The child was excluded from school on three occasions between March and June, so transition arrangements took place mainly from home. This took the form of informal visits by the outreach teacher from the secondary communication unit to home and school, ahead of formal placement decision.
Case 3 Primary communication support unit $\Rightarrow$ Secondary communication support unit	As the placement decision was not made until mid-May, the normal policy of primary-secondary liaison was both delayed and incompletely implemented. The psychologist accompanied the parent on a pre-placement visit to the secondary communication unit in January. The outreach teacher from the secondary communication unit made only one visit instead of implementing the normal two. The child made two visits to the secondary communication unit but these were delayed until the end of June. The primary-secondary liaison took place on an informal basis, ahead of placement decision.
Case 4	As the placement decision was delayed until mid-May, the normal policy of

Primary communication support unit ⇒ Autism specific day provision	primary-secondary liaison was both delayed and incompletely implemented. The parent visited the school on 14 May and the child was offered a place on 15 May. Staff from the secondary placement visited the primary placement on 31 May. The child made three brief visits to the secondary placement in June. The child and parent attended the school fete at the secondary placement in late June. Primary-secondary liaison also took place on an informal basis between Head Teachers ahead of placement decision.
Case 5 Primary communication support unit ⇒ Autism specific residential provision	The Principal of the residential provision made a home visit in June 2001. As the child then spent nine months with no placement other than home tuition the normal transition procedures were both severely delayed and incompletely implemented. An offer of a temporary placement on an assessment basis was finally made in April 2002. The child and his parent made two visits to the school immediately before the placement commenced in May 2002.

However, *visits* could be of varying numbers, duration and content. Teacher visits might involve talking to few staff, or might include observing the child in class. Child visits might include cursory inspection of buildings, or lengthier engagement in activity with teachers and children/young people. There was also mention of *informal* arrangements which were not (or could not be) specified. In 4/5 cases the arrangements for a particular child were delayed or incomplete. This pattern was similar to Frank and Jeffrey's (1985) findings that actual practice varied widely. However, the professionals involved reported preparedness to implement structured and comprehensive transition programs that were congruent with the best practice nationally and internationally.

Children/young people's Perspectives on their New School
The children/young people's responses to the idea of their new school were generally very positive. All the children/young people reported that they knew which school they were going to, and all except one child had visited the new school at least once at the point of interview. One child reported having visited his new school three times. A theme that emerged repeatedly was that the children/young people particularly valued opportunities for practical participation in school activities.

Asked what they thought their new school would be like, the themes which emerged were that it was big and there would be lots of new rules to learn. One child expressed his regret that his school was at the other side of the city, which he thought might make it hard to play after school with the new friends he would make. The child who was going to a five-day residential placement spontaneously volunteered that he was worried about waking up at night and being afraid, and particularly that this might annoy the teachers there.

Asked how adults could help them when changing school, a dominant theme was to help them feel prepared. One child said he needed help to make friends. Several of the children/young people spontaneously said that they found the visits to their new school very helpful.

Perceptions of Other Stakeholders: Transition Arrangements
Considering the perspectives of other stakeholders, overall evaluation of the transition arrangements by parents was considerably lower than that of the professional stakeholders (see Table 3). The difference between parents (mean = 2.75) and secondary teachers (mean = 6.25) was particularly striking; while the ratings made by educational psychologists were only a little greater than those of parents (mean = 3.40).

Thus a large number of problems were identified (frequencies >1 in parenthesis):
➢ Delay in placement decisions (2)
➢ Exclusion from school created further problems (2)
➢ Full range of provision not explained/understood

- ➢ Lack of communication between professionals
- ➢ Lack of consistency between local health provider agencies and education department (school district) priorities
- ➢ Insufficient provision for particular combinations of needs
- ➢ Lack of places in appropriate provision
- ➢ Lack of professional resource/time for supporting transition
- ➢ Case transfer between professionals at transition time

It can be seen from Table 3 that delays in the transition arrangements emerged as a predominant theme. Indeed, this theme appeared to provide an overarching context for many other perceptions noted by stakeholders. The overarching theme of delay was, therefore, explored more fully. A series of mutually exclusive coding categories were developed as follows: (1) no delay in the transition process noted by participant; (2) delay in transition noted by the participant but no effect on transition process attributed to delay; (3) delay in transition noted by the participant with minor negative effect on transition process attributed to delay; (4) delay in transition noted by the participant with major negative effect on transition process attributed to delay. Coding was done in parallel by a project researcher and an independent researcher. Inter-coder reliability was high (Cohen's Kappa 0.86).

Table 3
Mean ratings of transition arrangements by stakeholders (from 1 inadequate to 10 adequate)

Stakeholder mean rating	Why did you arrive at that point?	What things would need to change to move you further up the scale?
Parents n = 4 mean= 2.75	Excessive delay in placement decisions held up the transition process and brought a lot of uncertainty and stress. The full range of provision was not explained. Lack of communication between parents and professionals.	Need to make placement decision earlier to prepare child for new school. Professionals should work together to facilitate communication with parents. As a parent I need to challenge the system more.
Primary Teachers n = 5 mean= 5.40	The delay in the placement decision was horrendous it was difficult to contain everyone's anxiety June is far too late to make placing decisions. The outreach teacher was proactive and started the communication process before final placement decision.	Need to make placement decision by February in the context of a strategic admissions body to avoid the uncertainty of secondary mainstream placing request availability. Need to fill the current gap in provision for children/young people who have both autistic spectrum disorder and significant learning difficulties. Need parental permission to discuss the child's difficulties with the child openly.
Secondary Teachers n = 4 mean= 6.25	Excessive delay prevented secondary school staff from seeing the child in the context of his primary school. Exclusion from school interfered with the normal transition process.	Need more long term strategic planning of placements in context of a joint assessment team. Need more communication between education service managers and other professionals in placement decision-making.
Psychologists n = 5 mean= 3.40	Being excluded in the transition period compounded other problems. Potential provisions had no free places and there were no meaningful alternatives for the family. A severely delayed placement decision brought anxiety and stress to the family.	Earlier placement decision-making, preferably just after Christmas but by Easter at the latest. More time for assessment during the transition period.
Speech and	The speech and language therapist	The mainstream school could be even

Language Therapists n = 2 mean= 5.50	highlighted the child's needs and the outreach support teacher brought help to a stressed situation. The educational transition process is not currently prioritized. Transfer of cases between speech and language therapists at transition is not good. Lack of consistency between Health Board and education priorities.	more aware of the role of the outreach support teacher. A clearer definition of the role of the speech and language therapist in transition. The placement decision should be made earlier and with greater multi-agency involvement.

Table 4 shows that (taking the mean of both coders), 19.5 (65%) of the 30 sets of data (n=24 participants) featured the perception that the transition procedures were delayed and that this had a major negative impact. This perception of delay was in evidence for all transition routes (with the exception only of the mainstream primary to mainstream secondary transfer route, which of course would have been the default placement for the child concerned).

Table 4
Content analysis of stakeholder interview comments on delay

No delay noted		Delay with minor effect		Delay with major effect		Total	
Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
9.5	32	1	3	19.5	65	30	100

In many cases the final placement decision was not made until May or even June. There was evidence that this was associated with high levels of stress and anxiety for some children/young people and their families, and that this presented additional problems for primary school teachers in managing transition arrangements. There was a widespread perception among stakeholders that the delay in transition was attributable to a large degree to postponement in making placement decisions.

Breaks in Schooling owing to Delay and Exclusion
Breaks in schooling occurred in two of the five cases studied. In one case a child was out of formal school-based education for approximately ten months owing to extended placement delay. In another case the discontinuity was due to exclusion from school as a result of reported 'behaviour and conduct difficulties' on the part of the child.

These discontinuities of educational provision led to negative and disruptive interactions within the transition process. Such discontinuities also seemed to be associated with the highest levels of stress, conflict and negative attribution between the child, parents and professionals. It must be acknowledged that it is difficult to make objective and definitive causal attributions between these factors. However, some parents clearly indicated that they felt that they had to challenge the system to obtain the provision they felt was necessary for their child.

Where an interruption in schooling occurred because of unavailability of a placement that was acceptable to the parent, the parent attributed the difficulty to the fact that educational professionals had not explained the full range of provision (note that parental choice is statutorily embedded in the U.K. Education system). The parents of both children/young people who were subject to breaks in educational provision expressed the view that the full range of provision was not explained to them. Where the discontinuity occurred because of exclusion, the parent attributed the difficulty to negative attitudes and lack of objectivity on the part of teachers about the child's difficult behaviours.

Inter-Agency Working and Joint Assessment
Several stakeholders suggested that an earlier and more proactive approach to making placement decisions about all children/young people with ASD would be beneficial. Although speech and language therapists seemed to be acutely aware of the importance of their assessment at the

transition stage, they felt that transition processes were not a high priority within their formal job remit. Indeed, one speech and language therapist indicated that she would very much welcome a clearer recognition of the need to prioritize more formal input to transition processes within her remit.

Perceptions of What Works
In order to more closely examine specific issues that arose in specific provisions, what follows focuses on three specific cases, outlined in Tables 5, 6 and 7. Case 1 was chosen to examine perceptions of what was working and not working for a child who was in the process of making an apparently relatively problem free transition from his local mainstream primary to his local mainstream secondary. Case 2 was chosen to search for particular insights into stakeholder perceptions with regard to a child who had a particularly problematic placement in a mainstream primary school and who was making the transition to a communication support unit in a mainstream secondary school. Case 4 was chosen to examine stakeholder perceptions of what was perceived to be working and not working for a child who had an apparently successful placement in a primary communication support unit and who was making the transition to an autism specific day provision after a particularly difficult placement decision-making process.

Table 5
Case 1 - Stakeholder Comments on What Works: Summary

Mainstream primary	
What was working?	**What was not working?**
Parent's perceptions Enabling the child to take part. Improving his self-esteem.	**Parent's perceptions** Nothing identified.
Teacher's perceptions Positive expectations that the child will access the mainstream curriculum. Avoiding him seeing himself as different.	**Teacher's perceptions** Nothing identified.
Psychologist's perceptions Playing to the child's strengths in terms of supporting his ability to access peer support for himself.	**Psychologist's perceptions** The school's approach to playing down the child's autistic difficulties could be construed as controversial.
Mainstream secondary	
What will work?	**What will not work?**
Parent's perceptions Getting the child involved with encouragement and praise	**Parent's perceptions** Problems with changing teachers and different teaching styles
Teacher's perceptions Difficult to predict what will work until the child arrives in school.	**Teacher's perceptions** Nothing identified.
Psychologist's perceptions Ability of the learning support teachers to work with the child and the parents.	**Psychologist's perceptions** Nothing identified.

Thus, a large number of positive interventions were identified by different stakeholders (frequencies >1 in parenthesis):
➢ Positive/*normal* expectations (inc. by mainstream teachers) + expect surprises (4)
➢ Individualized social and communication skills training (3)
➢ Close liaison/good relationships between specialist & regular teachers (3)
➢ Individual assessment and programming (2)
➢ One-to-one teaching (2)

- ➢ Small group teaching (2)
- ➢ Competent and intensive specialist teacher input (2)
- ➢ Working with child's strengths
- ➢ Encouragement and praise
- ➢ Enhancing self-esteem
- ➢ Close teacher/child/parent liaison
- ➢ Outreach support
- ➢ Facilitating pupil engagement in activities
- ➢ Circle of Friends

However, an equally large number of negative factors were identified (frequencies >1 in parenthesis):
- ➢ Peer group relationships (especially large groups) (2)
- ➢ Failure to secure parental permissions (2)
- ➢ Minimizing child's difficulties/lack of objectivity in teachers (2)
- ➢ Changing teaching and learning styles
- ➢ Negative attitudes in teachers
- ➢ Liaison with too many teachers
- ➢ Demanding more time/resource from mainstream teachers
- ➢ Staff illness/absence
- ➢ Failure to use continuum of provision strategically
- ➢ Traveling out of own community
- ➢ Lack of linkage to mainstream/normal environment

Table 6
Case 2 – Stakeholders' Comments on What Works: Summary

Mainstream primary	
What was working?	**What was not working?**
Parent's perceptions One to one working when available.	**Parent's perceptions** Negative attitudes on the part of teachers. Lack of objectivity on the part of teachers.
Teacher's perceptions Small group work that focused on the child's social and communication skills. The Circle of Friends approach was particularly effective. Outreach support for the child helped when relationships were particularly strained in school.	**Teacher's perceptions** Staff illness including teachers and SEN auxiliary, which may have been a result of stress. Failure to negotiate parental permission to discuss the child's difficulties openly with him.
Psychologist's perceptions Nothing identified.	**Psychologist's perceptions** Conflict in personal relationships including parent-teacher, child-SEN auxiliary, and child with peers, which led to exclusion from school. Failure to negotiate parental permission to discuss the child's difficulties openly with him.
Communication support unit attached to a mainstream secondary school	
What will work?	**What will not work?**
Parent's perceptions The child feeling less stressed in this environment.	**Parent's perceptions** Child having to travel out of his community.
Teacher's perceptions Intensive support for social communication skills to allow the child to access mainstream. Close liaison between the communication	**Teacher's perceptions** The first month will involve some difficult readjustments for all concerned including parents, child and staff.

support unit and the child's mainstream teachers. The communication support unit has now been in existence for two years and we are slowly managing to change the perceptions and practice of the mainstream teachers with regard to children/young people with ASD.	Impinging on mainstream teachers' free time or asking for additional involvement above their normal remit does not work; our approach has to involve lifting burdens on mainstream teachers rather than imposing them.
Psychologist's perceptions The outreach teacher has already begun to build a good relationship with the child and his parents.	**Psychologist's perceptions** Managing contact with a range of secondary mainstream teachers could be challenging. Possible conflict with other children/young people.
Speech and Language Therapist's perceptions High level of support from specialist teachers and speech and language therapists. Individual and responsive targeting of social skills development.	**Speech and Language Therapist's perceptions** Full integration could be problematic. Group dynamics with peers could be difficult.

Table 7
Case 4 - Stakeholder Comments on What Works: Summary

Communication support unit attached to mainstream primary school	
What was working?	**What was not working?**
Parent's perceptions Teachers have a lot of autism specific experience.	**Parent's perceptions** Nothing identified.
Teacher's perceptions Individual assessment and IEP for child. Teachers making good relationships with parents.	**Teacher's perceptions** Nothing identified.
Psychologist's perceptions Recognition of individual profile and personality of the child.	**Psychologist's perceptions** Nothing identified.
Autism specific day provision	
What will work?	**What will not work?**
Parent's perceptions Continuity of approach with previous primary placement.	**Parent's perceptions** Nothing identified.
Teacher's perceptions Individual assessment and IEP for each child. Small group work to focus on social skills.	**Teacher's perceptions** School does not have enough access to mainstream environments and peers. The lack of a strategic overview of the placement process is a problem at the moment with the result the existing continuum of provision is not being used as efficiently as could be.
Psychologist's perceptions Continuation of individual approach within small groups.	**Psychologist's perceptions** Large groups of children/young people are bewildering for this child; therefore mainstream environments are problematic.

Speech and Language Therapist's perceptions Continuity of approach with previous primary placement.	**Speech and Language Therapist's perceptions** Adolescence will bring particular challenges.

Staff Development

Staff development is often seen as a main enabler for the acceptance and inclusion of children/young people with a diagnosis of ASD into a wider range of provision, including mainstream schools. Thus it might be a key factor in extending the range of provision which may be available to children/young people with autism, as well as in successful transition per se. Mainstream personnel gave opinions on perceived usefulness of staff development inputs, and specialist autism teachers gave opinions on perceived ability to contribute to staff development.

The staff development inputs rated as most useful by primary teachers were:
- Help in responding appropriately to autistic behaviour;
- Help in differentiating the curriculum in order to emphasize social and communication skills;
- Help with matching an appropriate approach to teaching and learning with the preferred learning style of a child with autism.

The staff development inputs rated as most useful by secondary teachers were:
- Help in responding appropriately to autistic behaviour;
- Help in understanding autistic thinking and behaviour;
- Help in developing strategies to assess a child with autism in order to determine her/his learning needs.

Among the potential providers of staff development inputs, specialist teachers from the primary and secondary sectors rated themselves significantly higher than other stakeholders in their ability to contribute to the areas of need identified by primary and secondary mainstream teachers. However, with regard to strategies to assess a child with autism, specialist secondary teachers rated themselves considerably higher than their primary counterparts.

DISCUSSION

The sample size in this study was very small, yet included every relevant child within a geographical area, albeit at one moment in time. Whether the findings can be generalized to other geographical areas is uncertain, as structures, procedures and the effectiveness thereof might be very different in other areas. The data were subjective perceptions, perhaps colored by selective memory, but these stakeholders had real experiences which made them the *experts*. Additionally, issues raised by stakeholders were congruent with those raised in other parts of the UK (as reported in the literature), providing corroboration.

The finding that delay in transition arrangements was common echoes other studies (Shaw, 1995; Delamont, 1991; Mizelle, 1999). Some authors have suggested that such heightened anxiety may be an adaptive coping mechanism (Lucey & Reay, 2000; Measor & Woods, 1984). However, given the highly specific attributions by stakeholders in this study, the reported anxiety levels here may have been abnormally high.

The finding that parents assert that full range of provision was not explained to them is congruent with the results of a larger national survey conducted by Barnard, Prior and Potter (2000), which included evidence that 24% of parents thought they did not understand all the educational options before choosing a place for their child. These authors note that one in five children/young people with ASD is excluded from school at some point. They argue that attention to social and communication skills is crucial if exclusion from school is to be avoided for children/young people with ASD, but that social skills training is often neglected by schools and greater weight placed on academic achievement, which can lead to children/young people with ASD being excluded. However, in the current study there is an indication that teachers did consider social skills training

in school to be important - although they might not have been the same type of teacher as in the Barnard *et al.* (2000) study.

Would inter-disciplinary joint assessment teams have yielded swifter and more effective services? Such a proposition is to some extent supported by research carried out by Jordan and Jones (1997), who found that admissions policy and practice in autism specific provisions varied considerably both within and between different local authorities, to the extent that ostensibly similar children/young people with ASD received different placements and interventions. These authors recommended that each authority draw up criteria to guide admissions to schools and units, which should be linked to criteria to determine when a child should be moved on to a different placement.

CONCLUSIONS

A large number of possible primary-secondary transition support arrangements for ASD children/young people were identified. However, in 4/5 cases, the arrangements for particular children/young people were delayed and/or incomplete, and a number of specific problems were identified. Despite the size and complexity of their new school, the children/young people were positive about transition, but wanted real inclusion in school activities. They greatly appreciated transition arrangements when they happened. Parental evaluations of transition arrangements were considerably lower than those of professionals. Stakeholder perceptions of what worked and did not work were contrasted. Commonalities and differences in the relevant development needs of primary and secondary school staff were identified. Specialist teachers in primary and secondary sectors saw themselves as well placed to deliver such development.

The results showed that, despite widespread preparedness to implement planned transition arrangements, in many cases the transition program were delayed and disrupted due to postponement in the placement decision-making process. There was evidence to suggest that this delay might have given rise to increased levels of stress and anxiety in a range of stakeholders. It was suggested by stakeholders that this difficult situation could be avoided in future by more rational, timely, strategic and *joined-up* placement decisions (perhaps made by a joint assessment body). It was also suggested that this could potentially also lead to more efficient use of existing resources.

Analysis of stakeholder perceptions of what was working and not working revealed a diversity of views in mainstream schools about the extent to which it is appropriate to disclose and thereby highlight a child's difficulties, as opposed to seeking to de-emphasize and normalize them. In more autism-specific provision there appeared to be a more open and consistent view - that it was necessary to have an open dialogue with the child and other stakeholders, including the child and his peers, about the nature of the difficulties.

The results revealed a close match between the staff development inputs rated as most valuable by mainstream teachers of children/young people with ASD and specialist teachers' perceptions of their own ability to deliver such inputs. This suggests that the prerequisite expertise and motivation for a dynamic process of collaboration and mutually determined staff development might already exist within the system itself.

Future research in this area could be improved through longitudinal studies with larger samples. The solution-focused interviews in the current study proved a promising technique for deeper exploration of issues. Other methodologies worth exploring might include Personal Construct or Repertory Grid techniques, to investigate the sense that stakeholders make of their own work, organization and objectives - which presumably influences their actions. Future research needs to address knowledge transfer issues and transformation into practice and policy. This implies a need for local authorities to develop reliable and valid reciprocal feedback loops in their administrative systems.

The implications for policy and practice from this small scale study must be drawn with caution, not least as local authority contexts might differ greatly. However, there was abundant evidence that stakeholders suffered stress from delayed decisions, which were not made in a sufficiently strategic way. Informal outreach reduced stress and contributed to better assessment and decision-making. The systemic requirements implied include:

- Elimination of delay in placement decisions
- Elimination of exclusions from school
- Timely, planned, long-term strategic decision-making
- Better, faster, less formal, more realistic, reciprocal communication between all stakeholders
- A full range of provision, with available vacancies, explained/understood by all stakeholders, catering for combinations of needs rather than singular needs.
- Professional resource/time available to supporting transition effectively, without key worker change at transition.

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