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Developing Mainstream Resource Provision for Pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Parent and Pupil Perceptions

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Abstract

The diverse needs of pupils with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have led to a continuum of educational provision being promoted in many countries, and which is often developed at a local level. The majority of children and young people with ASD in the UK attend mainstream schools, and resourced mainstream schools are increasingly part of this continuum of provision. These schools offer additional environmental modifications and adult support over and above that normally provided by mainstream schools. How parents and pupils perceive such provisions has not previously been investigated. The current study was designed to explore the perceptions of parents and pupils in five primary and three secondary resource provision schools in one Local Authority during the pupils' first year at the provisions. A series of interviews took place with 16 parents and 9 pupils during this initial year. Data were analysed using inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecosystemic theory was used to conceptualise and organise the complex interactions between home, local education systems, school systems and sub-systems, and their impact on pupil outcomes over time. Findings and implications are discussed in relation to theory and practice.

Key words: Autism Spectrum Disorder; inclusion; education; resource provision; pupil perceptions; parent perceptions.

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Introduction

The number of children identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been steadily increasing since the 1970s, with current prevalence estimated at 1.7% among the primary school age population in the UK (Russell, Rodgers, Ukoumunne, & Ford, 2014), and parents reporting a 1.5% prevalence rate in children under 8 years in the US (Russell, Collishaw, Golding, Kelly, & Ford, 2015). There is debate about the causes of this increase: Lundström, Reichenberg, Anckarsäter, Lichtenstein, and Gillberg (2015) attributed it to broadening of diagnostic criteria, while Russell et al. (2015) identified an actual increase in behaviours associated with ASD, as well as greater parent and teacher awareness of ASD-related behaviours. ASD is recognised as occurring across the range of cognitive ability (Matson & Shoemaker, 2009), and many young people with ASD have co-occurring diagnoses, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, social anxiety (Simonoff et al., 2008), and language impairment (Leyfer, Tager-Flusberg, Dowd, Tomblin, & Folstein, 2008). There is also some overlap between ASD and SLI diagnostic categories (Dockerell, Lindsay, Letchford and Mackie, 2006) particularly in relation to pragmatic language skills. Given this diversity of individual profiles and needs, a continuum of educational provision from specialist to full mainstream has been established in many countries. (Bond, Symes, Hebron, Humphrey, & Morewood, 2016; Falkmer, Anderson, Joosten, & Falkmer, 2015).

In England approximately 70% of young people with ASD are educated in a mainstream education setting (DfE, 2014). Although parents and young people with ASD identify benefits of being included in mainstream, such as positive opportunities for social inclusion (McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2014; Falkmer et al., 2015), parents have expressed

concerns regarding academic achievement (Lee, Harrington, Louie & Newschaffer, 2008). Furthermore, pupils and parents have highlighted issues around coping with the social demands of busy mainstream schools (Lee et al., 2008; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). For some pupils with ASD significant adaptations to mainstream schools may be required to meet their needs. In response to this, many localities have established resourced mainstream schools which offer additional staffing and environmental modifications over and above what might normally be provided in a mainstream school. This enables more individualised planning and support (Frederickson, Jones & Lang, 2010).

A large number of surveys of parent views (e.g. 28 reviewed in Falkmer et al., 2015; Lindsey, Ricketts, Peacey, Dockerell, & Charman, 2016) and a smaller number of studies exploring pupil perceptions (e.g. McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2014), have been conducted. These highlight a range of supportive factors and barriers to mainstream inclusion for pupils with ASD which are broadly similar across studies. At the school level, these include good communication, positive peer relations, prevention of bullying, support from staff, positive teacher attitudes; and at the societal level, funding and legislative policy (Falkmer et al., 2015).

A comprehensive framework for analysing these interacting developmental and experiential factors is Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecosystemic model (2005) (see Figure 1). This organises the differing factors at the macrosystem, exosystem and microsystem levels, as well as incorporating the chronosystem (accounting for change over time). At the macrosystem level, political philosophies such as inclusion shape the experiences of parents and pupils. Although there has been a legislative push towards mainstream inclusion in many countries, parents are divided on the benefits of this for children with ASD (Tissot, 2011).

<<<INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>>>

A related consideration at the macrosystem level is diversity awareness. In the UK and other countries, disability legislation has emphasised the importance of accommodations to meet individual needs. However, this may not be enacted in a consistent way across mainstream schools. Starr and Foy (2012) found that 15% of parents of children with ASD reported that their child had been excluded from school at some point, which parents attributed to staff not being able to manage the child's behaviour. Many parents in Starr and Foy's (2012) study also reported resentment or prejudice towards them and/or their child from school staff or parents, although in other schools parents felt that their children were accepted and included.

The exosystem represents the next level of the model and focuses on the importance of institutions, including the local authority (LA), community, whole school systems and partnership-working. In the UK, decisions about young people's educational placement are made at the Local Authority (local governing body) level. Parents have found LA assessment processes bureaucratic and stressful, as well as lacking in the provision of clear information and support (Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers & Yuille, 2006; Tissot, 2011). Parents have expressed concern that decisions may be driven by financial and availability factors rather than what might be in the child's interests (Tissot, 2011). However, more recently Lindsay et al. (2016) found that the majority of parents of children with ASD who had been through statutory assessment reported good communication and support, although a minority felt unsupported and frustrated by the process. This change in views might reflect legislative changes which have taken place in response to wider concerns about parental involvement for pupils with special educational needs (Lamb, 2009). Other LA factors which can be stressful for parents and young people with ASD include home-school transport (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) and transition from one school to another (Dillon & Underwood, 2012).

Accessible community services and supports have also been identified as a priority by parents of children with ASD (Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2014). However, the role of schools in supporting access to community services has received limited attention to date in the literature.

At the school level an inclusive ethos, which promotes full inclusion for pupils with ASD and is welcoming, has been identified as a key aspect by pupils and parents (Starr & Foy, 2012; Tobias, 2009). This is underpinned by positive teacher attitudes, a commitment to inclusion, supportive leadership, and staff training (Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011). In 17 articles focusing on the views of parents of children with ASD (Falkmer et al., 2015), 15 emphasised the importance of communication with parents, relationship-building and trust. Trust was underpinned by honest communication, with parents valuing involvement in decision-making (Lindsay et al., 2016).

The most proximal level to parents and young people with ASD is the microsystem, which encompasses the mainstream school, resource provision, peers and family. These systems interact dynamically and form the mesosystem. Young people's experiences in mainstream classes have been reported extensively through the use of parent- and pupil-report. Important factors identified by parents include: personal characteristics of teachers, their knowledge of the individual child, ability to communicate and elicit trust, implementation of individualised interventions, promoting positive peer relations, and the ability to understand challenging behaviour (Falkmer et al., 2015). Parents reported that this is supported by organisational factors, such as teachers being responsible for the learning of pupils with special needs and staff adopting a consistent approach (Starr & Foy, 2012). Pupils have identified important teacher characteristics, such as being knowledgeable, structured, being able to make subtle adaptations, and promoting independence (Saggers, Hwang, &

Mercer, 2011). Coping with a busy and stimulating mainstream environment can be demanding (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), and pupils have also reported that they value teachers who are proactive in enabling them to feel accepted and included by their peers (McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2014).

Moreover, resourced mainstream schools have enhanced staffing and resources. This can enable them to provide a further level of expertise (Lindsay et al., 2016), increased flexibly to respond to pupil needs (e.g. tailored transitions), and access to more specialist support and interventions (Starr & Foy, 2012). Additional staff training also helps to ensure that in-class support is a facilitator rather than a barrier to inclusion (Falkmer et al., 2015). Pupils in Tobias' (2009) study identified access to quiet areas and mentors as helpful supports. However, they felt that developing their life skills, independence and sense of belonging were areas which could be targeted further.

Peers have an important role to play in the inclusion of pupils with ASD, and parents have identified that staff can facilitate this by being good role models and promoting social inclusion (Falkmer et al., 2015). Pupils with ASD have reported being able to form and maintain friendships at school (Saggers et al., 2011) although bullying and social isolation have frequently been highlighted as concerns (McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2014). Fitting in with peers and not wanting to be treated differently have been identified as challenges for pupils to negotiate (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

For families, having a child with ASD can be demanding, particularly if the child is not settled in school. Lee et al. (2008) identified that parents of children with ASD are more likely to have a higher caring burden, give up work due to caring responsibilities, and participate less in community activities with their children compared to parents of children

without ASD. Stress related to challenging behaviour is also recognised as having a potential impact on the family (Lindsay et al., 2016).

Although not explicitly part of Bronfenbrenner's model, pupil outcomes are important in reflecting how effective the system is in achieving its aims and therefore merit inclusion. Lindsay et al. (2016) found that parents of children attending resource provision tended to be more positive about outcomes than parents of children attending mainstream. Parents of children with ASD were also more likely to talk about wider benefits of mainstream beyond academic skills (Dillon & Underwood, 2012) and were aware that their child's progress might be different from that of peers. Less favourable rates of progress were more likely to be commented on at secondary school (Lindsay et al., 2016).

Bronfenbrenner's theory therefore offers a sophisticated model for understanding the complex, dynamic and interacting factors operating at different levels in young people's and their parents' experiences of educational inclusion. The theory has also been used effectively to understand teacher perspectives of resource provision schools for pupils with ASD (Bond & Hebron, 2016). Nevertheless, it has been criticised for being too abstract and neglecting children's active role and motivations (Jarvis, 2007; 2008). With this in mind, the current study aimed to focus specifically on pupil and parent perspectives of mainstream schools with resource provision as the schools developed their practice over a one-year period.

Methodology

This research was part of a larger longitudinal evaluation of the effectiveness of resource provision in Manchester, England. Five primary and three secondary schools admitting pupils with ASD and a smaller number of pupils with SLI participated in the research (Bond & Hebron, 2013). Manchester is a socially and ethnically diverse urban

authority containing areas of significant deprivation, (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015).

Given the importance of parent and pupil perceptions for effective inclusion, the specific aims of this study were to focus on the experiences of pupils with ASD (including a smaller number with SLI) and their parents/carers during the first year of admission to the resource provisions. Interviews were also conducted with school staff as part of the broader evaluation and this research is reported in another paper focusing specifically on staff perceptions and satisfaction (Bond & Hebron, 2016). Approval to conduct the research was granted following ethical review by the host institution's Research Integrity Committee.

As described in Bond and Hebron (2016), schools volunteered to become resource provision schools and, once approved, the LA funded new buildings, resources and a tiered package of training for all staff in the schools. The LA commissioned each school to develop its provision and deliver a set number of places for pupils with ASD/SLI. The schools had a high degree of autonomy and were able to develop their own model of provision but there were also network meetings for the schools to share good practice. As part of the local ASD strategy it had been decided to close a special school, Northfield (- name changed for anonymity). The school was initially designated for pupils with SLI but also had a significant number of students with ASD. Approximately half of the pupils included in the current research transitioned from Northfield. While the majority of pupils admitted to the provisions had a diagnosis of ASD, it was decided that young people with SLI would also be included, as previous research has identified that the perspectives of parents of children with SLI regarding children's needs and educational provision are often similar to those of parents of pupils with ASD (Lindsay et al., 2016). There was also overlap between the SLI and ASD

group as some of the children with a primary diagnosis of SLI also had additional social and pragmatic difficulties.

In total, 16 parents/carers and 9 pupils (aged from 8-15 years) were interviewed. Two of these pupils were siblings, meaning that one parent was interviewed for two participating pupils. Details of the interviews, including the each pupil's year group, gender and primary need are given in Table 1. Potential participants were invited to be interviewed by the research team on a strictly opt-in basis. Sampling was purposeful, with up to three primary pupils and five secondary aged pupils and their parents/carers recruited from each school. Parents consented to be interviewed as well as their child, although they were interviewed separately. This was partly for the convenience of working parents, but also to ensure that the child's voice could be heard and understood (Maguire, 2005). Pupils were only interviewed if they were able to understand the aims of the research and provide their own (in addition to their parents') informed consent using a child-friendly format (and which was re-confirmed at each subsequent meeting). Time was taken in advance of the interviews to ensure that the young people were comfortable with the researcher and that they felt no pressure to participate.

As shown in Table 1 semi-structured interviews took place at three key points during the first year, i.e. during the first term of pupil admissions (T1), after six months (T2) and after a full year (T3), this resulted in 53 interviews. It should be noted that there was considerable variation in terms of the time when individual pupils joined the schools (and their readiness to participate), and so data collection at all three time-points was not possible in all cases. Nevertheless, due to the relatively small sample size and the range of experiences of the young people and their parents, it was decided that all interview data would be kept for analysis.

<<<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>>>

While pupils were settling into the resource provision the initial pupil and parent interviews (T1) were not audio recorded, although detailed interview notes were taken. Subsequent interviews were audio recorded, with a small number of pupils consenting to meet with the researcher without being audio recorded. The interviews provided an opportunity to explore a wide range of factors which influenced parent and pupil perceptions of the resource provision. Following recommendations in Humphrey and Lewis (2008), staff and parents were consulted regarding how child interviews should be conducted. This principally involved ensuring that the interview questions were appropriate to the communication levels of the children, ensuring a familiar setting, and having a trusted adult in the interview or nearby.

The interview schedules[1] were informed by existing literature and discussion with participating schools during the research contracting phase. Factors highlighted in the literature resulted in parents being asked about home-school collaboration (Frederickson et al., 2010) and wider staff awareness (DfES, 2001) and pupils were asked about social inclusion in the main school and resource provision (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Interviews were analysed using Nvivo (QSR, 2012). An initial inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was undertaken jointly by the two authors. Initial codes were developed by the second author and checked with the first author with regular discussion of emerging themes to ensure consensus and consistency. As the initial themes focused on different aspects of the pupils' immediate environment and interactions between systems, a further deductive analysis was subsequently undertaken using Bronfenbrenner's

[1] For a copy of the pupil and parent interview schedules, please contact the authors.

(2005) bio-ecosystemic theory in order to locate the data within the broader theoretical framework.

Findings

The findings are presented in relation to the three main levels in Bronfenbrenner's model. The longitudinal focus of the research is reflected in the chronosystem being represented at each level. An implicit aspect of Bronfenbrenner's theory is the impact of these inter-related systems upon the child. To reflect this, an additional 'pupil outcomes' category has been included as parents often commented on individual outcomes for their child which they identified as resulting specifically from attending resource provision.

Macrosystem - (a) Political Philosophy

At the macrosystem level, responses from parents illustrate the complexity of working out broad philosophies such as inclusion in practice. For the majority of parents, placement in the resource provision was successful in resolving many of the tensions of balancing inclusion with sufficient support for their child's individual needs. The Parent of a YR[2] pupil commented, *"*I think this place was fantastic for him because he had the opportunity to meet with children in a normal classroom as well as have the help he needs. So yeah, we tried quite hard to get him here*"*.

Many pupils also reflected on the advantages of attending an inclusive provision which offered opportunities for access to a broader curriculum and not being perceived as different. This was often contrasted positively with previous negative school experiences. However, some older pupils offered more balanced reflections on their school experiences,

[2] YR is Reception class for 4 to 5-year-old children in the UK. Y1 corresponds to Kindergarten in the US and Y2 is 1st Grade.

Here you can do like as many topics as you want and like you have the opportunity of getting into college without people think*ing 'oh she came from this place'…'I can't say Northfield was rubbish because it wasn't in* the case that I can communicate - Year 10 student.

Macrosystem – (b) Cultural Values – Diversity

Parents also identified the importance of positive staff attitudes towards pupils with ASD. For some parents this had been a concern in the past, especially in terms of staff demonstrating an understanding of the issues surrounding having a child with ASD. The parent of a Y11 student expressed concern that, "we was getting daily calls and it was always *'Sean this, Sean tha*t, Sean the other*.' They wasn't looking at the* problem, they blamed the family*"*.

Parents also described previous experiences of staff not having sufficient knowledge of ASD to manage incidents of bullying, resulting in episodes lasting lengthy periods of time. Some pupils described how their experiences in the resource provision contrasted with previous school experiences, e.g. "I find it very different from the other school there was all the bullies. I find it perfect here*"* - Y5 pupil.

Similarly, when staff had found it difficult to manage challenging behaviour, lack of understanding of ASD and its heterogeneity had on occasion led to reductions in curriculum opportunities as well as inclusion. For example, parents spoke of reduced timetables and being called to collect their child due to behavioural challenges, "Yeah, I would be like drop *him off at nine … by the time I reach w*ork I had to go and pick him up" - Parent of Y1 pupil.

Exosystem – (a) LA Systems

Parents described a range of experiences of working with LA systems to enable their child's school move. For some parents it was a very anxiety-provoking time, "Oh, it was scary. The amount of sleep I lost over him was unbelievable, yeah. Because there was no kind *of support when he was moving, you know, we got given a list and they're basically 'choo*se one of those*"* - Parent of Y4 pupil.

Some parents described a history of having to fight on their own to navigate different educational and health-care systems, often with delays due to statutory or diagnostic processes. For others, particularly those whose children were transferring from Northfield, parents often reported being supported well as a there was a clear process overseen by the LA and a planned transition. However, even for these families there was often anxiety about how their child would cope in a different environment.

For a number of families there was also a history of multiple school moves and failed placements which contributed to high levels of anxiety surrounding yet another change of school. The concerns created by a lack of appropriate placement was described by one parent of a Y3 pupil who sent her son to a special school prior to the resource provision, "I did also *know that the special school probably hadn't been the right thing*, and I knew it was closing, *but I still sent him there because I couldn't find another mainstream sch*ool that wanted to take him*"*.

Future transitions were also a cause of anxiety, particularly where children were approaching a regular transition-point such as the move to secondary school. Parents identified that resource provision staff worked to ensure sufficient advanced planning and liaison with relevant professionals in these situations. Parents also commented positively on flexible LA arrangements for transport from home to the resource provision which took account of children's individual needs. The parent of a Y4 pupil described how travelling to

school by taxi with two other children had worked well for her son, *"*He loves it, a special *treat. He waits for his taxi in the morning, he knows exactly what time it comes and his coat's* on and his wellies are on *and he's out"*.

Exosystem – (b) School Ethos

The ethos of the wider school was perceived to be important in enabling children who were part of the resource provision to feel included. Parents felt it was crucial for all staff to be autism-aware, *"*It just seems everybody around the school seems a lot more aware, teachers, ... the dinner lady, everybody. They all seem to know a little bit more*"* – Parent YR pupil.

The parent of a Year 4 pupil also described being reassured when this inclusive message was communicated by all staff, commenting on, "how nice Mr Marsh was [when] we first met him because Nathan was crawling under his desk. Usually you expect head *teachers to be kind of 'oh no, no' and* he just moved his legs*"*.

One parent commented on how the school had made efforts to make parents in the wider school aware of the resource provision opening,

> A leaflet that went out just to explain that the children with the ASD are going to be in and accessing the *main…and having awareness in classes, so somebody's bee*n speaking about, *what ASD is to each of the children, so they don't stand out as much* - Parent Y4 pupil.

Parents also identified being able to access activities with peers as another key to inclusion, e.g. "H*e wasn't included in the mainstre*am homework last time, now *he's doing the same as what the other kids are doing so he doesn't feel left out*" - Parent Y4 pupil.

Exosystem – (c) Community

Pupils and parents often identified how resource provision enabled pupils to participate in the wider life of the school, such as after-school clubs and trips. Pupils also developed friendships which extended out of school, as noted by the parent of a student in Y9, "S*he's made a group of friends, I mean they've c*ome here as well, she meets up with them, they go to *Nando's*".

Parents of younger pupils also reported on their child's increasing ability to cope with new situations outside the home, such as family events and going to the cinema. For parents themselves though, being part of the wider school community could be a challenge, as their children frequently used school transport resulting in lack of regular informal contact with other parents.

Exosystem – (d) Partnership Working

Another important factor in ensuring the success of resource provision for parents and pupils was the home-school partnership, and this was especially important where previous school placements had been problematic. Parents identified a range of home-school communication formats which often had a positive focus and seemed to have been tailored to their needs. Regular communication was particularly valued by parents: for example, the Parent of a Y11 student commented, *"They're very good. They're constantly keeping me in* the loop. *They send letters all the time to tell you of… if he's falling back or if he's excell*ing, which is good*"*. For some parents this included joint home-school interventions to support communication or behaviour (e.g. shared visual timetables).

Microsystem – (a) Mainstream School

When asked their views of their new schools, resource provision pupils expressed a wide range of positive views. Although attending a new school presented many challenges

pupils seemed to feel that they had been supported well and were proud of their successes. When asked to rate their experience on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the highest) pupils usually gave scores of 8-10 and focused on their whole school experience, e.g. "School is really a fun place to be*"* - Y5 pupil. Factors they identified as contributing to these ratings included supportive staff, academic challenge and opportunities to meet new people. Positive communication between staff and pupils and relationships with staff in mainstream as well as resource provision also supported inclusion according to the young people. Pupils identified that "people here listen to you" - Y11 Student, with a Y5 parent also commenting, *"he's got a really nice bond with them [staff] and he's never had that in any other school"*.

Although staff reported that some pupils had gaps in their curriculum knowledge (particularly in English and Mathematics), this appears to have been managed sensitively, with pupils commenting that although work could be be hard they enjoyed the challenge.

> Interviewer: And if somebody else was coming into school, what would you say to them if they were a bit worried about coming here?
> Y6 pupil: *You don't have to worry because the people will be nice to you and make* you welcome to the school.

Social inclusion was another important area for pupils, and something which was frequently commented on positively by them, *"The classmates are…most of them are all my* friends. I would describe them as helpful and understanding*"* – Y5 pupil. Parents also mentioned how some of the children became more interested in social contact over time, particularly at unstructured times of the day such as break and lunchtime. This is likely to be a particular advantage of resourced mainstream schools providing opportunities for children to socialise with peers who have a wider range of social skills than perhaps might be the case in a specialist setting. For example, "Children do say bye to him and they know him from

class and he does say bye to them sometimes. H*e's definitely more sociable than being at a* special school*"* - Parent of Y3 pupil.

Microsystem – (b) resource provision

The resource provision ensured children received an individualised programme of support. This often began with gradual transitions, *"*It was small chunks, you know, they did it really slowly*"* – Parent of Y2 pupil.

While the aim of the resource provisions was to increase children's inclusion in mainstream classes, this was individually paced and adapted according to how the child might respond at a particular time, e.g. "W*hen he's getting a bit stressed he says 'can I go* back [to the provision] *now?' And he's fine to go back*" - Parent of Y4 pupil.

The enhanced staffing in the resource provisions also enabled staff to provide interventions in areas such as social skills, work experience and life skills. For some older pupils, not being perceived as different from their peers was very important and needed to be sensitively managed by staff*, e.g. "I don't think he likes people to know he's a bit different and he has the timeout. But I think now he realises that's there to stop him from getti*ng frustrated and into trouble*"* – Parent of Y7 student.

Microsystem – (c) Peers

Peer relationships were important for children and parents. Although bullying was a concern, most parents and pupils commented that it was infrequent. Parents identified teacher-modelling of social relationships as an important means of developing peer awareness and positive peer relationships, *"Yeah, I think like how the teacher portrays it…the* kids pick up so because the teachers understand, they know how to deal with him, so the kids deal with him the same" - Parent Y1 pupil.

Pupils formed friendships within the resource provision and also in their mainstream classes and commented on the importance of these new friendships, e.g. *"*I find Caitlin helpful because *when I'm upset or hurt she's a*lways there to help me*"* – Y5 pupil; and *"I've* made a variety of friends that I want. I want people who want the same things as I do, so going to a good college, having good grades and stuff, having a good job*"* – Y10 student.

Microsystem – (d) Family

The majority of parents reflected on how attending the resource provision had had a positive effect on life at home, and the following extract is typical of parental responses about improved home life once their child had settled:

> Dad also stressed the wider effects of Aar*on's school placement, describing it as the "ripples you see in water when you throw a stone in"*. He said that he was more relaxed at work and that even his colleagues had commented on this. His older brother is more relaxed at home now, and his mother has recently been able to take up a part-time job due to fewer worries about Aaron (YR) - Field Note

Improved communication at home was another positive change frequently noted by parents, *'He's more confident, he talks, he comes in and tells me the* problems. Or if *something's going wrong he lets me know now"* – Parent of Y11 student.

Child Outcomes

Parents and pupils were mostly very enthusiastic about the amount and variety of progress made during the time that the children attended the resource provision. For many pupils this progress encompassed multiple areas, including coping with a mainstream environment. For instance, *"She's just made really, really good progress*, right across the

board really, all the core curriculum and like her social *behaviour as well'* – Parent of Y2 pupil.

Parents frequently commented on academic progress, such as their child's improved reading and writing skills, and these changes were also reflected in improved standard assessment test scores, "*I think he's definitely gone up …* two levels in everything*"* – Parent of Y3 pupil. Parents also mentioned changes in children's confidence, willingness to engage in assessment and improvements in their motivation for learning, e.g. *"He's looking forward* to doing exams and that is the biggest bonus for us*"* - Parent of Y11 student.

Although for many children progress at school was mirrored at home, some parents noted that in spite of doing well at school there had been a deterioration in their child's behaviour at home. Nevertheless, parents generally reported positive changes in behaviour, and any remaining concerns appeared to diminish over time.

Discussion

This longitudinal study sought to explore for the first time the perceptions of parents and pupils with ASD/SLI during the first year of attending a resource provision school. The data tentatively demonstrate that Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecosystemic theory was a helpful organising framework in capturing the differing experiences of children and parents at a range of levels (e.g. parents commented on all levels while pupil reflections tended to cluster around the microsystem). The model accommodates change over time, such as anxiety about initial transition shifting to a focus on progress, and also anticipates dynamic interactions between and within levels (e.g. how inclusion as a philosophy operates in practice in the exosystem and microsystem).

At the macrosystem level parents and pupils reflected on opportunities provided by resource provision schools and how these facilitated inclusion whilst also ensuring sufficient resources were available to meet the child's needs. This is consistent with Lindsay et al. (2016) who identified that parents of children attending resource provision schools were generally more positive. The current study goes beyond Lindsay et al. (2016) though by including the pupil perspective. In contrast to some of the parents in the study by Starr and Foy (2012), parents of resource provision pupils were also very positive about the level of inclusivity and diversity awareness among school staff, and how these factors were promoted within the wider school community.

At the exoystem level parents' reflections on their experiences of managing school moves was variable. For some, their experiences were similar to the stressful experiences described by Tissot (2011), but for others their experiences were closer to the supportive process described by Lindsay et al. (2016), perhaps reflecting a policy shift to increase parental involvement (Lamb, 2009) that is facilitated in schools with a resource provision. Difficulties seemed most likely to occur when there was a mismatch between the provision available and pupil needs (Tissot, 2011). Although resource provision placement was not successful for all children in the current sample, it is of note that it was able to meet the needs of the majority, some of whom had negative perceptions of education from previous failed settings.

At the LA level, ensuring accessible information for parents to enable them to make informed decisions is a continuing area for development (Falkmer, 2015). Concerns such as transport and transition were perceived to have been addressed effectively for the majority of children in this study. For some parents the resource provision schools also played an important part in enabling their children to participate in wider community activities, such as

going to the cinema and after-school clubs. This is promising given the concerns identified by parents in Pellicano et al. (2014). In this context, further research to explore the actual and potential contribution of resource provision schools would be of great value. The current research also confirms and extends the importance of a whole school inclusive ethos as identified by parents and pupils in previous research (Starr & Foy, 2012; Tobias, 2009), and how this is supported by open and honest home-school communication (Lindsay, 2016).

At the microsystem level pupils were very positive about their experiences and tended to see themselves as very much part of the school and their mainstream classes, despite knowing that they were also part of the resource provision. They reflected on positive aspects similar to those identified by Falkmer et al. (2015), such as positive relationships with staff and peers, high expectations and learning being fun. The resource provision enhanced this aspect by providing flexible, individualised support, quiet spaces and facilitating inclusion in mainstream classes, lending further support the importance of these factors identified in previous research in this area (Falkmer et al., 2015; Tobias, 2009). Parents and pupils tended not to mention specific interventions but instead commented on broader areas such as enabling the pupil to develop a sense of belonging and develop their life skills (Tissot, 2011). It is of note that the pupils in this study, like those in Saggers et al., (2011), reported having friends, and parents perceived staff as actively modelling good social relationships (Falkmer et al., 2015). At the family level it was encouraging to note that some parents experienced reduced caring demands and a positive impact upon family life which they attributed to their child being settled and happy in the provision. This contrasts with the findings of Lee et al. (2008) and may reflect the additional capacity of resource provision schools for joint home-school collaboration and individualised planning.

The current research illustrates the additional benefits of greater resources and staff expertise provided by resource provision schools. Schools were able to develop a flexible mesosystem which was perceived as fluid and supportive by pupils and parents. For instance, pupils and parents tended to describe the resource provision classes, mainstream classes and staffing as complimentary and adaptable rather than fixed. Communication was also flexible and adapted according to parent and child need.

In relation to pupil outcomes, it is noteworthy that parents and pupils were able to identify a broad range of positive outcomes. These included academic progress and wider social and life skills benefits (Dillon & Underwood, 2012). Pupils felt a sense of belonging which was identified as an area for development by pupils in the study by Tobias' (2009). Higher levels of school connectedness are strongly associated with positive academic and mental health outcomes (Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006), making this a particularly encouraging finding in the context of resource provision schools.

Despite many positive findings, this study has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. The research was undertaken in one LA and approximately half the pupils came from a previously settled placement at one special school, so findings may not be representative of all children being admitted to resource provision schools. Six of the 18 focus pupils also had a primary need of SLI rather than ASD which may also limit generalisability of findings. However, as Lindsay et al. (2016) found, parents of children with SLI may often have similar concerns to parents of children with ASD. The positive outcomes across the group as a whole also provide some evidence for the utility of individualised planning approaches for more mixed community samples. The data also combine pupil and parent perspectives, and although the views of parents and pupils were often complimentary,

presenting the data in this way may mask the importance of particular issues for one group, such as the importance of fitting in for pupils (McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2014).

The current research confirms the importance of interconnected systems, as identified by Bronfenbrenner (2005), and extends research into perceptions of resource provision schools (Bond & Hebron, 2016) by illustrating key factors which parents and pupils perceive as promoting success in these settings. While many of the findings are congruent with the broader mainstream research field, it is nevertheless important to focus on resource provision schools and understand where similarities (i.e. friendship development) and differences (i.e. school connectedness) may lie. These data provide some support for the benefits of resource provision as part of a continuum of provision (Falkmer et al., 2015). Pupils were able to access mainstream provision and having a dedicated team of staff appears to enable continued attention to inclusion at a school and classroom level through staff training, modelling of positive social interactions and additional opportunities for staff to work collaboratively. Staff were able to enhance family and school connectedness by getting to know resource provision pupils and their parents well, focusing on a broad range of skills, and ensuring effective and regular communication.

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Figure 1. The bio-ecosystemic model of human development, adapted from Bronfenbrenner (2005).

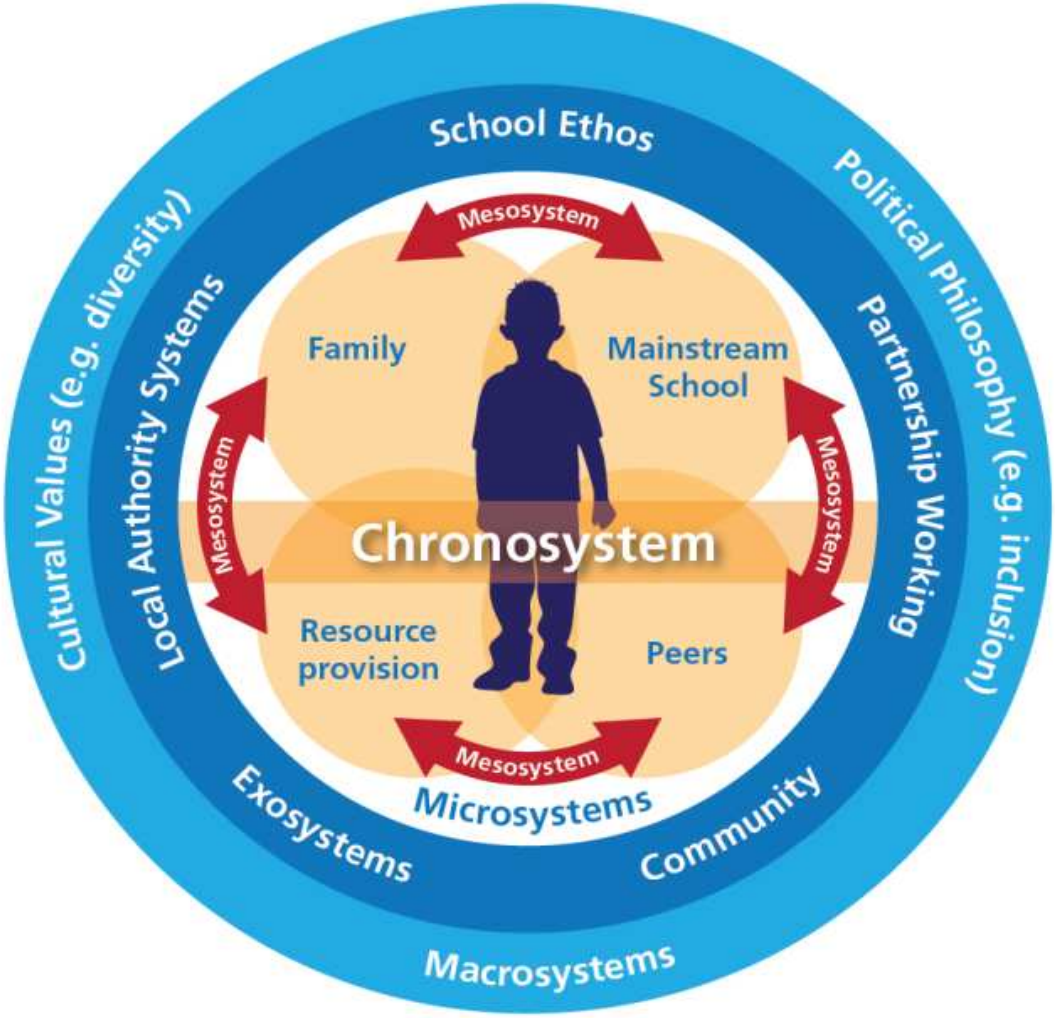

Table 1: Interview participants at each time-point.

Phase	Pupil year group, gender, and primary need			Parent T1	Parent T2	Parent T3	Pupil T1	Pupil T2	Pupil T3
Primary school	YR	M	ASD			✓			
	YR	M	ASD	✓	✓				
	Y1	M	ASD	✓	✓	✓			
	Y2	F	ASD	✓	✓	✓			
	Y2	M	ASD	✓	✓	✓			
	Y3	M	SLI	✓					
	Y4	M	ASD	✓	✓	✓			
	Y5	M	SLI	✓			✓	✓	✓
	Y5	M	ASD			✓	✓	✓	✓
	Y5	M	ASD			✓			
	Y6	M	ASD	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Secondary school	Y7	M	ASD		✓	✓			
	Y8	M	SLI		✓		✓	✓	✓
	Y9	F	SLI		✓		✓		
	Y9	M	ASD	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	Y9	M	SLI				✓	✓	
	Y10	F	SLI		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Y11	M	ASD		✓			✓	✓

Note. Parental interviews were all conducted with mothers, except * = father, and **= father and grandmother.