

# What does ‘inclusion’ mean for pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools?

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**Key words:** Asperger syndrome, autism, case studies, inclusive education.

**The last decade has seen a groundswell of developments in educational policy in the UK relating to inclusive education for students with special educational needs (SEN). However, whether government policy has been fully implemented in schools remains a concern. The experience of students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) provides an excellent case in point. An increasing number of such students are now educated in mainstream schools, but the limited research in this area has indicated that their experience of school is often marked by bullying, social isolation and anxiety. In light of this, the aim of the current study was to examine the extent to which inclusive educational policy was actually reflected in the practices of four mainstream secondary schools. An exploratory case study approach was adopted, utilising interviews with pupils, teachers, other school staff (e.g., senior managers, learning support assistants) and parents, observations of lessons and other contexts (e.g., lunch time), and document analysis. Our findings highlighted a number of school practices which acted as facilitators or barriers to students' learning and participation, some of which were generic to SEN provision, and some of which appeared to be specific to those on the autistic spectrum. A discussion of these is presented to enable further understanding of, and inform practice relating to, the inclusion process for students with ASDs.**

## Introduction

During the last decade, the UK government has introduced a series of policy changes in order to foster improvements in state school education. The government published a Green Paper in 1997 entitled *Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs* (Department for Education and Employment, DfEE, 1997), which initiated a wide-ranging review of education for children with special educational needs (SEN) and signalled the government's commitment to the principle of inclusion. As a result, the 'Special Educational Needs and Disability Act' was brought into force in 2001. This act required teachers, by law, to make 'reasonable adjustments' to their lessons to enable children with SEN to learn and be included in

school life (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, HMSO, 2001). More recently, in 2004, the government's new SEN strategy, *Removing Barriers to Achievement*, claimed to set out 'the Government's vision for the education of children with SEN and disability' and 'provide clear national leadership' (Department for Education and Skills, DfES, 2004, p. 9).

The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED, 2004) examined the extent to which the inclusion framework had impacted on the capacity of schools to cater effectively for a wider range of needs. They recommended that schools and local authorities (LAs) should ensure that 'pupils with SEN in mainstream schools are able to play a full part in school life, and receive a curriculum and teaching relevant to their needs' (p. 9). However, whether this has been fully implemented is uncertain. The experience of students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) provides an excellent case in point. The number of such students attending mainstream schools in the UK has risen significantly in the last 10 years (Keen & Ward, 2004), and it is now estimated that up to 1 in 270 students at secondary mainstream schools have SEN relating to an ASD (Barnard, Broach, Potter & Prior, 2002). Such students, who are likely to have been diagnosed with Asperser's syndrome or high-functioning autism, typically experience difficulties in social interaction, communication and imagination, coupled with average or high intellectual and linguistic ability. Despite increasing numbers of students with ASDs attending mainstream schools, the process of facilitating their learning and participation remains a complex and poorly understood area of education (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000; Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers & Yuille, 2006; Davis et al., 2004; Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006).

The limited research base in this area indicates that 21% of students with ASD are excluded from school at least once (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000; National Autistic Society, NAS, 2003) – this is a significantly higher rate than students with other SEN, and 20 times that experienced by those without SEN (DfES, 2006). Furthermore, teachers in mainstream schools report that they do not have the necessary training and support to provide adequately for such students (Robertson, Chamberlain & Kasari, 2003), and indeed, they are considered to be more difficult to

include effectively than those with other SEN (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). Current practices within mainstream schools may, therefore, contribute to disaffection and social exclusion in students with ASDs (Connor, 2000; Osler & Osler, 2002).

The notion of a ‘distinct needs’ (Norwich & Lewis, 2005) position in terms of mainstream educational provision for students with ASD is gathering support. There is often an assumption that because a student with an ASD is academically able, he or she should be able to cope in mainstream school (Moore, 2007). However, difficulties in social communication and interaction experienced by such students are likely to increase their exposure and vulnerability to bullying and social isolation over and above that experienced by those with other or no SEN, particularly at secondary school (NAS, 2006; Whitney, Smith & Thompson, 1994). Furthermore, the preference for routine, predictability and low sensory stimulation expressed by individuals with ASDs is at odds with the noisy, bustling and chaotic environment of secondary mainstream schools (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Moore, 2007; Wing, 2007). Also, the typical cognitive profile and preferred learning styles of such students challenge professional assumptions about teaching and learning more than other groups of learners (Jordan, 2005). The lack of research and subsequent knowledge transfer in this area (in comparison to other SEN) (Davis et al., 2004; Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006) means that schools are typically less equipped to meet their needs – as Howlin (1998, p. 317) states, ‘our knowledge of how to help this particular group effectively lags far behind’. In light of this, parents’ confidence in the effectiveness of inclusion diminishes as students with ASDs enter secondary school (Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger & Alkin, 1999), and it is during this period that they are at an increased risk of developing mental health problems (Barnhill & Myles, 2001).

### The current study

In light of the above, the central aim of the research was to examine the effectiveness of (and subsequently inform practice in) inclusive education<sup>1</sup> for students with ASDs in mainstream schools. Our exploratory study, funded by the University of Manchester Research Support Fund, comprised case studies of four secondary mainstream schools, and aimed to determine:

1. What barriers to learning and participation are evident for students on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools, and how can these be overcome?

2. How do practices in mainstream schools facilitate or constrain participation of children on the autistic spectrum?
3. What are the views and experiences of students on the autistic spectrum in relation to mainstream secondary education?
4. How do other key stakeholders (educators, parents, peers) perceive the inclusion process for students on the autistic spectrum?

The current paper will report centrally on questions 1 and 2 (questions 3 and 4 are addressed, but only tangentially). For a focused discussion of question 3, the reader is referred to Humphrey and Lewis (2008).

### Research design

A multiple case-study research design was adopted, consistent with an eco-systemic approach and in line with similar projects exploring inclusion for specific groups of learners (Davis, 2003; Fox, Farrell & Davis, 2004). This type of design enabled an in-depth investigation of practice in context, reflecting the exploratory nature of the research.

Case studies of four mainstream schools in the northwest of England were conducted during the academic year 2005–2006. The schools selected provided variation of relevant features, including number of students with ASDs enrolled; age and SEN status of students; cultural context of school; and history of special education provision within school. Consent from all those involved in the research was obtained and a total of 19 students with ASD (age range 11–17 years) were involved. Generic descriptions of the schools are presented in Appendix 1. A variety of data collection techniques were used, including *interviews* with students with ASDs, teachers, learning support assistants, SEN co-ordinators (SENCOs), senior management and parents; classroom *observations* and observations in other contexts (e.g., at lunch time); *examination of school documents* (e.g., policy documents and individual education plans); and *student diaries*.

Data were analysed using a pragmatic, content-analysis driven approach (Mayring, 2004). We intended for the interpretations to be meaningful to policy-makers and the educators whose work was being explored – thus, by creating categories drawn from our research questions, we hoped to be able to connect directly with practice. Furthermore, because the research was not concerned with theory development, a purely ‘bottom-up’ approach (such as grounded theory – see Charmaz, 2003) was not considered to be appropriate. Finally, qualitative content analysis is appropriate for use with diverse data sources (e.g., observation field notes, interview transcripts, school documents). In terms of procedure, general categories were initially generated from our research questions. Following a ‘pilot’ analysis involving around one-quarter of the data, the categories were revised. Revision was implemented if, for instance, a particular category failed adequately to account for a significant proportion of the data. The final

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that definitions of ‘inclusion’ vary – in this paper the term is used to refer to the *presence* (e.g., attendance, use of withdrawal and segregation), *participation* (e.g., quality of learning experience, engagement in activities), *acceptance* (e.g., by peers and staff, valuing of diversity) and *achievement* (e.g., spanning academic, personal, social and emotional domains) of all students in mainstream schools, where possible (Manchester City Council, 2004). This view is consistent with national and international literature in this area (e.g., Farrell & Ainscow, 2002; UNESCO, 1994, 2005).

categories were then applied to the full dataset, with further revisions made on an ad-hoc basis.

## Results

The analytical procedure outlined above yielded a large number of data categories. For the purpose of brevity, these have been subsumed into four key analytical themes. A thematic (rather than school-by-school) approach was chosen in order to avoid needless repetition. However, care has been taken to ensure that the source of each excerpt below (e.g., from Schools A, B, C or D) is clearly marked, such that the reader may pick up on patterns emerging *within* schools in addition to the patterns *across* schools that are presented here.

### *School ethos and commitment to inclusion*

Consistent with the literature in this area (e.g., Booth & Ainscow, 2002), we found that the ethos of each school, and in particular the way in which ‘inclusion’ was understood, was crucial in determining the extent to which government policy and guidance was followed. For instance, in some schools there was evidence of integration (in the sense of physical placement of students with ASDs in mainstream classes), but not inclusion (in the sense of acceptance, participation, etc.) – as one learning support assistant (LSA) stated, ‘Some teachers ignore kids with learning disabilities altogether ... even though they are in the lessons they are stood separately’ (LSA, School C). Where the ethos of a given school was one of acceptance and valuing diversity, this permeated from the top down. For instance, consider the following excerpts from a head-teacher:

*‘Educating every child is not just about SATs or GCSEs [secondary examinations sat at age 14 and 16, respectively] or all of that standards written agenda that the government is so obsessed with, it’s about turning them [out] as human beings and developing of the skills to enable them to go on learning through their lives and what it is to be a member of the community and so on and so on.’*

*‘The school, however, resisted the word “unit” – doesn’t like the word “unit” at all on the grounds that we’re simply here to provide and meet the needs of any child who comes here and not to create units within the school and so the concept is learning support, so when we were approached by the local authority and asked if we were interested in a resource we were slightly sceptical because it sounded very much as an entity within an entity and we didn’t like the idea of children being separated out.’ (Head-teacher, School D)*

Where a school’s leadership demonstrated such commitment, other key staff felt supported and more able to meet the needs of their students: ‘My perception is that the senior management are on board with it, well, certainly the head and the deputy head are on board with it ... they’re sort of receptive to the ideas that you know that they can open up the school and make it more accessible, you know, to these

*children who have individual needs’* (ASD resource manager, School D). In schools where this ‘top-down’ inclusive ethos was not in place, clear tensions were evident. Consider the following excerpts from the SENCO of School B:

*‘I think one of the major difficulties is that the senior management team don’t really understand about these children’s needs.’*

*‘Heads of years can be the worst in that, and if you have a head of year who just doesn’t take on board that these children are not just being naughty or whatever reasons they give and do something about it and lead from the front, then the troops aren’t going to.’*  
(SENCO, School B)

The lack of ‘leading from the front’ in School B led to some staff becoming extremely disaffected (*‘I feel sometimes, it’s like “Oh, let [SENCO] go away and play and we’ll get on with the real job”’* – SENCO, School B) as their efforts to include students with ASDs were met with ambivalence and lack of recognition, and a perception of the school as misrepresenting itself: *‘I think the school believes that it is a totally inclusive school ... but in practice they’re not’* (SENCO, School B). Thus, as others (e.g., Dyson, Howes & Roberts, 2002; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2005) had previously found, schools’ leaders played a pivotal role in both the development of an inclusive ethos – and in particular – it was a true (rather than ‘token’) commitment to inclusive principles that seemed to make the difference. Without this, there were clear difficulties in translating policy into practice:

*‘As part of our departmental training, I photocopied the OFSTED criteria for SEN and Inclusion and we went through it as a department and we highlighted all the different statements under the different headings: green if we thought we were doing it well, blue if it was a patchy area and pink if it was abysmal. And we did one for the school which was virtually all pink.’* (SENCO, School B)

Even in schools where there was evidence of top-down commitment to inclusion, there were still difficulties in policy filtering down to the ‘ground floor’, and evidence of scepticism among staff:

*‘I’ve kind of accepted that there’s very little that I can do about what is provided but it does annoy me that the school has got an inclusion mark [an inclusion “kite-mark” is given to schools in the city as a result of a self-audit process and is designed to signify excellence in inclusive practice] saying that all this provision so that [student with ASD] can be educated along with his peers in mainstream school – sorry I think its window-dressing.’* (LSA, School A)

In other cases, staff were simply unaware of the policy that they were supposed to be implementing:

*'To tell you the truth, no I don't ... I know we have one [an inclusion policy]. I think it's an old one if I remember rightly ... but no I can't tell you anything about it really.'* (LSA, School B).

This may, however, have been a direct result of a policy 'overload' in recent years in the UK education system:

*'We've got a special needs policy ... we've got an EAL [English as an Additional Language] policy, we've got an anti-racist policy ... we've got a vulnerable children policy.'* (SENCO, School C)

The 'bottom line' in terms of the tensions and difficulties outlined above was that whilst some students with ASD felt part of their school community (*'I think it's benefited me no end really, you know, so I feel privileged that I got into mainstream school ... and I feel privileged to come here and I'm glad I did because of the way I've turned out.'* – Student with ASD, School B), others were unable to actively participate, leading to a state of 'integrated segregation' that was often a direct consequence of the practice of teachers and/or LSAs:

*[Student with ASD] does not talk to any other pupils whilst [LSA] is sat next to him* (Observation field notes, School B):

*The teacher starts the lesson (SAT revision lesson) and the class begins an activity. LSA sets up laptop at the back of the classroom for [student with ASD] to carry out an activity. He faces the wall, facing opposite direction to the rest of the class and carries out the task on the computer with headphones on. [Student with ASD] occasionally looks around at LSA, who is with another student [who is also doing different work to the rest of the class]. He puts fingers on screen and counts aloud and types answer. LSA gives [student with ASD] a worksheet with a task to do – he is not doing the same as the class at all. LSA sits next him and goes through how to complete the worksheet. Throughout the lesson, the teacher does not approach or speak to [student with ASD].* (Observation field notes, School C)

#### *Communication and inclusive practices*

A key factor that emerged during the course of our data analysis was the quality of communication within each school, and the impact this had upon the development of inclusive ways of working. 'Communication' is meant in its broadest sense, but at its most fundamental level much of what we discuss below centres upon the passing on information throughout (e.g., from SENCO to subject teachers) and beyond (e.g., to and from parents) the school to enable teaching and learning to be better tailored to students' individual needs. A crucial communication channel in each school was between the SENCO (or, in some cases, the head of an SEN resource base) and the subject teachers. This channel was vital because, as others (Robertson, Chamberlain & Kasari, 2003) have previously found, many subject teachers felt that they lacked the

'specialist knowledge' to enable them to provide effectively for students with ASDs: *'Some of the NQTs [newly qualified teachers] have actually said to me "but I'm not trained to teach these children."*' (SENCO, School B) – this is in stark contrast to the Government's assertion that, 'all teachers should expect to teach children with SEN' (DFES, 2004, p. 7). Furthermore, as a student stated, *'It is the teachers [that] are rubbish – they know about their subject but they know nothing about us with Asperger's syndrome'* (Student with ASD, School B).

In such situations, SENCOs are relied upon as a source of expertise – and we observed a number of strategies by which these staff attempted to communicate information about pupils with ASD to their subject teachers – although this was mediated by the motivation of the said staff. For instance, one SENCO suggested that *'the degree to which staff access that [the school's SEN register] depends on how much they're interested in special needs'* (SENCO, School A). Furthermore, for some school SENCOs, what had been planned as a two-way communication process (involving, for instance, updates from subject teachers about the success or failure of strategies suggested by the SENCO for a given student) often ended up being anything but

*'a support worker [will be] going in and saying have you got the IEP [individual education plan], have you picked this up from the head of department, you know, do you understand what this means, so there's a lot of close liaison, one to one. I was torn at one time, because I can spend the whole of my week chasing round staff. The worst department in the school and I can go on record as saying this, because I've told the head of department and I've told the deputy head, is the English department, never ever fill them in, and we only have I would say maximum 10 children in any one year, where I ask them to do individual learning targets and they don't do them and considering these children have got social awareness problems, nothing, nothing comes back at all, year after year after year.'* (SENCO, School B)

These issues are, of course, directly related to deep-seated values and beliefs about whose was the ultimate responsibility for ensuring students with ASDs' learning and participation (see next two themes).

Communication strategies implemented by SENCOs included in-service training (INSET) sessions, passing of individual education plans (IEPS) electronically and in hard-copy, messages in daily staff bulletins, and in one school the implementation of a 'yellow book' system – wherein each student with an ASD had a yellow booklet that went to each teacher containing a detailed profile of strengths and difficulties, suggested teaching and learning strategies, and so on. This booklet also contained space for both the SENCO and subject teachers to write notes throughout the year, such that as knowledge was cumulatively generated about how to meet a student's needs, it could immediately

be shared amongst staff: *'It really builds up the picture of the student, how they work and, you know, tensions, things they're good at, things where they might be ... saying where there would be difficulty but trying to really paint a picture of the youngster'* (ex-SENCO, School D).

In addition to established methods of communication of specialist knowledge regarding ASDs, SENCOs also routinely provided ad-hoc support for staff in meeting the needs of students:

*'It is so useful to have [head of ASD resource base] to go to and say I am having a problem with this, what do you suggest and she will suggest some strategies. There was an incident a couple of weeks ago and [student with ASD] ... he was doing exams and he got quite stressed, he likes maths but doesn't like English but he was quite stressed in maths exams but we couldn't understand why, but I think it was like the anticipation of the English in the afternoon. Picked up on the fact that he was quite stressed on maths so I do go [sic] to [head of ASD resource base] and say you know if maths is going to be problem today I am anticipating major problems in English especially in the exam and he sort of gave me some sort of pointers to and I don't honestly think if I hadn't spoken to her I don't think I got him through the exams.'* (LSA, School D)

Where communication channels throughout a given school were operating well, students' individual needs were more likely to be met. However, in every school instances of 'communication breakdown' were recorded, where vital information had not been passed on to key individuals, and in these situations the outcomes for students with ASDs was worrying:

*'I've had two kids on ASD statements that have been excluded and I've not known anything about it until they've been excluded for behavioural reasons. I felt in both cases they were actually being excluded for their autistic reaction to the situation that wasn't of their making and really excluding them was just the reaction on the part of the school ... one was a student with Asperger's at lunch time who'd been ... there had been name calling out on the field and he produced this great big stick which he was wielding about in a high state of anxiety.'* (ex-SENCO, School D)

*'The teacher hadn't realised he'd got Asperger[s] syndrome and I just wondered whether that teacher would have dealt with the situation differently had he known' [student with ASD had been reprimanded for a minor incident in a science class that the student had then become extremely anxious about].'* (Parent, School A)

#### *Responsibility for students' learning and the role of the LSA*

Given that teachers are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to their lessons to enable all students to access them fully, the matter of responsibility for students'

learning also came to light. IEPs which identify the learning needs and targets of students with SEN are prepared by SENCOs and reviewed at least once a year. There is thus an expectation that teaching staff use these IEPs in order to differentiate their class work accordingly and to make use of the LSA (if present) to enable these students fully to access the lesson. However, with the increasing numbers of students with SEN, the difficulties that teachers face in implementing educational and school policies whilst ensuring students learn are highlighted:

*'... the biggest change is in the complexity of the special needs children. When I first came here most of the children on the register I would say had educational needs, because of their low ability of those children, but recently they have complex needs and I don't think that the school has kept up with the change in the complexity of these children...'* (SENCO, School B)

*'... I think teachers still are left in a pretty difficult situation in terms of what on paper, they should be doing for every pupil with any kind of extra need in the classroom, and what it is actually realistically possible to do.'* (History teacher, School D)

*'... although the information comes out on the IEPs, it's very difficult to digest that and keep it at your fingertips, when it's one student of 27 or 28, it's really difficult ... The group that [ASD student] is in ... there's a massive number of students on IEPs, about half the class, so you've got to keep that student's individual particulars, in mind with all the others as well, and I guess that's really why it's useful to have somebody, who's only focusing on [one] student.'* (Science teacher, School C)

The use of LSA support for students in the study varied from school to school and where they were judged to be on the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice framework (e.g., School Action, School Action Plus, Statement of SEN) (DfES, 2001). Accordingly, some pupils received little/no additional adult support in the classroom, some received it in key subjects, and others in almost every lesson. Their usefulness in classrooms was identified in several interviews, and as one student remarked: *'It makes me feel like I'm calm and relaxed and I can get on with my work'* (Student with ASD, School D). However, the presence of an LSA allowed some teachers to 'absolve their responsibility' in terms of differentiating work for students with ASDs:

*'The problems ... teachers ... when they say, you walk in the room and "that's yours", and they don't see that they have any responsibility for this child. They don't pre-plan or if they do they don't tell us, I suspect they don't pre-plan.'* (SENCO, School B)

*The LSA starts to dictate to [student with ASD] and he writes down exactly what the LSA is saying. [Student with ASD] seems to be keeping to task and writing down exactly what the LSA is saying. When he is talking*

*to the LSA he looks at her ... The LSA starts talking and writing down and he looks out the window. The LSA starts dictating again and [student with ASD] writes down what she says. The teacher comes over and says to the LSA "Can I look at [student with ASD]'s work?"* (Observation field notes, School D)

Furthermore, evidence of differentiation of the class work by teachers also was variable both across and within schools, where some teachers actively sought out information about pupils in order to differentiate the work appropriately, and others did not. For instance, contrast the following excerpts:

*'... she had ... taken trouble to talk [to] his previous art teacher and she's gone away and she had provided differentiating materials.... she's actually made the whole thing far more accessible. He's doing the same thing that everybody else is doing...'* (LSA, School A)

*'... there's very little evidence of differentiation for [ASD student] ... It's the teacher's job. They all know that they're supposed to provide differentiating material for different levels of ability in their classes.'* (LSA, School A)

Overall, it was not clear whether differentiation of work was the responsibility of the class teacher or the LSA. As mentioned in the previous section, there was evidence that this may have been linked to some teachers' lack of understanding of the needs of students with ASDs: *'We have to produce an individual learning plan for each student and I find that personally difficult because I don't really know at what sort of level the children ... I don't know what I'm expected to accept from them – some of the few information we have is quite blunt'* (History teacher, School B).

Teachers' approach and confidence were also reflected in the way they engaged with their students with ASDs in class, and ensuring that they had understood the task and lesson. For example, there was evidence of some teachers 'leaving the LSA to it' or teachers asking the LSA about an individual student (e.g., *'How's he doing?'*) rather than actually asking the student themselves. This meant, in some cases, that pupils had little or no actual interaction with class teachers: *'Normally none of our teachers really look at my work and none of them don't really come and talk to me like ... but on that day he come [sic] over to watch and you were watching me and normally he wouldn't do that. If you looked at any of the other students he didn't go up to any of the other students'* (Student with ASD, School C).

*Students with ASDs in mainstream schools – distinct needs*  
The issues described up to this point in the current paper are arguably generic to SEN provision in mainstream schools rather than specific to students with ASD (although it could be argued that the nature of the difficulties experienced by students with ASD means that such issues are more likely to impact upon them than on students with

other SEN). However, consistent with the 'distinct needs' position outlined by Norwich and Lewis (2005), our data analysis also revealed a subset of issues that linked directly to the unique pattern of difficulties in social communication, social interaction and imagination that characterise students with ASDs.

The consequences of not being able to experience the order and predictability upon which students with ASDs rely present something of a dilemma in terms of developing mainstream educational environments that are 'AS-friendly' (Connor, 2000), since schools are, by their nature, noisy, bustling, unpredictable and often chaotic (particularly at secondary level). Students in our case study schools found the school environment to be very distressing in this regard:

*'It does bother me because sometimes there can be a lot of pushing and shoving including the corridors because they are small.'* (Student, School B)

*'... I think all the teachers now know that he doesn't sit next to boys ... but then the unexpected happens like in the library and somebody will come and sit down then that can be a bit of a problem.'* (LSA, School B)

Furthermore, failure of staff to accommodate the 'literality of thought' of students with ASDs proved to be a barrier in their interactions with them in the classroom:

*'[ASD student] puts his hand up ... the teacher acknowledges his hand is up and says, "Hold that thought, I'll come back to you in a minute." [ASD student] puts his hand down.'* (Observation, School A)

*'The teacher is talking very seriously to the class about their behaviour. The LSA turns to [ASD student] and says "Don't worry, 'sir' is not talking to you". [ASD student] puts his fingers in his ears. The LSA says "You don't have to do that; you should try and think of something else in your head." [ASD student] puts his hands down.'* (Observation, School D)

Such students also require clear routine in schools to ensure their day runs smoothly. Unplanned changes to the school day or a room change that would seem trivial to most students were particular problems for those with ASDs:

*'... particularly when they first start here they are not used to routine and things do throw them ... sometimes simply like their normal teacher is absent but nobody has explained that there will be a different teacher in there, and that throws them ...'* (LSA, School C)

*'... there are some other distractions that would be very distracting that the others would perhaps look at and think oh it is snowing and then turn back to work.... The other thing that is very distracting is the first time that they are in rooms usually looking around the room and*

*taking in all the information and sometimes it can take the whole lesson to read every poster and make sure that you know exactly what's where and then after that which is another reason where perhaps changing classrooms is difficult.* (LSA, School C)

*'Wednesday, 21 June 2006: The taxi was late this morning and it was late in the afternoon.*

*Thursday, 22 June 2006: We had to wait 10 minutes in the taxi.*

*Friday, 7 July 2006: The taxi is RUBBISH!!! [word capitalised and written in red ink by student] I arrived home at 15:30 with [previous taxi driver], now I arrived home at 16:30 with this taxi. We MUST change the taxi, or I go to another school, what [sic] I don't want.* (Diary of student, School D) (This particular student arrived at school by taxi each day – but a new driver had taken over in mid-June, and the taxi's route was altered to allow another pupil to be picked up.)

Students were often placed into academic sets and many students with ASDs found themselves in the lowest set. These sets are usually noisier and more disruptive and as a result may act as a barrier to the learning and achievement of those with ASDs:

*'Thursday, 22 June 2006: In English [lessons] there was so much noise. I just wanted the class to be quiet and I can get on with my work.'* (Diary of student, School C)

*'... the class are not a very nice class ... I literally have to stand at the front and I spend so much time disciplining ... I have to admit, out of the pupils I do teach with autism, he is the one I speak to the least because of the class that he is in.'* (Teacher, School C)

*'... the classes they are in often sets and this school particularly I would say the bottom sets equate also for behaviour ... although our children are well behaved they have lots of examples of poor behaviour, we do find it very frustrating and eventually you can see the good copying it as well.'* (LSA, School C)

However, we also found evidence of simple adaptations that can help to break down such barriers to learning and participation – for instance, one school routinely 'cherry-picked' quiet, well-behaved classes for pupils with ASDs who had particular difficulties coping with noise and disruption. In other schools there were often certain areas (such as resource rooms or libraries) that were used as a refuge for pupils wanting to escape the 'chaos of the corridor':

*'... they put him in the lower set but really that wasn't helping his behaviour so he was put in the top set and then he's got some role models ... and so that worked.'* (SENCO, School D)

## Conclusion

The last decade has seen a significant upsurge in policy development relating to the inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools in the UK (e.g., DfEE, 1997, 2004; HMSO, 2001; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). However, the government's goals of personalising learning for all students, making education more innovative and responsive to their individual needs, reducing reliance on separate SEN structures and processes, and raising achievement of all students (DfES, 2004) appear to be unmet as yet – if the current research is typical of other schools in the UK. Indeed, the gap between 'inclusion rhetoric' and 'classroom reality' was very wide in some schools. Effective mainstream education for students with SEN (and in particular those with ASDs) requires a positive school ethos and commitment to inclusion, characterised by a 'top-down' commitment from head-teachers. Clear channels of communication need to be established in order for specialist knowledge about students' needs to be disseminated around schools. Such communication should always be a two-way process, with class teachers having a vital role to play in feeding back on the success or otherwise of strategies suggested by SENCOs. Furthermore, there needs to be absolute clarity regarding responsibility for learning of students with SEN if the situations of 'segregated integration' outlined above are to be avoided. Finally, there needs to be consideration of 'specific group needs' (Lewis & Norwich, 2005) for groups of learners (such as those with ASDs) who may find the experience of the typical mainstream school environment particularly difficult.

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### Appendix 1: Generic descriptions of the four case study schools

1. School A – Medium school serving an urban area
  - Disproportionate number of students in public care, but average free school meals (FSM)\*
  - Above average number of students with SEN, but below average Statements of SEN (SSEN)\*\*
  - Attainment in Year 9 (age 14) and Year 11 (age 16) above average
  - 2 students with ASDs
2. School B – Large school serving a mixed urban/suburban area
  - Less than half national average FSM
  - Less than half national average SEN and SSEN
  - Split-site
  - Attainment above average for Year 9 and Year 11
  - More than 10 students with ASDs (local feeder primary school has a specially resourced ASD unit)
3. School C – Large school serving an urban area
  - Average FSM
  - Average SEN and SSEN
  - Resourced for severe learning difficulties (SLD)
  - Split-site
  - Above average attainment in Year 9 and Year 11
  - 6 students with ASDs, 2 of whom also qualify to access the school's SLD resources
4. School D – Very large school serving an affluent suburban area
  - Low FSM
  - Low SEN and SSEN
  - Attainment well above average in Year 9 and Year 11
  - Resourced for ASD
  - 3 students on roll for resource base, with an additional 5 students with ASDs in school

\*Eligibility for FSM is based on parental income and is used as a proxy indicator of socio-economic status.

\*\*A legal document that sets out a child's needs and typically secures financial resources to allow a given school to provide for those needs.