A Study of
Further Education Provision for
Students with Autistic Spectrum
Conditions in the Surrey Area

Acknowledgements

Note 1

In this study the acronym of ASC will be used to refer to an autistic spectrum condition instead of ASD (autistic spectrum disorder). This is following the increased use of this title in autism literature as the term 'condition' is felt to be more neutral and less negative than 'disorder'.

The abbreviation AS refers to Asperger Syndrome.

Note 2

To protect the anonymity of the participants in this study any names have been replaced by a single letter, e.g. "'A' was very happy at college".

Abstract

In Britain today, the Government has emphasised the need for inclusion and equality for all young people with regard to accessing further education. This requirement extends to all young persons diagnosed with an autistic spectrum condition. In this qualitative study, twenty-nine participants were interviewed about their experiences of further education (FE) provision. The participants included students with a diagnosis of an autistic spectrum condition and parents of students with an ASC. Further information was gathered by visiting mainstream colleges, specialist colleges and by interviewing professionals who work with young autistic people. Results suggest that although access to FE is getting better, there are areas that need improvement.

Introduction

Since Kanner first identified the traits of, and gave a name to autism in the 1940's, there has followed a rapid growth in knowledge and diagnosis of the condition. Also in the 1940's, Hans Asperger described a condition with similarities to autism but which exhibited higher abilities in grammatical language, this became known as Asperger syndrome. Both of these syndromes exhibit a triad of impairments in social interaction, social communication and social imagination, and come under the title of Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC's). The growth in knowledge has occurred alongside the continuing rise in estimates of the prevalence of autistic spectrum conditions which has gone from being considered rare to now one of the most common neurological disorders amongst children with incidence rates thought to be around 1 in every 100 (National Autistic Society, 2008).

As predicted levels in the prevalence of autism rise so has awareness of the need to provide services to help people impaired by the condition. The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 has provided a legal framework to ensure that a student with a disability such as autism is not 'placed at a substantial disadvantage in

comparison with a person who is not disabled'. Despite this new legal framework it is questionable whether educational institutions are managing to provide a service that allows students with special needs to access and experience college with the same level of success and enjoyment that a non-disabled student does.

For educational establishments to provide services for students with autism it is important that there is an understanding of the condition. It can be hard to define what an autistic person is like as one of the features of autism is that strong individual differences persist. Films, books and tv programmes have helped to raise the profile of ASC's but have also led to assumptions being made about autistic people, such as 'autistic people are good with numbers' or 'autistic people don't like being touched'. A mother of a child with autism describes the irregularity of the condition, "the only predictable thing about it is the unpredictability; the only consistent attribute – the inconsistency. There is little argument on any level that autism is baffling, even to those who spend there lives around it." (Ellen Notbolm; 2005). It is this unpredictability and inconsistency that often hinders integration, learning and success at college for autistic students.

The fact that for an autistic thinker the unwritten social rules that the neuro-typical subconsciously learn and instinctively understand will have to be painstakingly learned and often never fully understood hampers social relationships. The student with an ASC may often come across as rude, belligerent, lazy or behaving in a totally unacceptable manner. Without an understanding of these difficulties it may be hard for a teacher to have empathy for a student who constantly corrects them, or disrupts the class, or never hands their work in on time. Clare Sainsbury describes in her book what it is like to be at school for a child with AS, "I don't understand the children around me. They frighten and confuse me… I try so hard to do what I am told, but just when I think I am being helpful and good, the teachers tell me off and I don't know why. It's as if everybody is playing some complicated game and I am the only one who hasn't been told the rules." (Sainsbury, 2000). This vividly illustrates the alienation that a student with an ASC can feel, but whilst Clare Sainsbury has been able to

articulate these feelings, many people are not and rely on those around them being aware of the difficulties they face on a daily basis.

In a study conducted by Barnard et al. (2001), it was found that school exclusion rates for pupils with ASCs was 20 times higher than the average and we may assume that this has an impact on a students success in further education. There is also evidence from a National Autistic Society survey of support systems in mainstream schooling by Barnard et al. (2002) that suggests that, "almost half the respondent schools considered that neither pupils with autism nor their teachers were getting the assistance they needed" (Howlin, 2005).

There may be many reasons for these high rates of exclusion for ASC students but one suggestion is that the colleges are not providing a person-centred approach that enables a student to have input to their own educational programme. In a paper regarding inclusion for autistic learners, Christine Breakey explains how when choices are made for the autistic person that do not fit with their wants or desires this can cause frustration which 'is then often demonstrated through behaviour which is labelled by neuro-typical people as 'challenging'…The end result of this is that the autistic person cannot be accommodated in mainstream and is excluded', (Breakey, 2006).

In 2001 the Disability Discrimination Act was amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act to ensure that education providers did not treat disabled people less favourably because of their disability. This includes people with learning difficulties and conditions such as autism and Asperger's. In 2005 there were further amendments which put a duty on education providers to be proactive in promoting disability equality, taking steps to eliminate discrimination and harassment and plan services for any person with a disability including anticipating and making reasonable adjustments. Therefore, education providers should be looking at the individual needs of students so that they can provide an environment and service that will provide the best chance for that student to enjoy and succeed at college.

The ever increasing knowledge about autism and new laws putting a duty on educational establishments to provide services that ensure a student with a disability is not at a substantial disadvantage it is imperative that we continue to check and improve, as necessary, the provision of education for students with autistic spectrum conditions.

The Study

To learn about the current further education provision for ASC students in the Surrey area, a variety of information gathering sources were used. These fell into five distinct groups

1. The first information source was the ASC students and their families. Where possible I met with students who told me of their personal experiences within further education. However, some students did not want to talk to me directly about their time at college but were happy for their parents to recount their experiences.

2. Local mainstream colleges were visited and meetings with learning support managers and assistants were held to gain a clear picture of what support services were on offer and to get an impression of the level of understanding of ASCs within the colleges.

3. Another information source was visiting local specialist learning difficulty (LD) schools and sixth forms to find out about services they offered and how many students they could cater for.

4. Specialist out of county colleges for students with Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism were visited to gather information about their methodologies..

5. A final source of information was visiting professionals who are involved in enabling individuals with autism to access services such as further education, i.e. connections advisors, community learning disability team members, occupational therapists, etc.

The main body of evidence gathered for this study came from interviews with participants. The participants were either students in further education, about to go to further education, had previously attended an FE college themselves or close family members of students. Students were not interviewed alone but each had either a support worker or parent present during the interview. If the student was present the interview was directed at them but input from parents and support worker's was encouraged with guidance from the student. The study included interviews with parents of students who may have felt unable to attend the interview themselves due to unfamiliarity with the interviewee, a dislike of being bombarded by questions or an anxiety around talking about negative experiences.

In total there were 8 students, 18 parents and 3 support workers interviewed for the study. These can be separated in to 19 individual units with each unit referring to a different student and their own experiences. The interview was guided by a questionnaire (appendix 1) but the interviewees were encouraged to talk freely about any student experience within the education system that was either negative or positive. Participants were also encouraged to talk about how negative experiences for students with ASCs could be reduced or avoided and ways they feel current FE college provision could be improved.

The most common topic that came up in the interviews was the quality of staff, with 12 out of the 18 participant units citing good and bad staff as having an effect on the students' experience. This was one of the few themes that did not appear to be mostly associated with one type of educational establishment but was cited as being an issue for all educational service providers.

 Many interviewees talked of there being very good staff who made a noticeable difference to the quality of experience for the student, e.g. one student explained, "certain teachers have really helped, I was put in the bottom class for maths but my teacher was great, he was on my wavelength and now I am going to do A level maths'. Another interviewee talked of how the headmaster at their son's college was such a strong leader he had a strong staff team and any concerns that a

parent may have were dealt with swiftly and effectively. In another instance, one student described how he felt similar to the course tutor, and that the tutor understood him and was therefore able to approach him. After failing at two previous colleges a mixture of the right course, the right tutor and the right support was enabling him to succeed at college. In yet another instance the Learning Support Worker recognised that the student preferred discreet support as described by the student, "it was good because the LSW was in the room but no one knew who they were for".

Unfortunately there were also reports of how poor staff contributed to difficulties for the students. For many it was a lack of staff consistency either because of staff absences or staff changes that caused problems for the student. In other instances it was a lack of rapport between the LSW and the student as described by one parent, "you need to, as far as you can, marry up the support assistant with the student, because if they have nothing in common it can cause problems". Another parent told of how, "there are good support workers and bad ones, you need to be able to have a rapport with the person you are supporting and not all of them have this".

It was also highlighted through the interviews that lack of specific skills amongst staff members can be a problem for the student. For one student who had a scribe for lessons and exams he felt that some scribes did not write fast enough and in other instances the scribe edited his work by choosing what to write down.
In another regard the skills of staff were questioned by one parent who said, "the staff don't seem to have any communication skills such as makaton or pecs or even utilising TEACCH". In this case, the parent had sent the college pictures that the student was able to use to aid communication but the college staff did not know what to do with them. Unfortunately, this college placement eventually broke down.

Positive experiences for college students that were identified in the interviews were improved independence, relevant and enjoyable classes, good 1:1 support,

increased self-esteem, opportunities to make new friends, integration, and development of life skills. Negative points included, bullying, bad communication with parents, break times and free periods, limited courses, lack of understanding of ASCs, lack of individualised programme of education and missed opportunities. These experiences have been described in more detail below but the findings have been separated into three categories that relate to the type of educational provision that is relevant to the point being made.

Specialist AS Colleges

The first described here is the specialist AS colleges that provide places for a very small number of students who meet the entry requirements and manage to get funding for these expensive placements. These colleges provide term time residential placements where the students are supported to access mainstream college courses. There are many positive elements to these types of services.

Firstly, the students undergo intense assessment periods. This serves the purpose of getting to know the student well and also to form individual, person-centred programmes for social and life skills development.

These colleges tend to have a well informed staff team that have a strong understanding of ASCs. At one of the colleges visited there was a strong emphasis on the importance of the learning support workers (LSWs) and how their role is a major contributing factor in the success of the students. It was recognised by the college that these are the workers that will get to know the students well, to recognise signs of the students anxiety, to help them learn social skills and to liaise with the mainstream college tutors and families.

One of the students interviewed who attends an AS college said, "my key support worker is with me most days and she is very good, she gives me the emotional support I need and she takes notes for me which really helps". The parent of this student went on to describe how the key LSW had aided the transition to college

for the student and parents, "it was really stressful for him, but they were very good in terms of keeping us engaged and very supportive".

The strong knowledge of ASCs that these colleges have means that they can recognise characteristics of the condition and have a strategy in place to help manage any difficulties that this characteristic may produce. For instance, in one particular college, students' anxiety is recognised as a common feature and so helping the students identify the causes of their anxiety and encouraging them to develop strategies to reduce and manage it has been made a priority. In another, college there are tools in place that the staff are trained to use that give guidelines on how to provide the student with immediate emotional and environmental support in a way that reduces any stress to the student and teaches the young person better, more constructive and effective ways to deal with stress or painful feelings.

Another positive facet of the specialist residential colleges is that they can provide an opportunity for the student to increase their social, emotional and life skills. Students are able to access local amenities such as the cinema, shops, discos and social clubs with the support of the college. They are also provided opportunities to increase life skills such as budgeting, food shopping, cooking and laundry in a structured target-oriented manner. Whilst visiting one college a lesson was observed where students were learning about other people's perspectives and at another it was explained that if a student has a difficulty in a social situation the support worker can, "at an appropriate time and place, conduct a non-critical review of the student's language and manner". Emotional skills enhancement is recognised as very important to this student group, one college support manager described how the students at that college were academically very able but emotionally immature. He saw the students' time at the residential college as an opportunity to develop emotional skills to be closer to that of their peer group.

A benefit of the specialist residential colleges that was cited by all participants who attended such colleges is that they were able to find courses that they were

particularly interested in. The colleges do not restrict students to a choice of one mainstream college but will support them to access any course within the geographical area.

Despite the many positive outcomes for students attending specialist AS colleges there were some negative points that were identified:

The colleges are often far away from the family home which can mean many lengthy journeys during each term. Two of the students interviewed cited problems with the frequent and lengthy journeys as they found the travelling exhausting and disruptive.

The distance from the family home causes other problems with parents feeling that they are unable to maintain as strong links as they may have done with previous local school provision. One parent said, "I would not have sent A….. away had there been suitable local provision".

For some, college is a time to move away from family and become more independent and some participants spoken to did cite college as an opportunity to build independence skills but they also valued the support, familiarity and understanding that their families provided them with. The specialist colleges were all described by participants as communicating well with parents but some felt that being able to have a physical presence at the college e.g. picking up the student, dropping in to speak to tutors, would be preferable.

The amount of placements available is currently quite limited by the small number of colleges, by the expense of the placements and the student entry requirements. The residential colleges visited for this study all catered for students on the high functioning end of the autistic spectrum. If students did meet the criteria for entry they then had to overcome the hurdle of finding a place and getting funding from their local authority.

Colleges for Students with Learning Difficulties

In these sixth forms the students mostly attend on a daily basis although one sixth form visited does offer some residential places for limited amounts of time. The teaching predominantly occurred within the school with certain link courses from local mainstream colleges being available. These colleges were all fairly small offering between 5 and 8 places per year.

Only 1 out of 7 of the special schools/sixth form colleges visited were autism specialists, though one school visited is currently setting up a sixth form for ASC students (due to open Sept 2007). However, all displayed a good knowledge of autistic spectrum conditions and were able to offer an individualised service. One parent of a student who accesses a local LD sixth form said, "they understand about Asperger's and autistic spectrum disorders so nobody's phased by anything that he does, they know how to deal with him and how to get the best out of him".

This understanding of ASCs has many positive outcomes such as one college that provides a homework club for those students that struggle to structure their work and motivate themselves at home. A parent said of this, "the school has a homework club which has been enormously helpful in giving B….. a structure around his homework and in actually getting him to do it"

The colleges all had small class sizes with a high staff to student ratio. This was highlighted as a positive thing by 5 out of the 7 participants interviewed who attended an LD specialist school sixth form. The advantages of small class sizes and high staff to student ratios are many. It generally provides a calmer environment, the students receive much higher rates of 1:1 attention, individualised programmes of learning and achievement can be developed and recognition of a students anxieties or behaviour triggers are more likely as the tutors and learning assistants should have good knowledge of the individual students.

Bullying is often a problem for the autistic student but the environment of the specialist LD sixth form with small student numbers and higher student to staff ratios than mainstream are reported by parents and the students as being able to deal with bullying better. One of the interviewed parents said, "there was bullying where C… didn't want to go to school but it was dealt with and it is not a problem now". Another parent also told of how bullying was dealt with swiftly and successfully at the school their son attended.

Specialist educational tools and programmes were in evidence during the visits to the LD sixth forms. One college used TEACCH methodology (Schopler and Mesibov, 1995) which emphasises making the environment as clear and predictable as possible by practices such as putting pictorial labels on all items in the environment and developing individual timetables using pictures and symbols to give clear indications of what is to be done and when something is over. Communication systems were also practised within the colleges such as Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and makaton and some of the establishments implemented the social stories approach (Carol Gray, 1994) to aid learning.

The colleges visited all implemented vocational courses that were geared towards future achievable employment, these included; catering, horticulture, office skills and IT. One sixth form visited felt that links to employment was a priority for their students and the staff worked very hard to find yearly 2 week work experience for every student and students were encouraged to take part time jobs during their time at college for which they could be released from college to fulfil if necessary.

There were some negatives that were identified with the specialist school sixth forms.

Two participants in the study had had negative experiences at the college they had attended. Both had had problems with the particular type of communication system that they were used to not being used by the college they attended. At

one college the weekly speech and language therapy sessions that the student was funded for rarely happened, partly due to staff absences but also due to bad management of the service in the opinion of the parent. For the other student, it was felt by the parent that the placement had not been appropriate for her son and through bad communication with the parents and a lack of understanding of her son's autism this was not recognised until the student had a breakdown and was excluded from the college.

Other negative points were the restricted range of courses available to the students. With relatively few students attending each college the course range was very limited. One parent described how, "the environment is great for D…... as it is a small school with average class sizes of 10, but this has meant that there was not a wide choice of courses'. Some of the colleges had links courses to local mainstream courses but students could not choose from any course at the linked college, it was more common that one particular course was available for the students to access if they so wished.

One parent of a student with an ASC expressed disappointment with the autism specialist college that her son had attended before he moved on to mainstream college as she said that they had not passed on any information about her son to the college he had moved on to. This lack of information sharing had led to problems at mainstream that the parent believed may have been avoided if the college had an awareness of her son's difficulties and information about strategies that may have previously been successful in reducing these difficulties.

Another concern of the specialist sixth form is that the students are in an environment that may be hard to replicate when they leave college. Social stories are devised to help the autistic person learn how to deal with social situations that they may find difficult but methodologies such as TEACCH may not be as easy to generalise to the outside world and thus college leavers may find the less structured and unpredictable environment of employment or independent living difficult to cope with.

Despite these negatives, special educational needs sixth forms provide appropriate educational services for a particular group of ASC students and unfortunately places within these colleges are, like the AS colleges, very limited and not every student who would thrive in these environments will get a place in them.

Mainstream Colleges

The final type of further education provider that was looked at was mainstream colleges. Since the advent of increased laws protecting the rights of disabled persons not to be discriminated against, mainstream colleges have developed learning support centres which oversee the service provision of any student who has special educational needs. This has led to increased access to mainstream courses for ASC students and some positives being identified, however, there is evidence to suggest that current provision is still deficient in certain areas.

Mainstream colleges visited mostly suggested that they were happy with the amount of support hours that they could offer to students with support needs. This was largely backed up by the participants in the study who attended mainstream colleges as they had been told support hours were available when requested.

Another positive was in reported levels of independence and self-esteem for many of the students, one parent described how her son enjoyed "having a chance to feel that he is like everybody else", now that he was going to a "normal college" after years of special needs education. Out of the 7 participants interviewed who attended a mainstream college, 6 reported increased independence as being positive and 4 told of increased self esteem since attending college.

Mainstream colleges tend to be large and therefore able to offer many different extra-curricular activities such as social clubs, gyms and evening events. One of the colleges visited told of its efforts to promote inclusion with its clubs. This

college currently runs an art and drama group, a football team and a positive friendship group where students from pre-entry level through to level 1-3 courses are encouraged to attend.

The learning support managers from mainstream colleges that were interviewed all expressed enthusiasm for improving and developing the services they are currently offering by bringing more training and increasing specialist knowledge amongst the staff team. They mostly claimed that awareness of ASCs was increasing all the time though admitted that there was room for improvement in this area.

The greatest area of dissatisfaction amongst the participants with regard to mainstream colleges was the lack of knowledge and understanding of autistic spectrum conditions that it was felt the colleges had. This caused the most concern as it affected the students in so many ways.

An example of this dissatisfaction came form one parent who described in interview how, "tutors were writing comments on E…..'s work such as 'E….. does not listen and follow instructions', 'E….. struggles to listen and note take', for the parent this showed a complete lack of understanding of E…..'s disorder".

The colleges visited admitted that training is not often compulsory for tutors and that the learning support teams do not have expertise in different disorders or conditions but provide a generic service of support for students who are recognised as having support needs. An obstacle that was noted when talking to two separate learning support managers was the attitude that the service has to provide support for a wide range of support needs from dyslexic, blind or disaffected students and that they are unable to have experts in particular areas. Mainstream colleges were willing to send individual staff members on courses such as the 'autism champions course' but there was little evidence of more extensive training for staff. This is a problem for the autistic student whose success at college may rely heavily on support workers and tutors recognising and understanding the subtle ways that difficulties and anxieties may present themselves.

One parent said of her son, "he comes across as more able than he is and then he is misunderstood". Another parent said of her son, "it's difficult because F….. appears very able and is good at masking his anxiety so the lack of understanding [of his support needs] has caused problems". One student with Asperger's syndrome said in the interview, "people don't think that I've got it [AS] because I don't act like I've got it … we put on a front when we go out in public so that people don't judge you or see you as different". Without the knowledge that it is a common trait of people with an ASC to appear more able than they may well be, certain behaviours can often come across as obtuse, rude, defiant or lazy. In one instance, a parent told of how her son had been having difficulties with his course. The tutors claimed that he was being defiant and lazy by never doing any of the work he was supposed to. When a visiting behaviour specialist spent some time with the student in the class, he helped this student to understand the work set for him and the student immediately set to work. The tutor was reluctant to praise the student as he felt that the work had only been produced because the behaviour specialist was there. However, the behaviour specialist felt that the student was not being obstinate or lazy but did not understand what was expected of him until someone sat with him and showed him what he should be doing. The tutor expressed that the student could always ask for help but both parent and behaviour specialist acknowledged that the student would find it difficult to ask for help.

Many of the people interviewed cited problems at college because of the apparent reluctance for the ASC student to ask for help. Parents statements included, "G…. will not tell you directly what is wrong with him" or, "problems arise because someone with autism is very unlikely to go to someone and say 'I find this difficult' but their difficulties are much more likely to be presented through their behaviours". One student explained, "they said 'here is the special needs centre and you can go there if you need help', but I wouldn't have gone there, people with Asperger's won't do that". Although this common characteristic of autistic conditions cannot be changed by the colleges, there is a feeling amongst the participants that if the staff at the mainstream colleges had a

better understanding of ASCs they would recognise this and would be proactive in helping the students rather than waiting to be asked.

The increased lack of structure at college has caused problems for some of the participants in this study. One parent claimed, "there is less structure at college and H….. struggles with this because he needs defined structure to be able to function". Another parent reports, "he struggles with the less structured timetable of college and says that he doesn't know what he is supposed to be doing when he has free periods".

3 of the participants who attended or had previously attended mainstream colleges had been involved in incidents that led to disciplinary procedures. In each case there is some evidence to suggest that if the colleges had possessed a better understanding of ASCs there may have been different outcomes. Two of incidents involving separate students but similar circumstances involved the students behaving in what was deemed an inappropriate and unacceptable manner which led to disciplinary action. In both cases the incidents took place in busy communal areas during break times. In both cases it was reported to the college by the parents that the students would need support in break times but support was either not in place or was not being consistently supplied. Also, in both cases the parents believed that their sons were discriminated against during the disciplinary procedure as their disability with regards to lack of social understanding and poor self-advocacy skills were not adjusted for.

The third incident that resulted in disciplinary procedures also occurred in communal areas during a break time. Prior to this incident a behaviour specialist from the local health service and the parents of the student had written guidelines for the college to follow to help the student with areas of difficulty. These included allowing the student to use a designated computer at pre-arranged times. It was also recommended to the college that the student have support in break times. According to the parents these guidelines were adhered to in the first year and the student did well. In the second year it is reported that there were staff changes and the guidelines did not get passed on to new staff.

The student had been allocated a computer to use during break times, but the incident took place when the student, who was unsupervised, was told to get off the computer by a staff member. When the student did not respond the computer was switched off by the staff member which resulted in the student shoving the staff member out of the way. The parents suggested that if there had been a communication between staff, a better knowledge of their son and a better understanding of autism by the staff at the college this incident may have been avoided. The parents also felt that although their son was not excluded at this point it led to a break down in relationship between the student and the college which resulted in the breakdown of the placement.

Other areas of concern in mainstream colleges that were brought up in the interviews included; higher rates of bullying, no or little individualised educational programmes, little help in developing social and emotional skills, less ability to deal with challenging behaviours, lack of staff consistency, poor communication with parents, poor communication between staff.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A final part of the study was to look at how further education provision could be improved in the Surrey area. The evidence from the interviews provided a main source for developing recommendations for improvements and the visits to the different colleges provided much information about what elements might go in to providing an ideal service for students with an ASC. To enhance this information, professional with experience in this area were contacted and asked for their ideas to develop a good model for the education provider. The professionals included, further education inspectors, National Autistic Society professionals, a provider of youth services for ASC individuals, a transitions manager, health professionals and a behaviour specialist. A study of current literature on educational practices for ASC students was also undertaken to produce as comprehensive picture of how to improve current services. Below are some of the recommendations that the study produced.

Staff training

It was obvious from the interviews with participants that this is an area of great concern. Although the specialist colleges have staff that exhibit a good knowledge of ASCs, in the mainstream settings staff awareness was deficient. A recommendation would be for autism awareness training to be given frequently and made compulsory for all staff including management, canteen staff, cleaners, administrative staff, etc.

However, it is widely recognised that a comprehensive understanding of ASCs will not be achieved by a one off training session. One solution to this problem may be to have a number of staff within the college who undergo intense training to become 'autism experts'. These experts could oversee the service that is provided to students with an ASC. Included in their role might be providing tutors with relevant information about how a particular student is affected by their ASC, such as, strengths weaknesses, difficulties and triggers of anxiety. In this way the 'autism expert' might act as an advocate for the student and enhance individual tutors' understanding of ASCs.

Promotion of staff consistency

The issue of staff consistency was seen as something that could be improved in colleges. There are methods that can be adopted that may improve retention of staff and absence rates. One of the colleges visited for the study used planned strategies to help students reduce and control their more unacceptable and inappropriate impulses and behaviours through the structured use of positive interventions and approaches to behaviour planning. By using planned strategies or tools to aid staff in dealing with certain situations, the hope is that staff will have greater confidence with their work and themselves and therefore feel more in control and happier at work.

Another strategy to aid staff consistency is to have a strong staff support system that encourages staff members to talk about problems they may be having without feeling they are failing. Staff support systems could also encompass personal development plans to reduce stagnation and encourage staff enthusiasm and progression through learning and goal setting.

Individualised education programmes for students with an ASC

Although some of the interviewed students expressed positive attitudes towards their chosen course of study, for others, the courses available to them were restricted, inflexible and unable to accommodate the spiky profile that many autistic spectrum students have.

In 'The Autism Spectrum and Further Education – A Guide to Good practice' (Christine Breakey, 2006), it is argued that for an education provider to fulfil its promise of being inclusive it should be person centred; thus, being "person-centred is entirely compatible with inclusion, which is not synonymous with integration, but is in itself a person-centred concept where providers match their provision to the needs of the individual learner. By this definition, all institutions that define themselves as 'inclusive' should be person-centred", (Breakey, 2006).

With this view in mind, a college that promotes inclusion should put in place strategies to provide a person-centred approach that might involve building a relationship with the autistic student so that effective communication between student and service provider can be developed to enable the student to express their own needs and desires rather than having someone else's idea of what is best imposed on them. To get as comprehensive picture of the student as possible, information should be gathered from as many sources as possible, i.e. any professionals that have worked with the student, previous education providers accessed by the student, parents and observations of the student. It is also important that there is continual assessment of the student whilst at college to check the appropriateness of the original plan and to make amendments as necessary.

Increased communication with parent/care-giver

Some of the parents in this study expressed disappointment that they had not been involved in their child's further education service. It is felt that not only do parents have in depth knowledge of how their child's autism affects them but that they are their child's best advocate having their best interests at heart. One parent suggested, "I think what schools should do, probably before the student starts, is have a good conversation with the parents and make a few notes about the student, i.e. what problems they may have… because you are the only person in the World who understands them".

Indeed, it is recognised that a parents knowledge and understanding of the student may play an important role in the success of the autistic student as, "few students with autism, no matter how high their intellectual ability, will have acquired the social competence or level of independence required to survive when they first enter college. To expect them to be able to cope without support from their families is to deprive them of a vital backup system and to deprive college staff of a valuable source of information", (Howlin, 2005).

Key worker systems

We have already heard one student describe how his key worker understands him and gives him emotional support. For a parent that was interviewed for the study the key worker system had been invaluable in the success of her sons time in mainstream college by, liaising with the parents, meeting with the student on a daily basis, developing a good understanding of the student, their needs, wishes, strengths and weaknesses and by developing an individual service for the student.

This system can be easily implemented by colleges using LSWs and has the added benefit of giving responsibility and thus a sense of empowerment to the staff member involved.

Support and structure provided during free periods

All of the serious incidents that affected students involved in this study happened during unsupervised free periods. This suggests that it would be beneficial for colleges to develop strategies to help students cope with these times that are often unpredictable and distressing for the student with an ASC.

A basic strategy would be to provide support during these times. Other strategies may include, supporting the student to access social clubs or busy areas whilst using it as an opportunity for the student to enhance social skills. The student may benefit from being provided with a structure that is developed with the student of things to do during free times. Access to a base room or designated area where the student feels calm and safe may be of benefit to the student. Giving the student a list of written rules can be of benefit to the student who has difficulty understanding social rules and norms.

Social and independence skills development

As described earlier, the AS colleges visited for this study had strong programmes for developing the individual students' social, emotional and independence skills. However, such programmes were not so apparent in mainstream settings. As this may be the last opportunity for some to access education, it would be a great opportunity to develop ways that the student can learn strategies to improve such skills that will be valuable when they move on from college.

Skills could be enhanced through schemes such as supporting students to access social groups, planning and go on trips outside of college, travel training, incorporating specified times in the individual's timetable to work on skills development, etc.

Diversity training for all staff and students

The need for staff to be trained to have an improved understanding of Autistic Spectrum Conditions has already been discussed but there is also a case for students at college to be given information to understand the condition better.

One professional who was contacted for ideas of how to improve further education provision for ASC students described a diversity programme that she had come across in the U.S where a college dedicates each week of term time to a minority group, i.e. people with dyslexia, the blind, chromes disease sufferers. This college has included autism and Asperger's weeks where staff and students are provided with information and encouraged to put themselves in the position of the person with the condition. The aim is to enhance awareness as well a de-stigmatising and normalising such conditions.

Peer support programmes

This study found that bullying is a common problem for an autistic student and evidence shows that despite a common misconception that people with an ASC are aloof and don't desire friendships, having companions is in fact a desirable goal for most, as one student with Asperger's explained in his internet blog, "while I don't always understand the meaning of friendship, it is very important to me" (www.dircon.co.uk, 2007). In a study by Stoddart (1999) it was suggested that, "adolescents with Asperger syndrome experience low self-esteem and have increasing awareness of their differences; they experienced frequent teasing and rejection by their peers, concerns about their peers' perceptions, and a lack of ability to make friends". There is evidence from studies of peer support programmes that these may go some way in reducing bullying and helping to develop positive peer relationships.

Details and findings from a peer support programme conducted in a comprehensive school in Barnet were presented by Annie Etherington at the 2007 NAS conference. The programme involved a student with Asperger's

Syndrome who had been bullied by two boys in particular but also by others. A key element of the study was that the perpetrators of the bullying were recruited as peer supporters. The supporters were trained during lesson time in support techniques, mentoring and in understanding Asperger's Syndrome. The peer support programme proved to be hugely successful with both the victim of the bullying and the perpetrators of the bullying benefiting from the programme.

There is increasing amounts of information about peer support programmes and implementing such a programme in a college setting may have a very positive impact on any student that has problems with social integration and relationships.

Development of transitions to and from college

Times of change can be very stressful for someone with an ASC and so transitions plans can be of great value in reducing anxieties around change. Some colleges already have links courses with local schools that can help with the transition from school to college. If these are not available to the student it is recommended that the college be flexible in allowing a number of visits from the student who is about to join the college.

What to do after graduating from college was an area of concern for some students and parents. Students may benefit if the colleges worked in partnership with the employment agencies to develop transitions plans for the students. This could include colleges allowing LSW's to support the students to work placements to enhance chances of a successful transition to employment.

Reasonable adjustments

In this study there were 3 incidents that different students were involved in that resulted in disciplinary procedures against the students. In each case the parents felt that reasonable adjustments for their sons had not been made. In each case the student had exhibited behaviour that was deemed unacceptable by the

colleges involved. However, there is a strong argument that the students were not being given adequate support at the time of the incidents and that they may have been avoided if sufficient strategies had been in place to help the student manage the situations. During the disciplinary procedures for each incident, parents felt that the colleges did not take this in to account and therefore reasonable adjustments were not being made for the students.

The Disability Discrimination Act (amended by SENDA 2001) makes it a requirement for all educational establishments to make anticipatory adjustments for disabled students. However, if there is a lack of understanding of the disability, as has been evidenced in this study, then it is impossible to anticipate adjustments that would need to be made to ensure an equality of service. By increasing staff knowledge of ASCs as discussed before the staff will have more chance at anticipating and implementing appropriate adjustments that the college can make to ensure that the student with an ASC is treated fairly.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1

A Study of
Further Education Provision in Surrey for People on the Autistic Spectrum

Interview Form

Participant:

Parent/Carer/Support Worker present:

Age of Participant:

Diagnosis of Participant:

Educational History of Participant:

Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer
What College do you currently go to?		
What courses are you doing at college?		
How do you get to college?		
Is your college far from where you live?		
Do people at College know about your diagnosis? Teachers/students.		

Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer
What things do you like about College? Prompts: Environment Other students. Lessons. The course. Teachers. Independence. Extra curricular activities. Communication with parents.		

Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer
Can you tell me about some things you do not like about college? Prompts: Environment. Other Students. Lessons. The course. Workload. Noise. Amount of people in classes. Teachers. Less structure. Travel. Communication with parents.		

Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer
Do you get any support at college? Prompts: How much? With whom? Teacher or support worker. Peer support. Personal tutor or key worker.		

Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer
What kind of support do you get? Prompts: Getting to college. During lessons. During free time. Emotional support. Daily structure. Transitions. Base room/area of escape.		
Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer

What kind of support do you get?

Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer
Have you had any very difficult or bad experiences at college? Prompts: Workload too high. Noise. Other students. Free time. Getting to college. Teaching methods. Getting in trouble.		

Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer
(only ask if there is a positive response to the previous question) **Is there anything you can think of that would have made this bad experience more manageable?** Prompts: Escape from situation. Someone to talk to. More support. More understanding from teachers/ students.		
Can you think of anything that the college could have done to prevent this bad experience form happening? Prompts: More support. Teachers being more understanding. Having somewhere to go/base room. More structure. Less free time.		

Questions	Participant's Answer	Parent/Support worker Answer
Tell me what do you want from you College experience? Prompts: Make new friends. Qualifications. Independence. Life skills.		
What's happening after college? Prompts: Transition plan. Employment. Further training/education.		

A Study of
Further Education Provision in Surrey for People on the Autistic Spectrum

Participant Consent Form

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet
for the above study.

I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions
and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to
withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I agree to take part in the above research study.

Name of Participant……………………………………………………………….

Participant Signature…………………………………………..Date………………..

Carer/Support Worker of Participant
Signature………………………………………….

Researcher Signature…………………………………………..Date………………..

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