

**PARENTS' AND LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS  
OF THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE SUCCESS OF INCLUSION OF PUPILS  
WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS**

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*The past ten years have seen a growing drive towards 'full inclusion' of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in schools. However, concerns about whether inclusion for children with ASD is synonymous with their right to appropriate education have been raised amongst researchers. The current study aimed to ascertain the views of both professionals, and parents of children with ASD, regarding inclusion of children with ASD into mainstream schools by using a series of focus groups. A content analysis was used, and the results showed that parents and professionals agreed that school factors, such as school commitment; and LEA factors, such as funding, were fundamental to the success of inclusion. Professionals felt that child factors such as behavioural problems, and learning difficulties, were the primary reason for exclusion from mainstream. Significantly, both groups agreed that in order to improve successful inclusion, there needed to be more openness to alternatives to mainstream for children with ASD.*

Over the past ten years there has been a growing drive towards *full inclusion*. This drives results, in part, from the Salamanca Statement (Unesco, 1994), and, in the United Kingdom, from a *rights agenda* (see Evans & Lunt, 2002; Gallagher, 2001). In contrast to this full inclusion position, there have been moves towards more *cautious* forms of inclusion (e.g., Vaughn & Schumm, 1995), which argues that individuals have a prevailing right to the best education.

The policy framework for inclusion in the United Kingdom has been set up by a number of documents. For example, the Government White Paper (Department for Education and Employment, 1997), which asserts the right of the pupil with special educational needs (SEN) to be educated in mainstream schools *wherever possible*, as well as the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1994), and the Government Programme of Action (DfEE, 1998). The latter document promotes inclusion: *where parents want it and where appropriate support can be provided*. This phrasing appears to acknowledge that inclusion will not necessarily benefit all children. Despite the recognition that full inclusion may not be beneficial for all children, there are no guidelines as to when inclusion will be favourable, and where it will hinder the child's education.

The Warnock Committee (1978) shifted the focus from separate or alternative provision, to that normally available at mainstream schools. Since the implementation of the 1981 Education Act, there has been a trend towards the greater use of mainstream placement. The Audit Commission (1998) found that the number of children with Statements of Needs being educated in mainstream schools had risen

from 40% to 55% since 1992. Current government targets encourage further development of inclusive provision (Frederickson & Cline, 2002). However, many critics fear that inclusion for some children will never be beneficial (e.g., Simpson & Myles, 1990). Others argue that the case for inclusion is driven by ideological approaches, leading to an overemphasis on ethical and moral imperatives, and a relative lack of concern in meeting the child's individual needs (Burack et al., 1997). Such concerns have led to a call for the replacement of *full inclusion* with a more *responsible inclusion* (O'Bri

en,2001 ; Vaughn & Schumm,1999) One of the main concerns is how to include children with behavioural problems, such as those displayed by children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (Downing, Morrison & Berecin-Rascon, 1996). Although the number of children being included is increasing (Norwich, 2000), the number of pupils being excluded from school, mainly for unacceptable behaviour, has also steadily increased (Parsons, 2000). Unfortunately, there has been little work examining the factors that promote successful inclusion of children with ASD. One recent study looked at the attitudes of parents and professionals about the various educational provisions available for children with autism (Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr & Smith, 2005). They found that parents considered that autism specific training for teachers was critical to the success of a mainstream placement. In addition, parents and professionals felt that in all provisions the quality of delivery, staff training and effective adaptation of the curriculum was fundamental to creating an inclusive environment (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005).

The importance of the views of staff involved directly with the inclusion process to the success of that inclusion practice has been referred to regularly in the literature (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Frederickson, Osborne & Reed, 2004; Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher & Saumell, 1996). Frederickson et al. (2004) found that there were commonalities in the views of the definition of *successful inclusion* amongst teachers involved in the process of inclusion. The authors argued that this would have implications when the teachers came to design support and skill development programs for the pupils. Therefore, assessing the opinions, concerns and perspectives of those staff involved in the process of inclusion will have a significant impact on the success or otherwise of inclusion. These views, in addition to those of the carers of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), will be the topic of the current study.

Individuals who work, and are in close contact, with children diagnosed with ASD will have valuable insight into the factors that promote successful inclusion, and may help to develop a better understanding of what determines successful inclusion for children with ASD. The same is the case for parents of children with ASD. Parents have the ultimate say on whether their child is included or not into a mainstream school, as stated in the code of practice (DfEE, 1994). Consequently, their views will influence the success of inclusion. Given this the views of both parents of children with AD and professionals involved in the inclusion process were sought.

## Method

### *Participants.*

Parents of children with ASD, and local authority workers, were recruited from three local authorities in the South East of England. All participants were randomly selected from lists of parents who had a child with a diagnosis of ASD, and local authority officers with experience of working with children with ASD. Letters were sent inviting participants to attend focus groups discussing their experiences of inclusion. The participants received no payment for the participation in this study. Eight focus group interviews were conducted in total; four groups with parents, and four with local authority workers. The composition of the groups is given in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Number of participants in each focus group**

	<b>Participants</b>	
<b>Local Authority Workers</b>	Group 1	5 females
	Group 2	6 females, 2 males
	Group 3	7 females
	Group 4	4 females, 1 male
<b>Parents</b>	Group 5	7 females, 1 male
	Group 6	4 females
	Group 7	3 females, 1 male
	Group 8	6 females, 1 male

*Focus Group Sessions.*

Each focus group was conducted by a trained moderator. The focus groups were structured by a scripted set of instructions consisting of the questions to be asked, and the prompts to be used when participants were unsure about how to answer. In this way, all questions were consistent in every focus group interview, and each group was conducted, as far as possible, under the same conditions. Table 2 displays a skeleton of the questions that were asked by the moderator during the focus group interviews.

**Table 2**  
**Questions asked in the focus groups**

1.	Who decided when your child was ready to be included in a mainstream school?
2.	What factors lead to the decision to place a child in mainstream?
3.	What factors are most beneficial for inclusion?
4.	What is less beneficial?
5.	What could be improved?
6.	What are the advantages of having a child placed in a mainstream school instead of a special school?
7.	What types of help have been offered by the professional services and when?
8.	If advice is to be given, when is the best time?

The length of the focus groups varied depending on the number of participants involved. The shortest focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes, and the longest focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes.

*Content Analysis.*

All focus groups were audio-taped, and later transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were analysed using a content analysis of the text as recommended by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996). This procedure has been used previously by Frederickson et al. (2004), and Osborne and Reed (in press). The stages of the analysis are outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Stages in Content Analysis (as cited in Vaughn et al. 1996)**

1.	Identification of key themes from reading and re-reading the transcripts
2.	Creating units of information from the data (phrases and /or sentences)
3.	Categorisation of the units into themes or categories
4.	Negotiation of categorisation between two researchers until all categories have been exhausted.

Once transcribed, all statements from the individual focus groups were broken down into the smallest units of information that were interpretable by themselves. A unit of information could be either a sentence or phrase. This was completed for the transcripts of all the focus groups. Once the units were established, category headings were created by reading through all the units that were suggested for each question. The category headings represented the general themes stemming from the units of information. After all units from a particular question were placed into the categories for this question, this list was passed to another assessor, who read the comments to check agreement with the unitisation and categorisation of the statements.

In order to confirm the reliability of the coding of the results, a Cohen's Kappa analysis was used for inter-rater reliability. In order to do this, two experimenters rated all the data. A high mean level of reliability was identified between their two separate judgements for each question. The figures ranged from a low of 0.92 for Question 2, to a high of 1.00 for questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, & 8.

### Results

In total 430 units were collected for the eight focus groups. Responses for each question have been categorised into themes and these are displayed in Tables 5 to 11.

*Question 1: Who decided when your child was ready to be included in a mainstream school?*

**Table 4**

**Percentage of participants' responses falling into the different categories for Question 1**

Themes	Parents %	Professionals %	Examples
Parent decided	44	47	"the decision was always ours"
Joint decision with school and LEA	11	29	"The school, myself, everyone involved [made the decision]"
Depends if they have a statement or not	0	12	"if the child has a statement then it would be the decision that was reached following an annual review"
Never thought of anything else/didn't realise he needed help	22	0	"We had never considered anything other than mainstream".
No other option/forced decision	11	0	"It was a forced decision because they [children] would not qualify for anything else, regardless of their need".
Parents decide against LEA recommendation	7	0	"I decided, even though in the statement it said he should go to a special school, I thought no way, I didn't want to send him there".
Depends on child factors (age & school)	4	12	"As it happens, had we taken a different route and sent him to a state primary school, had we chosen not to send him to the independent, the decision may not have been in our hands".

Table 4 summarises the responses made by participants from both the parent and local authority groups to Question 1. The participants identified seven main themes. When it came to deciding whether to place a child in mainstream the majority of statements from both groups agreed that the parent had the overriding say in this decision. Parents said that they: ... *wouldn't want anything else other than mainstream school because I think that it is right for my children and in the case of my children I am their mom and I decide.* The local authority

workers agreed, and said that: .... *the views of the parents are overriding*, suggesting that even if the local authority felt that the child wasn't going to be placed suitably in mainstream, the child still would be placed in mainstream. Parent's also felt this, saying that: *I decided, even though in the statement it said that he should go to a special school, I thought no way, I didn't want to send him there.*

Over a quarter of the local authority workers statements suggested that the decision to place a child in mainstream was a joint decision, in contrast to only a small group of statements made by parents. These parents and local authority workers felt that the decision was jointly made between all those involved, as described by a parent, *the school, myself, everyone involved.*

The second most common response from the parents was that they didn't realise that there was a problem and, hence, did not think of anything but mainstream: *we never knew he had any problems. We just took him to nursery.*

A considerable number of statements from local authority workers suggested that who made this decision depended on whether the child had a statement: *if they already have a statement then it goes through annual review and within that everyone participate.* However, no parents felt that statementing had an impact. Another group of parents statements suggested that they felt that they had no other choice but mainstream for their child because of lack of alternatives, and felt that although the decision: *...was mine but it was a forced decision because they would not qualify for anything else, regardless of their need.* Another parent said that: *because he is at the able side of the spectrum, we won't be able to get him into a special school.*

*Question 2: What factors lead to the decision to place a child in mainstream?*

**Table 5**

**Percentage of participants' responses falling into the different categories for Question 2.**

Theme	Parents %	Professionals %	Examples
Choose the school that meets needs of child	32	24	"his needs were not profound enough to take him into a specialist school so it was a good compromise to get him a place in the unit"
Academic levels	10	12	"mainstream is the right place for my children because of their academic levels"
Socialisation	21	12	"I thought it would be good for him to model off other kids which were "normal" and that is the main reason why we sent him to mainstream school"
Lack of alternative provision	37	44	"it is very difficult to find specialist provision. It's not a choice for many parents. The expectation is mainstream from most of the cases we see."
Local school	0	4	"it varies in provisions as well because if you want to keep your child local you have to look at the range of provisions there is"
Behaviour	0	4	"I just think it's down to the individual whether they can cope with the situation"

For Question 2, six different themes were identified when parents and local authority workers were asked what factors led to their decision to place their child in mainstream. Both groups

agreed that the most important factor leading to place a child in mainstream was a lack of alternative provision for the child. One professional said that: *in an authority that talks very much about value for money it is very difficult to find specialist provision. It's not a choice for many parents.* Parents felt that they had no choice but to place their child in mainstream: *they would no way get into any kind of special school, because they haven't got learning difficulties.*

Just over a third of the parents' statements, and a quarter of the local authority workers' statements, suggested that a child's needs should be addressed when deciding the best provision. One parent describes her child's case as: *his needs were not profound enough to take him into a specialist school so it was a good compromise to get him a place in the unit.* One authority worker said: *progress made and behaviour. They need to show that they can work independently.* Both parents and local authority workers felt that academic levels were a factor leading to the decision to place a child in mainstream, as one parent said: *mainstream is the right place for my children because of their academic levels.*

Another important factor for the parents was the socialisation of the child. Parents felt that mainstream placements would: *be good for him to model off other children.* For the local authority workers, socialisation was also important and they felt that children: *need to know what to do when something goes wrong, so it's part of the social skills.* The authority workers also felt that the decision on mainstream could depend on the location of the school and therefore school placement decisions would vary because: *if you want to keep your child local you have to look at the range of provisions there is.*

*Question 3: What factors are most beneficial for inclusion?*

**Table 6**

**Percentage of participants' responses falling into the different categories for Question 3**

Theme	Parents %	Professionals %	Examples
School factors	42	38	"there needs to be an acceptance by the school setting that the child has a right and belongs there and there should be an acceptance as well that that child has particular and individual needs and it's the responsibility of all the people working there to help meet those as they would any other child"
LEA factors	38	25	"preparing the mainstream class teacher first through training courses which we run as a team every term, and more than that, and preparing them with the sort of strategies that the child will need in school"
Peer factors	13	11	"His friends are translators for him between the autistic world and the mainstream world and the wonderful thing is that it has been a two-way thing, it has enriched their lives as much as his"
Child Factors	7	26	"It's about the individual needs"

The responses to Question 3 show a strong similarity between both parents and local authority workers across the four themes identified. Both groups felt that school factors, such as school commitment and willingness (*the school has to want to [include the child]*), and good communication between the school and parents, where: *sharing information and making sure everybody is working consistently through out the school and at home*, were the most pertinent factors in moderating the success of inclusion.

The second most important factor for parents was 'LEA factors', such as funding and teacher training. One parent said that it was all about: *the people involved and getting them involved at a very early stage* whilst another parent felt: *you need somebody either with professional experience, really good experience [and] qualified*. The local authority workers prioritised child factors over LEA factors, like addressing the child's needs and social skills. One professional considered that: *their level [the child's] of communication skills that is a key indicator to how they can cope, because if they can't understand the language in the classroom, then they will just get bombarded and their anxiety level will get high*. Local authority workers regarded social skills as important and felt that: *some of our pupils are very peer orientated so they are able to moderate their behaviour because they don't want to be different and so they sort of fit in better*.

Parents and authority workers agreed that peer factors, such as peer training and peer relations played a role in promoting the successful inclusion of children with autistic spectrum disorders. One parent said that *wonderful friends* made it possible for her child to be in mainstream: *his friends are translators for him between the autistic world and the mainstream world and the wonderful thing is that it has been a two-way thing*. Another parent described peer training as an important tool: *if they have been educated about it then his classmates will become a team*.

*Question 4: What is less beneficial?*

**Table 7**  
**Percentage of participants' responses falling into the different categories for Question 4**

Theme	Parent %	Professional %	Examples
School factors	9	7	"If you don't have a supportive school you might as well not bother with inclusion because it's not going to work."
LEA factors	70	31	"The problem because we are not getting funding, that it is extremely difficult for him to stay in mainstream school because the teacher's haven't got the time or the resources to cater for his needs."
Peer factors	3	10	"[child] was subjected to quite a lot of bullying"
Child Factors	12	47	"the more aggressive ones are harder to include than the passive ones"
Parental factors	6	5	: "Some parents don't want your children there. I have had parents say to me get your ***** child out of our school".

The responses to Question 4 show a number of discrepancies between the two groups. The categories of responses to this question covered five main themes. The majority of statements by the parents indicated that they felt that LEA factors, such as funding, were the most important causes of failure to include a child. One parent said that *the problem, because we are not getting funding, that it is extremely difficult for him to stay in mainstream school because the teacher's haven't got the time or the resources to cater for his needs*.

In contrast, the local authority workers' statements indicated that they felt that child factors, such as not meeting the child's needs or individual characteristics of the child such as social skills, language abilities and behaviour were principal to the failure of inclusion. One worker mentioned the importance of knowing a child's individual needs: *in primary a lot of children get through it because they are in a small supportive environment mostly the same teacher all day...they know their needs and they've known them from when they were tiny.* Another authority worker mentioned language abilities as important as: *language could be overwhelming in which case they would be better in a special school.* Local authority workers also felt that social skills were fundamental: *one of the reasons for children being excluded is not having those adequate social skills, that is the core of it.*

Question 5: What could be improved?

**Table 8**  
**Percentage of participants' responses falling into the different categories for Question 5**

Theme	Parent %	Professional %	Examples
Involve school members more when making placement decisions	11	0	"I think it should be more the people in the school ( <i>making the decisions</i> ). They should have more of an impact."
Be more open to alternatives other than mainstream	44	33	"They are all obsessed with inclusion needing to work. I want them to be honest."
More training on ASD	22	17	"I think that teacher's need more training in ASD. Some of them don't even know what they ASD is."
Peer training	11	0	"Government should put it in the curriculum to teach children about different people with different illness' and needs."
More resources and support	11	17	"[children should] get more one to one time."
Measure of best placement	0	33	

Responses to Question 5 show a number of similarities between the local authority workers and parents. Primarily, when discussing what factors need to be improved in order for inclusion to be more successful, both groups agreed that the most important issue was to be more open to alternatives other than mainstream. One local authority worker described it as: *we need to move away from needing to push our kids down the same route.* Parents felt the same way, saying: *they are all obsessed with inclusion needing to work. I want them to be honest.* Parents also felt that there needed to be more training in ASD: *I think that teacher's need more training in ASD, some of them don't even know what ASD is!*

The next most important factor for the local authority workers was to create a measure of best placement, whereby professionals are: *working towards some guidance and a measurement that panels use.* The authority workers felt that in the current situation: *we are putting them in a position of failing in order to provide an alternative environment. What we need to be doing is making an appropriate judgement immediately.*

*Question 6: What are the advantages of having a child placed in a mainstream school instead of a special school?*

The responses to Question 6 show considerable differences in perceptions between the two groups when discussing the benefits of placing a child in a mainstream provision versus an alternative provision. The categories of responses to this question covered five main themes. Parents indicated that the overriding benefit was that mainstream schooling improved the child's chances of a normal life: *in special schools they could get more protected and would feel more vulnerable when they left*. For another parent mainstream meant that children: *are being forced into social situations that they are going to encounter for the rest of their lives*.

**Table 9**

**Percentage of participants' responses falling into the different categories for Question 6**

Theme	Parents %	Professionals %	Examples
Improve chances of a normal life	42	14	"I would prefer him to stay in mainstream and I think it would help him to have a normal life"
Teaches diversity to other children	0	14	"I think there are benefits for the other children, that they are around children with different needs, and you know, to celebrate diversity".
Social skills	25	58	" they will kind of pick up normal things and be with normal children"
Down to the individual child/parent	33	0	"I think that has to be the individual choice of the parent"
Academic	0	14	"He wouldn't be pushed academically in a special school"

For local authority workers, the most important benefits were social skills: *they will kind of pick up normal things and be with normal children*. For the authority workers this factor was followed by the importance of teaching diversity to other children: *I think there are benefits for other children, that they are around children with different needs, and you know, to celebrate diversity*.

*Question 7: What types of help have been offered by the professional services and when?*

**Table 10**

**Percentage of participants' responses falling into the different categories for Question 7**

Theme	Parent %	Professional %	Examples
Only with diagnosis	16	0	"If you're child hasn't been diagnosed you don't get access to any information."
Nothing	60	0	"None. I've just been having to read up about autism"
Through out	20	50	"I can't fault any of the external help that I got. They gave me all the information I could ask for."
Had to look for it	4	0	"I had to look it all up in the internet."
Support in choosing schools	0	50	"You can recommend [schools]. But you're not supposed to! I tell them what they should be looking at, what school".

Overwhelmingly, parents said they had received no help or information from the LEA saying that: *we get nothing*. In addition, only a small group of parents felt that they were given support at diagnosis and none thereafter: *I had to look it all up on the internet*. Only 1/5 parents felt that they were given support through out diagnosis and the inclusion process, and no parent felt that they were given help in choosing an appropriate school placement for their child.

These results are in stark contrast with the opinions of the local authority workers, who felt they had received and given support through out and had received and given support in helping parents choose an adequate school for their child: *we offer parent groups; we do have parent groups at the moment, where parents come when their child is first diagnosed as they get so much information, which will then reduce their anxiety*.

*Question 8: If advice is to be given, when is the best time?*

**Table 11**

**Percentage of participants' responses falling into the different categories for Question 8**

Theme	Parent %	Professional %	Examples
All the time	25	25	"The advice needs to be given before, during, all the time really"
At least 2 terms prior to inclusion	0	50	"at least two terms before the child enters the provision. So that someone can come and shadow the child in the nursery and the child can visit the mainstream"
At diagnosis	75	25	: "Everything you should get at diagnosis. You should get everything at diagnosis".

When asked when would be the best time to receive information and help, parents overwhelmingly agreed that it should all be given at the time of diagnosis: *you should get everything at diagnosis. It's staggering that we get nothing*. Another group of parents felt that the information should be ongoing: *all the time*. This pattern of results contrasts with the local authority workers, as half of the workers opinions were that it was important to give advice and information at least two terms prior to inclusion. A quarter felt that the support should be ongoing, and the other quarter felt that the advice should be given: *as early as possible. As soon as they know that they're child has an SEN, this way they know what to look for*.

### Discussion

The present study was an attempt to ascertain the perceptions of parents/caregivers, and local authority workers, concerning the factors that are beneficial to the inclusion of a child with ASD, and to determine what can be improved about the process. Both groups are closely involved with the process, either through teaching and delivering of provision, or by being the carer of an included child. Both groups agreed that when it came to making the decision to place a child in mainstream school, the decision was primarily the parent's, even in cases where the LEA's and professional's disagreed with the parent. This view would be consistent with the code of practice, which states that parents have the ultimate say as long as this is consistent with the best use of resources, and will not interfere with the education of the other children (DfEE, 1994).

A quarter of parents felt that they made the decision to place the child in mainstream because they didn't realise their child needed help. This could also suggest that children are not

getting identified early enough for parents to start making school choices appropriate to their child's needs. Early diagnosis is regarded as critical, but diagnosis is often delayed until school age due to lack of understanding or access to physicians (Mandell, Novak & Zubritsky, 2005).

Parents felt that they had chosen to place their child in mainstream out of lack of a better option. They believed that their child didn't have the opportunity to enter an alternative provision, either as they were too able to qualify, or because there was no alternative. Consistent with this view, in Question 2 when discussing what factors that lead to the decision to place a child in mainstream, both groups agreed that parents came to this decision primarily due to a lack of alternative provision. Additionally, parents and local authority workers also reflected this view when discussing what needed to be improved about the current inclusive policy, saying more openness to alternatives to inclusion was essential. In a survey conducted on teachers across the United Kingdom by the Times Educational Supplement (FDS International, 2005), teachers advocated the continued availability of a range of school provisions. Similarly more researchers are calling for responsible inclusion, whereby alternatives to full time inclusion are sought. Warnock (2005) asks for a 're-take' on inclusion, whereby specialist school are not disregarded as inferior education.

Both parents and local authority workers felt that finding a placement that met the child's needs was important. In order to do this, authority workers felt that there needed to be a measure of best placement to avoid placing children in mainstream 'to fail'. Children with autism have IQ's that vary from severe learning disability, to superior intellectual functioning. Their behavioural difficulties also vary tremendously, as do their social and cognitive functioning (Burack & Volkmar, 1992). With such diversity, the insistence for inclusion for all persons with autism seems short-sighted and simplistic (see Mesibov, 1990). In its place there needs to be more emphasis on individual educational needs that can promote development in all domains of functioning (Burrack, Root, & Zigler, 1994; Mesibov, 1990; Zigler & Hodapp, 1987).

When discussing factors that promote the successful inclusion of children with ASD, both groups felt that school factors, such as school commitment, and having the right people involved, were the most significant promoters of successful inclusion. This is consistent with Burrack, Root and Zigler's (1997) research that examined the attitudes of teachers. They found that teachers play a crucial role in the success of integration programmes, and that, in addition to teacher training, teacher and school commitment were critical to success. Kasari et al. (1999), in line with the current study, found that parents of children with autism were more likely to view specialised teaching and staff as important to their child's education. Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr and Smith (2005) also found that professionals and parents felt that staff attitude played a very important role in creating an inclusive environment.

The second most important factor benefiting inclusion for both parents and professionals were LEA factors, such as teacher training and funding. This is also consistent with Burrack et al. (1997). They found that, without support and training, only 33% of teachers were willing participants of inclusive practice. A survey run by the Times Educational Supplement (FDS International, 2005) found that training had an impact upon attitudes towards inclusion, and those with no training in SEN showed the least positive attitude scores. Likewise, Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) found that teachers with substantial training were more positive to inclusion and also felt more confident meeting IEP (Individual Education Plans) requirements as a result of their training. In accordance with the current study, Avramidis et al. (2000) also report that funding was a mediating factor to inclusion, and found that teachers wanted more non-contact time. Similarly, Diebold and Von Eschenbach (1991) noted that teachers reported that they did not have sufficient time for inclusion. In line with the current study, Jindal-Snape et al. (2005) found that parents felt that teachers should have more autism

specific training to help support their children in mainstream schools, and Barnard, Prior and Potter (2000) from a national survey reported that the most desired changes expressed by parents of children with autism was more training about autism for teachers.

Professionals also focused on child factors such as behaviour, social skills and academic abilities as beneficial for inclusion whilst parents didn't. This result is consistent with Fredrickson et al. (2004) who also found that professionals rated behaviour such as being able to follow instructions, obeying classroom rules and social progress as paramount in defining successful inclusion. Also consistent with the current study, professionals in Fredrickson et al.'s (2004) study rated learning and academic progress as an important factor in determining whether inclusion was successful. These concerns suggest that skills related to behaviour, social skills and academic abilities should be taught in order to help the child's success in a mainstream placement. In contrast, when it came to factors that were less helpful, although the parents still felt that LEA factors such as funding and resources were the principal factors in undermining successful inclusion of a child, local authority workers felt that child factors such as behavioural problems or lack of social skills were more critical. This finding is concordant with the literature which argues that successful placement in a typical classroom may be dependent upon the display of appropriate behaviour (Downing, Morrison & Bercin-Rascon, 1996), and a lack of social skills may impede the integration of children with autism as well as reduce their interaction with the peer group (Beckman 1983; Guralnick 1990; Sherratt 2002; Strain & Danko, 1995).

Parents and local authority workers were also asked about the information/help they received from LEA. An alarming majority of parents said that they had received no information or help from the LEA. This finding is in accordance with Osborne and Reed (in press) concerning lack of information at diagnosis. In contrast with the parents, an equal proportion of local authority workers felt that they had given help through out and that they had helped parents choose an appropriate school. Whether the parent's feelings are a true reflection of what they got, parents clearly perceive it as so, suggesting that work needs to be done addressing these concerns.

In accordance with the literature, parents and local authority workers called for a more responsible inclusive movement (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995) by recognising the alternatives to mainstream. This is in concurrence with many researchers concerned that the movement towards inclusion of children with ASD has been driven by ideological approaches (Bailey, 1998).

Although these results shed some light a number of different elements relevant to successful inclusion, there are a number of limitations to this study. The sample size and representativeness of the sample needs to be considered. Although only three boroughs were involved in the study, it should be noted that there was reasonable consistency between the perceptions of each parent and professionals group. Furthermore, all participants were volunteers, and so their representativeness of all parents and professionals in general may be an issue that limits the generalisation of the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. However, it is also important to note that all participants were randomly selected. As with any analysis of focus group data, these perceptions should be considered as a measure of the strength of a feeling about the specific issues that were discussed and should not be regarded as an indication of their frequency in the general population.

This is the first focus group to look at the view of parents and local authority workers on what promotes successful inclusion of children with ASD. Parents clearly are the ones making the decision to place a child in mainstream, primarily due to a lack of alternative provision. Both parents and professionals agreed that this needed to change and that in addition to becoming more open to alternatives, a measure of best placement should be introduced in order to place children in provisions that will meet their individual needs. Consistent with earlier literature

(see Burrack et al. 1997) both parents and teachers felt that the attitudes of teachers and overall school commitment were the most significant promoters of successful inclusion. Moreover both groups agreed that LEA funding, in addition to teacher training was essential to success. Professionals felt that child factors such as behaviour and social skills could undermine a successful inclusive placement, whilst parents felt that funding and resources were most important. Finally, parents felt that they hadn't been given sufficient support or information by LEA about the process of inclusion.

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