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Back to school: Paving the path to re-integration for autistic children previously excluded from education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With more than one in 100 children on the autism spectrum in England, every teacher should expect to encounter autistic students in their classes. These students are considered to be more "difficult" to include effectively than those with other forms of SEN. Indeed one quarter of these children have been excluded from education, and many suffer traumatic experiences in the lead up to this exclusion.

In this report, we examine the experiences of a group of autistic children who have been previously excluded from education, and who are currently re-integrating into school life.

The challenge

All children have the right to receive an education and to be included in their local mainstream school. Yet children and young people on the autism spectrum, who are already vulnerable to poor health and social outcomes, are at increased risk of being excluded from so-called inclusive settings. In fact, one quarter of autistic children have been excluded from education at least once – some, many times.

Such exclusion is likely to have drastic consequences on the young people themselves and their families – on their physical and emotional well-being and their prospects for the future. Very little is known, however, about the realities of being excluded from school for autistic children and young people. There is also no research on the most effective ways for teachers and school staff to get these children back into school. The absence of this knowledge is deeply concerning, especially given the substantial impact of missing out on education – on the individual themselves, their family, schools and society.

Our research

This research therefore sought to understand these issues in a group of so-called "hard-to-include" young people on the autism spectrum – young people who had been previously excluded from education and were currently re-integrating into school life within the Inclusive Learning Hub at the National Autistic Society's Robert Ogden School. This 'Hub' was created to provide a supportive learning environment for those autistic children with the most complex behaviours to access education.

Key discoveries

We discovered the following:

- The young people we spoke to reported often-harrowing accounts of their previous educational placements, which meant that they missed out on school. This had serious consequences on their mental and emotional well-being.

- The Hub provides a safe, secure environment for these young people, with dedicated staff who understand and accept the students' individual needs and challenges, and go to great lengths to accommodate them.

- The young people responded extremely well to their new environment and were very appreciative of the care they received.

- Despite the success of the Hub, we need to take a preventative approach, identifying what supports need to be in place to catch these young people sooner.

- The Hub also needs to re-establish itself as a stepping-stone, enhancing the well-being of its students and re-integrating them into learning environments beyond the Hub, and to give greater priority to preparing young people for their future lives.

How we conducted our research

Over a 6-month period, we worked with nine intellectually able young people attending the Hub. We asked them about their experiences in their previous schools, how they felt about learning in the Hub and their aspirations for the future. We also observed closely how they got on in class, and we had in-depth conversations with their parents and teachers to gain a fuller picture of the realities of their current and potential future lives. Finally, we asked teachers and school staff about the strategies and methods they used to reintegrate these children and young people into school.

What we learned

The children and young people and their parents gave overwhelmingly negative accounts of their previous school experiences. Parents felt that schools and teaching staff failed to understand and accommodate their children's often-complex needs and that inappropriate methods were being used by school staff to deal with children's resulting challenging behaviours – including, rather alarmingly, instances of emotional and physical torment.

All of this meant that these children were unable to engage in and access education and, in most cases, permanently excluded from school. Unsurprisingly, these events often left the young people 'broken', that is, highly anxious, lacking in confidence and disaffected by school and the adults who purport to support them.

The Hub was created to help precisely these sorts of children and young people. Staff made extensive efforts to understand the individual needs of students to ease gradually the transition back into school. They made substantial adjustments to the physical environment, including providing each student with their own classroom, which provided a secure base from which to learn, socialise, and retreat when necessary.

Staff also fostered strong relationships with the students, enabling them to build and maintain trust with the students. They understood that the students could be very "set in their ways" and had a strong need for control. This meant that they needed to be highly attentive to each student's individual needs and to respond flexibly to them on an often moment-by-moment basis. They adopted a range of child-led approaches and non-pressurised strategies to overcome students' defensiveness and get them ready to learn.

Overall, the young people were happy in the Hub. Despite often-traumatic educational histories, they had developed a newfound enthusiasm for school and their parents were extremely positive about the gains children had made in terms of mental and emotional well-being and behaviour. This is a testament to the design of the Hub, to the efforts of those who work there and also often to the dedication of the children and their parents to making the experience work.

The future

The parents and young people in our study reported that the system had failed them, that inclusion simply did not work in their previous schools, and that their mental and emotional well-being had suffered because of it. It simply should not get to this point.

It should not be beyond educational authorities, teachers and school staff to create greater opportunities for autistic children well before they reach a facility like the Hub. That kind of education would be attentive to the unique needs of individual children, and would echo the accepting ethos of teachers in the Hub. It would foster relationships between the young people and their parents and work together with other agencies, including health and social care, to promote the well-being of their students. This is not just good practice in autism education, but good practice in education more broadly.

"they treated [my child] like a naughty boy and nobody seemed to understand the fact that he needed help with his autism".

Parent

At present, the majority of young people attending the Hub are likely to be there for much of what remains of their school careers. This means they may not receive the academic expertise that is critical for achieving the aspirations the young people desire. Re-establishing itself to be more frequently a point of transition in these children's lives should ensure that the Hub and its staff have a greater impact. It should also seek to work as a centre of excellence in this regard, reaching more children through the Hub itself and through providing expertise to other schools across the region. In this way, it could ensure that young autistic people with additional mental health issues and behaviour that challenges receive the inclusive education that they deserve.

More also needs to be done to prepare these young people for life beyond the Hub. While they were positive about their own futures, teachers and parents often had serious concerns about how well the young people would get on in life, especially in the absence of the safe and secure environment afforded by the Hub and the dedicated, flexible staff who attend to their specific needs and care deeply about their well-being. This is critical but far from straightforward. Preparing young people to respond flexibly to the realities of everyday life – at home, at work, in the community – and to be able to advocate for themselves is a key challenge for all educators. But the expertise and commitment of Hub staff could be harnessed to ensure that they are well equipped for managing the obstacles they are likely to face in the remainder of their school career and their longer-term futures.

Autistic children and young people are already excluded from many opportunities simply because society does not understand what it is like to be autistic. Their rights to education should not be ignored. If we work with young people and parents to understand – and accept – their individual needs, however challenging they may be, we will be able to prevent the harm that is currently done, and enable many more children to reach their potential and enjoy a life full of well-being.
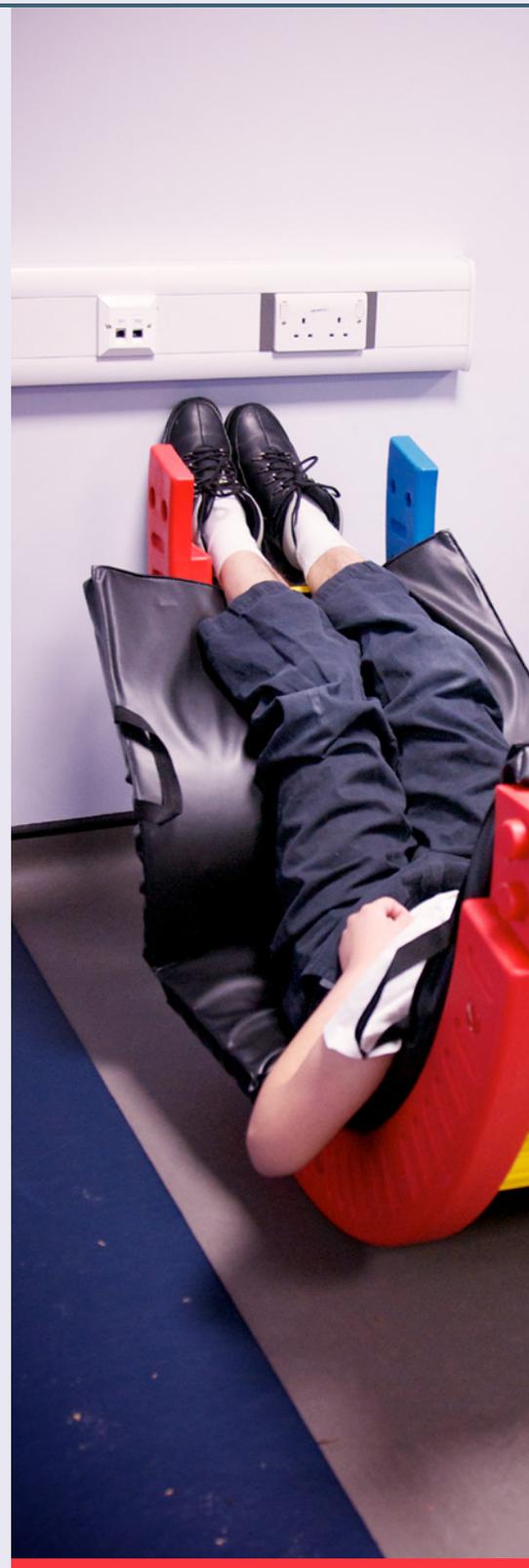
PREFACE

This report was commissioned by the National Autistic Society (NAS), who were funded by the Department for Education (DfE), to understand the views and experiences of autistic children and young people within the Inclusive Education Hub at the NAS Robert Ogden School and to highlight good practice that may be transferable to other settings. This Hub aims specifically to offer an educational setting for young people who have been previously excluded from education.

We are very grateful to the NAS and DfE for giving us the opportunity to work on such an important topic, allowing us to access the lives of a group of seldom-heard young people. In particular, we thank Carol Povey, Tracey Sellers, Andy Cutting, Ian Dale, and James Holland for helpful discussions. We also thank Marc Stears and Clare Truman for their very careful reading of the report and for their constructive feedback and Hannah White for her help with transcribing interviews.

We are also indebted to all the children and young people, their parents, and the NAS Robert Ogden School teaching staff, without whom this project would not have been possible. We are extremely grateful to all members of staff for making us feel so welcome, being so supportive of this project, and for sharing their knowledge and experiences with us. Thanks especially to Jilly Davis, Martin Halliday and Rachel Raine for their advice, help with the organisation of this research on-site and for initiating and coordinating contact with parents and children.

We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to all parents, who so generously gave up their time to take part in this project and share their experiences. Most importantly, we would like to thank the children and young people for allowing us to step into their lives for a brief moment to gain insight into what things are like in the Hub. They were an absolute pleasure to work with. We were deeply moved by their stories and experiences, and feel very privileged to have heard them. We have done our very best to convey these stories as accurately as possible. Any omissions or errors are entirely our own.

ABBREVIATIONS & TERMINOLOGY

In England, a child or young person is considered to have a Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) "if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her" [Children and Families Act, 2014]. In the revised SEN Code of Practice, children's SENDs are included within four broad areas of need and support: (i) communication and interaction, (ii) cognition and learning, (iii) social, emotional and mental health, (iv) sensory and/or physical needs. Importantly, children and young people on the autism spectrum may have needs across all of these areas. Many autistic children and young people may also have a disability as defined under the Equality Act 2010 as "a physical or mental impairment, which has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities". Schools have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments for individual pupils with SEND, including those on the autism spectrum.

In cases in which students either cannot be accommodated within mainstream or specialist schools or have been permanently excluded from these schools, the local authority may accommodate them within a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), a maintained school for the most troubled of pupils, with the aim of gradually re-introducing them to mainstream schools. Local authorities have a duty under section 19 of the Education Act 1996 to provide suitable education for children of compulsory school age who cannot attend school. PRUs are one way of fulfilling local authority obligations to educate all children.

In the autistic community, disability-first language (e.g., "autistic person") is often preferred to person-first language (e.g., "person with autism") [1,2]. In this report, we use both person-first and disability-first language to respect the wishes of all individuals on the autism spectrum.

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
CAMHS: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
DCD: Developmental Coordination Disorder
DfE: Department for Education
EHC: Education, Health and Care plan
EDA: Extreme Demand Avoidance
NAS: National Autistic Society
ODD: Oppositional Defiant Disorder
PDA: Pathological Demand Avoidance
PRU: Pupil Referral Unit
SEN: Special Education Needs
SEND: Special Educational Need and Disabilities
SRS: Social Responsiveness Scale
TA: Teaching Assistant

1. SETTING THE SCENE

Autistic children often face challenges when engaging with education, yet the way in which schools cater for children and young people with autism is poorly understood.

These children are more likely to be excluded from education than those without special educational needs, often as a result of the school feeling unable to cope with the child's behaviour.

The Inclusive Learning Hub at the NAS Robert Ogden School was created to offer such individuals an educational setting that could better respond to their complex needs.

School can be challenging for any child, but especially so for those diagnosed with an autism spectrum condition.

Autistic children, 70% of whom attend mainstream schools in England [3], often face considerable difficulties as they interact with and experience the world around them. Many also have additional challenges with their learning and behaviour and are at an increased risk of developing mental health problems – all of which can have serious consequences for their futures. Receiving the right educational support is therefore essential to ensuring that these students lead rewarding and fulfilling lives.

Despite this, the way in which schools cater for children and young people with autism is very poorly understood [4,5]. Current policy in England places a duty on local authorities to ensure that a child or young person with a SEND, including autism, has the opportunity to be educated within a mainstream setting [6] – enabling all children and young people on the autism spectrum to enjoy the same sorts of educational opportunities as non-autistic children. Yet, parents report little confidence in the extent to which their autistic children can be included effectively within mainstream provision [5,7]. They worry about large child-to-teacher ratios, bullying and rejection of their child by their non-autistic peers, and especially a lack of access to autism-specific knowledge, expertise and support [7-13]. Consequently, parents feel that teachers and school staff fail to understand the individual needs of their child (see Box 1, right), which often results in parents having to 'fight' the relevant authorities to ensure that their child is given the support they feel best fits his/her needs [14-16].

Parents are not the only ones to voice criticisms like these. Mainstream teachers themselves frequently report that they do not have the necessary training to teach autistic students [17-19]. Autism affects each child differently, and so effective strategies must be individually tailored to a child's specific needs [4]. Yet, although there are many interventions and educational approaches available for autistic children and young people, many of these approaches have not been rigorously tried-and-tested. Even in the few that have, there is disappointingly little evidence on which approach – or indeed which setting (mainstream, specialist) – works best for which individual [e.g., 20-21]. This lack of knowledge and training often makes it very difficult for schools and school staff to know how best to identify these young people's needs and respond to them effectively [22-24]. Failing to do so can have far-reaching consequences, including in some of the most serious cases, permanent exclusion from school. It is these particularly vulnerable young people that form the focus of this report.

1. Note that we use the term 'EDA' in this report because we feel it is less disparaging than the term PDA. The exception to this usage is where parents, teachers and the young people themselves have specifically referred to PDA.

Autism and Learning

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects the way a person interacts with others and experiences the world around them. One in every 100 UK children and adults lie on the autism spectrum [34,35]. According to current diagnostic criteria, autistic people show a set of core features, including difficulties in social communication, rigid and repetitive ways of thinking and behaving and unusual reactions to sensory input [36]. These core features vary widely from person to person. Whether these features are considered disabling for an individual can depend in part on the extent and nature of support provided by others. This support can include both helping the individual child/young person to develop skills and strategies to understand situations and communicate their needs and adapting the environment to enable the child to function and learn within it.

School can be particularly challenging for children and young people on the autism spectrum. Many autistic students struggle with communication and can find it difficult to understand task instructions [5]. Problems understanding the social complexities of school life can be isolating and make children and young people more vulnerable to social manipulation and bullying [37]. Differences in the way that sensory information is processed can make managing aspects of the school environment – the narrow and bustling corridors, the visual clutter of classrooms and the sounds and smells of large school dining halls – stressful and can have a negative impact on learning and behaviour [38]. Strong preferences for predictability and sameness mean that unexpected situations, which are often part and parcel of life in mainstream schools, can be anxiety provoking and, at times, very distressing. These challenges, combined with the increasing social, emotional and academic expectations placed on young people as they get older, can often be overwhelming for some young people on the autism spectrum, placing them at significant risk of developing problems with anxiety, depression and self-esteem.

Many autistic children also experience additional mental health problems, especially anxiety and attentional difficulties [39]. Some children also appear to present with a distinct pattern of additional difficulties, which has been termed by some British researchers and clinicians as 'Pathological Demand Avoidance' (PDA) [40] or 'Extreme Demand Avoidance' (EDA) [41][1]. Children showing EDA seem to present with an obsessive resistance to everyday demands, requests and pressures, even if this is related to a favoured activity, and are reported to utilise a wide range of strategies to avoid demands. Such strategies include distraction, negotiating, physically incapacitating themselves and behavioural 'meltdowns' [42]. They can also resort to extreme, aggressive or socially shocking behaviour if pressed to comply [41]. Demand avoidance and non-compliance is therefore thought to cause significant problems in their interactions with the world around them. Indeed, clinical reports highlight high levels of educational challenges among children with EDA [43], resulting in many being excluded from school or unable to access education [40].

Some autistic children with and without EDA show behaviour that challenges. Behaviours can be described as challenging when they are "of such an intensity, frequency or duration as to threaten the quality of life and/or the physical safety of the individual or others and is likely to lead to responses that are restrictive, aversive or result in exclusion" [44, p. 10]. They can include aggressive, self-injurious and destructive behaviours. There is a trend to use the term 'challenging behaviour' as a diagnostic label in which the onus of responsibility falls squarely on the individual rather than also on others. Instead, the position we adopt in the current report is that such behaviours have meaning and are contextual, that is, they result from an interaction between the individual and their environment, which includes both physical and interpersonal supports. Identifying and managing behaviour that challenges therefore critically needs to focus on the individual, the environment and the interaction between the two [44].

Box 1

Excluded from school

School exclusion can take many forms. The term can be used to describe formal exclusion, where students are either excluded for a short period (fixed-term exclusion) and then readmitted to school or excluded from school altogether (permanent exclusion) by reason of their behaviour. Once permanently excluded by the head teacher, the home local authority of any compulsory school-age child has a duty to ensure that s/he receives full-time education within some form of alternative provision, such as a Pupil Referral Unit for children who are otherwise unable to attend mainstream or special maintained schools.

Government statistics released in January 2016 indicate that children with SEND are disproportionately affected by exclusion – they were up to 11 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school in 2013/14 when compared to children with no SEND [25]. This is despite the fact that statutory guidance places a duty on schools to avoid permanently excluding any pupil with an SEN statement [3].

A recent report from the Office of the Children's Commissioner [26] also documented many instances in which children, especially those with SEND, including autism, have faced informal – and illegal – exclusions. That is, missing school without it ever having been recorded as a fixed-term or permanent exclusion. These included cases of schools encouraging some children to move schools or to be educated at home; sending pupils with SEND home when their carer/teaching assistant is unavailable; excluding pupils with SEND from school trips/events; and sending pupils home for any period without recording it as a fixed-term exclusion.

Several survey-based studies highlight the scale of the problem for autistic pupils specifically. The National Autistic Society (NAS) Report: Make School Make Sense [27] found that one in five autistic children had been excluded from school, with this figure rising to one in four for more cognitively able autistic students. The most common reason cited was that the school was unable to cope with the child's behaviour. Of these children, 67% have had more than one fixed-term exclusion, 25% of whom were excluded permanently. The majority of parents stated that

their local authority failed to put any support in place for their child while they were excluded from school, despite the statutory requirement to do so. Many parents also reported that their child had been excluded from school on an ad-hoc or informal basis.

These estimates are corroborated by a report by the Office for National Statistics [28], which demonstrated that, although autistic children were no more likely to miss school due to illness than other children, over one quarter (27%) of autistic children had experienced exclusion at least once, with a significant proportion of them (23%) having been excluded multiple times. Furthermore, in a survey conducted by Ambitious about Autism for their "Ruled Out" campaign, one fifth of the parents of autistic children reported having a child that had experienced fixed-term or permanent exclusion from school. Thirty per cent of respondents stated they had been asked to collect their child from school or to keep their child at home for reasons other than physical illness (illegal exclusion) and almost 40% of parents said that there was not a school locally that they felt met their child's needs, that is, exclusion by admission [29].

These school exclusion estimates are alarmingly high. The life chances and opportunities for young autistic people who are excluded – either legally or illegally – are likely to be severely limited in both the short term and in the longer term. The impact upon parents and families will also be substantial, affecting work, parental mental health and family life [30].

This project sought to:

1. Understand the previous educational experiences of children and young people
2. Determine children's post-exclusion educational experiences in the Hub
3. Highlight the specific strategies adopted by the Hub staff.
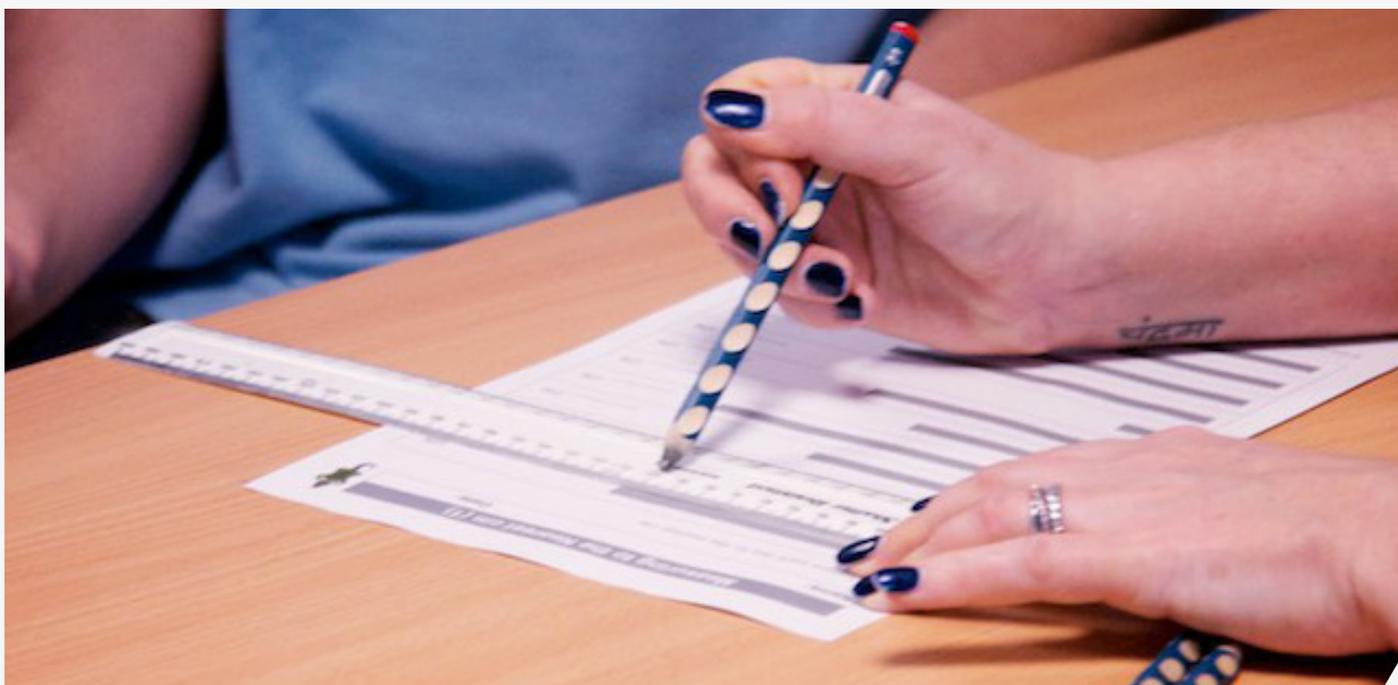
Indeed, re-integrating autistic children and young people who have experienced exclusion into education presents particular challenges. They have often spent a considerable portion of time – sometimes years – in Pupil Referral Units or out of formal education, increasing the likelihood of not receiving adequate help and support [31]. The discouraging experience of exclusion is likely to have detrimental effects on these children's behaviour and psychological well-being, including reduced confidence, increased anxiety and a lack of willingness to engage in education [23,32].

Despite the high estimates of exclusion and the impact exclusion has on schools, families and young people, there is remarkably little research on the experiences of autistic children and young people who have been excluded from school. There is also no research on the most effective ways to re-integrate these students into an educational setting. The current research therefore sought to address these issues by

focusing on one particular learning environment, the Inclusion Learning Hub (hereafter, 'the Hub') at the NAS Robert Ogden School.

The Inclusive Learning Hub

The Robert Ogden School, run by the NAS, is a large independent school and residential facility in the North of England for children and young people with a diagnosis of an autism spectrum condition. The school is registered for up to 165 students aged from 5 to 19 years. All students have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan or statement of SEN. Children are placed in the school by local authorities when local or national provision has proved inappropriate or unsuccessful. According to its most recent OFSTED inspection (in February 2015), it is a 'good' school.

In 2004, the Hub was established to cater for the needs of autistic children with especially complex behaviour – with the explicit aim of creating an environment that increases the likelihood that they can access education.

Most children who access the Hub, have general cognitive ability levels within or near the average range while one or two are intellectually very bright and/or have academic ability in defined areas. All students have a diagnosis of an autism spectrum condition and most have one or more additional diagnoses, which affect their ability to access learning. These are children, who have been previously excluded from school or who have been without formal education for considerable periods of time, and have particular difficulties settling in a classroom environment. The children referred to the Hub are considered to require a more differentiated approach to learning than the majority of the children in Robert Ogden School. This resource therefore aims to provide opportunities for the children to be included in educational activities that they otherwise would not access, by providing individualised learning programmes and management strategies.

The Hub has two teaching areas with class sizes no greater than

eight students. Each student has their own individual classroom and a minimum of one-to-one support with one teaching assistant (TA) working with each student at a time. There is also one 'floating' TA for each teaching area in case a member of staff is absent or to support another TA during certain activities. One senior teacher manages the Hub, who oversees two additional teachers, one for each of the Hub's teaching areas, and all TAs.

The physical environment has been designed specifically for autistic children with particularly challenging behaviour and Extreme Demand Avoidance (EDA) (see Box 1, p. 11). In line with the views expressed by the NAS, the school considers EDA/PDA to be a "part of autism that leads to oppositional and defiant behaviour", which is believed to be a result of excessive anxiety.

The curriculum is tailored towards students' individual needs and teaching is based on the students' strengths and special interests, making it highly personalised (see Chapter 5 for further discussion). Teachers work on building relationships with the students to (a) improve their confidence, (b) reduce their anxiety and (c) increase their willingness to engage in learning. In this way, students are expected to eventually re-integrate, over time, into the classroom, although some students may be educated in the Hub for the remainder of their schooling [45].

About this study

The current research does not aim to provide a complete picture of the educational experiences of children and young people excluded from school. Instead, it focuses specifically on the experiences of the children and young people currently attending the Hub – from the perspectives of their parents, their teachers and, importantly, themselves. This study's procedures were granted ethical approval by the UCL Institute of Education's Research Ethics Committee (REC 739).

This project sought to:

1. Understand the previous educational experiences of children and young people, particularly surrounding their prior exclusion from education;

2. Determine children's post-exclusion educational experiences in the Hub, focusing particularly on their learning, social experiences, sense of self and independence; and

3. Highlight the specific strategies adopted by the Hub staff to re-engage these children in learning and education and promote reintegration into school life.
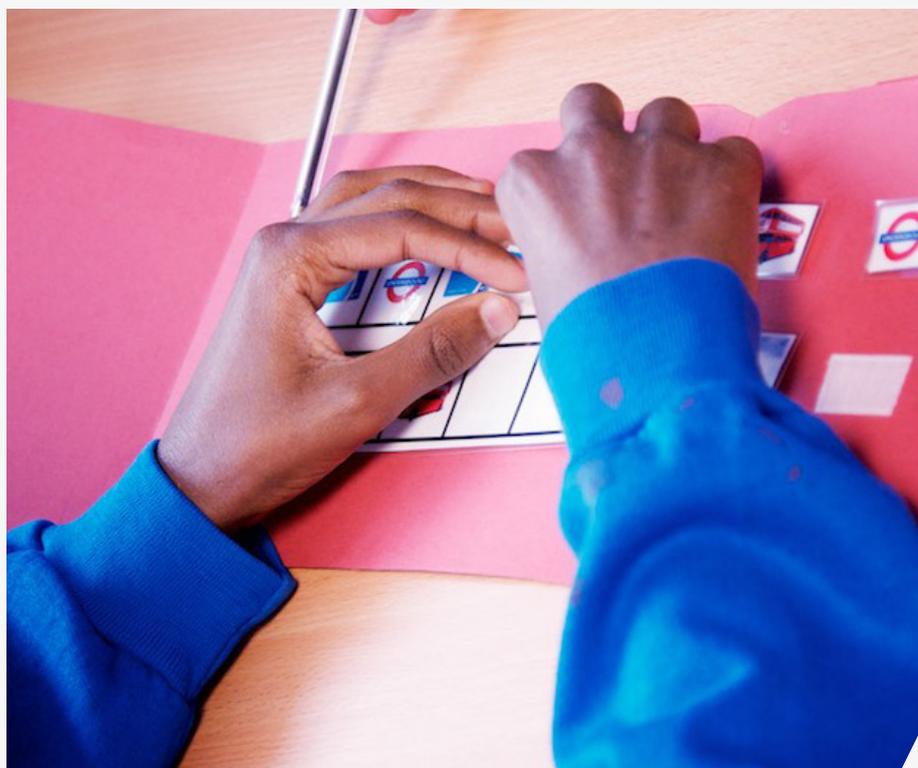
To address these aims, we invited all 15 students enrolled in the Hub during the academic year 2015-2016 to take part in this study. Of these 15 students, eight of their parents gave written informed consent for their child's involvement and one student over the age of 18 provided written informed consent on his own behalf. Over a six-month period, one researcher visited the Hub on seven occasions for three days at a time. The repeated visits ensured that the nine students became familiar with the researcher and built a connection with her. During each visit, various young people and teacher report measures

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2. The one exception to this pattern was a student who performed in the 'extremely low' range. High levels of anxiety and reluctance to comply with the task are likely to have impacted on this particular student's performance. This estimate must therefore be treated with caution.

were collected. Parent data were collected either in person, via phone or post at the same time. The study therefore included three groups of participants: (1) students who attended the Hub, (2) their parents and (3) teaching staff.

1. Students

This study focused on nine students, eight boys and one girl, ranging in age from 10 years 9 months to 18 years 1 month. They were all of White British ethnicity. All had a diagnosis of an autism spectrum condition. According to parental report, young people had received a diagnosis of either Asperger's Syndrome (n=6), autism (n=2) or atypical autism (n=1). Parents completed the Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ) [46], a screening tool for autism, which focuses on their child's developmental history. All young people obtained SCQ scores well above the cut-off score of 15, suggestive of elevated autistic symptoms.

Parents also reported their children's diagnoses in addition to autism. Of the nine young people who took part, eight had received co-occurring diagnoses of one or more of the following: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Anxiety Disorder, Depression, Developmental Coordination Disorder, Dyslexia, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, neurological impairment, PDA.

All young people were considered to be cognitively able, achieving non-verbal reasoning scores within at least the average range on a

Who took part in this research?

1. Nine children from The Hub (aged 10 -18 years)
2. Seven of the children's mothers
3. 19 members of teaching staff (one senior teacher, two teachers, two senior TAs and 14 TAs.)

standardised measure of non-verbal intelligence, the Raven's Progressive Matrices [47], assessed as part of this study[2].

We used a combination of approaches to capture the young people's views and experiences about their education and learning. First, we conducted semi-structured interviews using five 'choice cards' to give young people control over the interaction and engage them in the process. We asked them about their views and perspectives on (1) what it is like to go to school in the Hub, (2) how things are run, (3) whether they get to have their say, (4) how they feel about other children and staff in the Hub and (5) their hopes and aspirations for the future. We also discussed their views on how their current school is different from their previous schools. All interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face, lasting between 10 and 47 minutes (average = 28 minutes). Four interviews were conducted in the presence of the students' TAs.

Second, we completed a number of questionnaires with the children to capture their perceived health-

related quality of life, their ability to tolerate uncertainty, their emotions and behaviours, their anxiety and their social-emotional competence[3].

Finally, we carried out a series of ethnographic observations of each child during lesson time to assess a) the behaviour of the young people, b) how they interact with those around them, c) the strategies used by the teachers, and d) the effect of these strategies on student's perceived engagement.

Each student was seen on multiple occasions by a single researcher. Child consent was viewed as a "continuous process" [48]. Each child was therefore asked again at the beginning of each meeting if they were happy to work with the researcher for the duration of the study. To preserve anonymity of the young people involved, all students are referred to as male and all quotations reported in the remaining chapters are left unattributed.

2. Parents

Seven parents (all mothers) spoke to us in depth about their child's educational history,

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3. Note that this information is not detailed in this report. Please contact the authors for further information.

their perceptions of their child's wellbeing in their current school, what they feel is going well and not so well, what could be improved to promote their child's learning, behaviour, social competence and autonomy, and finally their hopes and aspirations for their child's future. Interviews with parents were either conducted face-to-face or over the phone and lasted between 35 and 52 minutes (average 40 minutes).

Parents were also asked to complete a number of questionnaires on children's quality of life, tendency to tolerate uncertainty, their emotions and behaviours, their anxiety and their social-emotional competence. Finally, they were asked to provide a range of current and historical information about their child's education and educational placement history [42].

3. Teaching staff
Nineteen (15 females) out of 21 members of teaching staff agreed to be interviewed about the strategies they use to reintegrate these children into school life and engage them in educational and social activities, including one senior teacher, two teachers,

two senior TAs and 14 TAs. They were specifically asked to provide examples of challenges and their responses to those challenges, and about the modifications that are made in the Hub that go beyond what is done in other classrooms in Robert Ogden School, and how they feel these adjustments impact on the learning and well-being of the students. Interviews with teaching staff were conducted individually and face-to-face, lasting between 20 and 63 minutes (average 31 minutes). To protect staff members' identities, they are referred to as 'teachers' and 'teaching staff' in the remaining chapters, regardless of their role.

Nine (6 female) of the 19 staff members also completed a second interview. For these interviews, each staff member was allocated to one of the nine students and asked for their perspectives on the impact of the Hub for that particular child, including their views on the child's learning, cognition, behaviour and socio-emotional functioning. These interviews lasted between 16 and 35 minutes (average 23 minutes). We also asked these nine staff members to complete questionnaires about the students to gain information with regard

to where they lie on the autism spectrum, their socio-emotional competence, emotions and behaviours and level of demand avoidance. Finally, they completed a weekly behavioural update for each student, systematically monitoring any absences, behavioural incidences, perceived level of anxiety, social engagement and participation in learning activities during the duration of this project.

Teaching staff had been working in the Hub for an average of five years. This average reflected two main groups: one that had been working in the Hub for a long period of time (7 years or more) and another for a shorter period of time (2 years or less). Staff members' experience of working in autism education also varied considerably. Some teachers had worked in other parts of the school prior to being allocated to the Hub; some reported that they have been in the Hub since it opened in 2004; and others had joined more recently and had not previously worked in autism education.

About the Report

This report is divided into an introduction, 4 chapters and a conclusion.

The chapters present the results from the interviews and questionnaires with students, parents and teachers and observations by the researcher. The first chapter ('Life before the Hub') describes young people's previous educational experiences. The second chapter ('Going to school in the Hub') – which forms the bulk of this report – presents the results on their current experiences in the Hub, including their transition to the Hub, the ways in which the Hub fosters a sense of security, and the perceived impact of the Hub on learning and social skills. The third ('What works for these young people') documents the strategies used by school staff to support the learning and emotional well-being of their students in the Hub. The fourth ('Life beyond the Hub') focuses on the life aspirations of the students in the Hub, and of their parents and teachers, and their preparedness for the future. The conclusion further summarises the findings and offers recommendations, highlighting key strategic messages.

This report is aimed at the autistic community, that is, autistic young people and adults, their parents and carers, and anyone who supports them, including educators and clinicians. Autistic children and young people have the right to receive an education and deserve the same educational and lifelong opportunities as non-autistic children and young people. Young people, parents and schools need to work together to ensure that this is a reality.

2. LIFE BEFORE THE HUB

The first key aim of this study was to understand the students' previous educational experiences and, in particular, the circumstances and feelings surrounding their prior exclusion from education. What we discovered was unsettling. In the years prior to attending Robert Ogden School, students in the Hub had experienced more challenges than most other children will endure in their entire school career. The parents and children that we spoke to described largely negative and often-distressing experiences in the children's previous educational placements, many of which resulted in both formal and informal exclusions, placement breakdowns and permanent exclusions.

All young people began their education in a mainstream setting. Some parents reported that their child had always struggled to adapt to the school environment. Others described how their child initially enjoyed school, with the first few years of primary school providing "continuity", limited pressure and "really good relationships" with teachers. All parents, however, described encountering considerable difficulties as their children's school careers progressed. Some children began to refuse to engage in schoolwork. When one mother asked her son's teacher why none of his work was on display at parents' evening, she was told that "he had not done any". Many children refused to attend school, with parents reporting the struggles they faced in physically getting their children to school ("every single day he refused to go to school and we would have to drag him there") and the stress this caused at home – for parents and siblings ("every morning he got himself into a real state, his anxiety levels were so high and it affected the entire house").

The young people themselves were also overwhelmingly negative about their previous school experiences, reporting that they "hated it" and that their schools were "awful", "boring", "unfair" and "absolutely shit".

During the primary years, parents reported that their children increasingly displayed behaviour that challenges (see Box 1, p11). One mother described an incident, just before her child's first exclusion, where he "barricaded himself in rooms with other children, set off fire alarms" and destroyed school property, resulting in the school "calling the police on him". Another mother stated that her child's anxiety led to instances of self-injury: "when [child] was in meltdown, he would sit under the desk and bang his head constantly on the top of the desk or he'd run away and shut himself in the toilets and bang various bits of his body on the walls, on the floor, in the toilets".

All parents stated that their children had experienced at least one fixed-term formal exclusion: two children

had experienced at least two exclusions, two had experienced five or more exclusions and one child had received over 50 formal exclusions. Parents also reported instances of informal exclusions: three parents were occasionally asked to remove their child from at least one school placement ("to only bring [my child] into school for half-day") while three parents said their child had often been unofficially excluded. One parent said that, although they were never asked to remove their child from school, they nevertheless noted that they "were made to feel most unwelcome. We were informed by the head teacher that [our child] was the most obnoxious boy she'd met in 16 years of teaching".

With the exception of two children, who moved directly from their first school placement to the Hub, the children experienced significant upheavals, with one mother reporting that her child had attended six different school placements prior to the Hub. By these children's second placement, two children remained

in mainstream, one attended a specialist autism base within a mainstream school, one attended a pupil referral unit, and one a specialist provision for ADHD. Several other children experienced periods of being educated at home, and one child moved regularly between mainstream and being educated at home due to difficulties in getting their needs met. Only two of the children's transitions were reported to be due to family circumstances (e.g., the family moved house) or a normal transition point (e.g., primary to secondary). The majority of placements broke down due to the child's educational needs not being met, while others were due to a permanent exclusion or a 'managed move' as an alternative to permanent exclusion.

Overall, these young people experienced a worryingly high number of placement breakdowns and exclusions prior to their placement in the Hub, which caused significant distress to the families involved. Parents and young people identified several factors that they felt made it particularly difficult for them or their children to cope effectively in school and to access learning in their previous schools, which ultimately led to behaviour that challenges and exclusions from school. These are described in detail below.

Problems at school

Parents reported that several aspects of their children's autism made it difficult for them to adjust to school – including social,

communication and sensory difficulties as well as their need for sameness. Several parents noted that their children had difficulties coping with change, and were particularly unsettled in unstructured situations (like playtime) and transition periods: "it was [child's] rigidity, if the littlest thing went wrong, he couldn't cope". One parent explained that, when her child's teacher wasn't at school, her child "had meltdowns and started running away" and when his teacher and classroom changed with a new academic year, he "just couldn't cope with it".

Parents also mentioned the difficulties their children experienced with the sensory environment, particularly of their mainstream schools, which they felt impacted on children's ability to cope in school: "I mean, in a mainstream school, you're in a massive class with a lot of children so there was a lot of noise and visual distractions. The rooms and corridors were small and there was nowhere private for him to go, nowhere for him to calm down". Children also described their schools as "far too busy".

Others spoke of their children's communication difficulties, particularly how they "take everything literally", which meant that they often did not understand teachers' instructions and expectations: "One teacher said to him, "boy, don't you have the courtesy to shut up when I'm talking?" and [child] said "no" – not because he was being cheeky but because he was saying well, no,

I don't have the courtesy clearly because otherwise I wouldn't still be talking".

Parents and young people also noted how the social milieu of school was particularly challenging for them and their children. One mother explained how her child's meltdowns often resulted from the exhaustion of constantly trying "to work out cognitively what he doesn't understand, all day every day". Another described how being bullied every day "wound up" her child and sent them "straight into a meltdown".

Young people talked of having few friends, with people not "liking me very much", and repeated conflicts with their non-autistic peers. One child noted that he "used to get bullied every single break", while another described how he attended a mainstream school "with bullies, pretty bad bullies, physical and emotional". One young person explained that, "it's just how kids are … I mean, they all had their own little circle of mates, and the way you get on with your own little circle of mates is by pissing on

everyone else". Several children spoke of the difficulties in being around other children all the time. One child said: "it was a bloody awful place, horrible. It was too busy, for a start, but I mean even for a pupil referral unit, they were all pupils who were kicked out at some point and there are still 10, well 15 of them in a classroom. Putting lots of them together in one bloody room is absurd".

The children themselves did not acknowledge the impact of their often-challenging behaviour on others. Yet several parents acknowledged that their children's meltdowns were negatively impacting on other children's school experience, either "triggering them off" or intimidating them. One mother said that "all the other kids there looked like robots, petrified little robots" when faced with her child's outbursts.

Finally, some parents felt that the invisibility of their child's condition caused problems for them at school: "He's very articulate but the problem with that was that people thought that he could understand and do anything they asked him to do; people were just assuming he could cope with any situation but he couldn't, so what was happening is they were

expecting a lot more of him than he could give them".

Perceived lack of understanding from school staff

One repeated theme from the interviews with parents and young people was the perceived lack of understanding of children's individual needs by school staff, which they felt was one of the primary causes of their children's escalating behavioural problems and their inability to access education. One parent felt that the school "was constantly letting [child] down". Her child also highlighted his teachers' failure to be consistent in their approach: "at one point they said they wouldn't do that, and then they did do that, and then I went completely apeshit".

Most young people told us that they felt staff were "unfair" and "unhelpful". One young person stated: "I was always punished, always, like, for being naughty and they just didn't understand really". His mother agreed: "they treated [my child] like a naughty boy and nobody seemed to understand the

fact that he needed help with his autism". Other young people noted specifically that they did not get on well with staff in their previous schools: "I didn't enjoy it, but I don't think the teachers enjoyed me either. One teacher had brown hair like yours and she turned grey and after I left her hair was white".

Several parents stressed how they had to "fight" to get their child's difficulties recognised by the school and to gain access to appropriate support. One mother stated that even when she finally convinced the school of her child's need for support, having a teaching assistant "actually made it worse 'cause having somebody with him all the time telling him to get on with his work was even more pressuring, it was more of a demand. The person obviously didn't understand PDA, it's a complicated condition and they didn't understand it". Another mother also felt that her child's refusal to attend school was due to their PDA profile, explaining that the demands placed on the child "caused distress and massive anxiety".

Some parents suggested that their children's challenges "were just

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>
> **Parent**

too much for a normal school" because "they couldn't cater for his needs" or "just didn't have the funding for the higher level of staff". Others, however, felt that "the schools were very, very unhelpful". One young person said: "they just do nothing to help you at all, and it's just rules … I got a bit angry at them". Several young people reported being particularly affected by staff's often unpredictable and unexpected approaches, and parents were also frustrated by the staff being inflexible and unwilling to adapt their way of working to meet the individual needs of their child.

Parents and young people made several serious allegations of bullying and abuse by school staff in their previous schools. Some of these were instances of emotional bullying. One mother stated that "all [the teacher] did was scream all day, shouting [at my child]" and that the teacher "ripped up his handwriting because it wasn't neat enough", resulting in her child feeling "humiliated" and "useless". Another mother reported that staff made her child "face the walls for having a facial tic when being nervous".

Others reported shocking instances of physical abuse. One young person noted that, "rather than them giving any warning whatsoever, this random woman dragged me out of the classroom. So even being put into the other classroom in the first place, after being told that I wouldn't, would have been annoying enough, being dragged out by someone I have never met before is even worse". Several parents voiced serious concerns about the amount of physical restraint used

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>
> **Young person**

with their children, which they believed had severe psychological consequences. One parent described being horrified to hear that "it took up to six people to pin her down". One parent "took photos of fingerprint bruising on [her child's] arm and bruising on his head that they had caused … and he was rocking, he was rocking for some time. I do think he has been massively traumatised". One parent described how her child "got very bruised a lot" and "became very fearful of staff; he screamed that he didn't want to go: 'they're gonna get me, they're gonna get me'". Another mother told of how her son "hated school because as soon as he saw the men coming, he lost control. It would make him more violent and so I said I don't think you're dealing with him the way he should be dealt with".

Worsening of the situation as a consequence of unmet needs

Children's perceived unmet needs and the use of unsuitable approaches by school staff in dealing with children's difficulties were attributed to a further decline both in their mental health and of the parent-school relationship. Parents repeatedly explained how these experiences had placed their children in a "terribly wound up state of crisis" and "on the point

of a nervous breakdown". The struggles in school also impacted on children's self-esteem and mental health. One young person explained that, "that was a very depressing time for me because it was just, I was ill, as in the way of, not as in coughing all the time, just in who I was. I wasn't right". His mother expressed considerable concern about his behaviour at home: "he wasn't doing anything, he wasn't playing, he wasn't enjoying anything, just really low his mood and his anxiety was through the roof". One mother noted her child used to pull his hair and was getting "very small bald patches, that were down to him being so stressed". Several parents reported that their child ended up physically hurting themselves, including "banging his head" during a meltdown, self-harming, and even seeming attempts to take their own lives: "he tried to tie a jumper around his neck in the playground".

One parent described how her child's violence towards his sister led to the local authority's decision to place him in residential care – a decision with which they fervently disagreed: "we were convinced that all he needed was the right schooling, the right placement and the right therapy because we saw lots of potential in [child], but he

was so stressed. He was in a crisis state all the time".

Parents also described how the schools' inability to adapt their approach to their children's needs caused significant tension between parents and staff. One mother spoke of how she and their child felt rejected: "other children, parents and teachers did not want [my son] there" and that she was told by the school that "parents don't pay for their children to go to school with children like my child".

Exclusion

With the exception of one child, all children were eventually excluded from their schools. Few young people liked to talk about their exclusions. Those who agreed to talk about the reason for their exclusion stated that they "could never stay in one place", "liked to be in control", or were excluded for "being violent". Parents stated that children were mainly excluded as a result of behavioural reasons, "considered to be a danger to [themselves] and other children".

One mother described how the school could not contain her child: "He'd run away and he'd be running round school and staff would be chasing after him trying to get him and, you know, they didn't have enough staff to be chasing after him all day, so he ended up getting excluded. Then he went onto a part-time timetable, doing two hours a day, and he was still getting excluded even though he was only doing this short amount of time … between the January and the April, he was excluded 24 times. He was so upset, it was like a cloud had come over him, you know, he just didn't understand what was going on. We had an emergency meeting at school and his paediatrician decided to sign him out of school, sick with anxiety".

Several parents objected to their child's repeated exclusions and negative school experiences by opting to keep their children at home – although this incurred resistance from the school and from local authorities. One mother explained: "they excluded him again and at that point I said I'm refusing to take him back. The L.A. [local authority] were saying to me you have to bring him to school and I was saying, 'No I don't have to bring him to school 'cause his mental state is now so bad that the thought of school is making him meltdown'". Another mother also described how she felt that taking her child to school would just "cause distress and massive anxiety. I said: 'you are mentally abusing my child on a daily basis and I am not having it anymore.'"

Following their child's exclusion, parents spoke of the difficulties they faced in finding an appropriate placement. One mother tried to get her son into a mainstream high school but they "wouldn't accept him because he was said to be too dangerous. So we then went to look at the PRU which absolutely filled us with sheer dread … there's no way he could have coped in that place". Some parents resigned to educate their child at home, but this also presented significant challenges. They reported receiving inadequate support for home-schooling their child, and that the little support they did receive "would only wind [them] up more". One mother stated: "I was struggling to teach him anything because I'm not a teacher and I'm not a special needs person and I didn't know enough. And [child] knew I didn't know enough and he would say, 'you're not my teacher, you're my mum'".

SUMMARY

- Parents felt that their autistic children's needs were not being met in their previous school placements and that staff were using inappropriate and ineffective approaches to deal with children's resulting challenging behaviours. Indeed, many parents and young people gave often-harrowing reports of their treatment, citing several instances of emotional and physical abuse.

- Ultimately, this meant that these children were unable to engage in and access education, eventually resulting in numerous school exclusions.

- Several parents decided to keep their children at home to spare them from the torment of school and subsequent exclusions, even against the school and local authorities' requests. Other parents also struggled either to find appropriate alternative provision or to access support to educate their children at home.

- Consequently, many of these children did not access education and were out of school for a significant length of time, some for up to two years, before their placement in the Hub at Robert Ogden School.

3. GOING TO SCHOOL IN THE HUB

Parents and young people described often-harrowing accounts of their educational experiences prior to attending the Hub. The second key aim of this study was to understand students' experiences of re-integration into school life, and the perceived impact of the Hub on young people's emotional and mental well-being and their social and academic learning. Students, parents and teachers' views and perspectives on these issues are described below.

First steps towards re-integration

Most of the students had been attending the Hub for at least one year. One student had been there for six years. Young people's transition into the Hub had been a key part of their re-integration process, especially following what were reported as often-devastating experiences in their previous educational placements. For the most part, the transition experience seemed to be a positive one for the students and their parents.

Decisions regarding placement in the Hub seem to have been mainly driven by parents. One student explained that he went to the Hub because he "got

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>
> **Young person**

suspended twice for bad behaviour and my mum said she's not going back there so she tried to get me to a special school and after about six months she got me here". Parents reported feeling desperate to find a suitable placement for their child and emphasised the time and effort it took to do so. Children were aware that their placement at the Hub was often "the only school that was left". One child stated: "well it was either this or the prison school. And I mean that".

While some students seemed to have been indifferent about the prospect of attending the Hub, others reported having felt positive: "coming here at first was fine, because it's a school. I mean in the end you at least get to learn stuff". Some students appreciated the opportunity to go to school again: "I feel lucky to actually get to be in this school, since a lot of people get turned down basically. A lot would be different if I wasn't here". One student understood the sense of urgency around him accessing support. When asked why he came to this school, he stated, "cos I needed help, didn't I? I mean at the end of the day, I've got to face it, I needed lots of help,

educational help because I was falling behind. I needed my special help, lots of help".

Although students seemed to have limited involvement in choosing their placement, their transition into the Hub appeared to be individually adapted to their specific needs. Both parents and children spoke about visiting before they formally started, to familiarise themselves with the new environment. One teacher explained the importance of the child visiting beforehand because "they need to buy into what we're offering. All the children who are in the Hub at the moment have chosen to come to us because if they won't come through the door then we won't be able to help them".

Parents identified several key factors contributing to the success of their child's transition. One of these factors was staff's willingness to give the children an initial opportunity to voice their concerns and influence their experience at the Hub. One pupil said he felt "cool" about coming to Robert Ogden because he was allowed to choose the colour of his classroom: "I got my room painted purple.

And who doesn't like to get a purple room". One mother stated: "[My child used to say] no I can't do this, whereas when he came here, they were friendly. We sat in the room and had a chat and [child] was very articulate in what he wanted to say and what he wanted to ask. He just liked it".

Another factor focused on staff's extensive efforts to understand children's needs prior to attending the Hub. One teacher explained, "particularly if we've got a child with a PDA or a demand avoidant profile, we look at the paperwork and talk to their parents to think about how we can meet their needs". Parents emphasised that they felt listened to right from the start: "it was such a rare thing for us for somebody to listen to us about our child". Another mother stated, "they spent a long time talking to us. They knew the things that would irritate [child] so it was about putting those things in place to keep him calm 'cause he can kick off and it's not pleasant".

Parents also explained how the school prepared the students by introducing the way the Hub is run, so they knew what to expect when they started: "they automatically understood that his anxieties would be high and they tried to make sure that he wasn't waiting around a long time, they told him exactly which room he was going to be going to and what was going to happen". One teacher stated: "it is about setting up the environment that they feel is less anxious for them and then it's about planning their day to make them feel less anxious".

Although the school and the children were well prepared for the transition, this did not mean that the process itself was a straightforward one. Some children experienced considerable setbacks. One mother told us: "the first visit was fine, but at the second visit [child] went into meltdown. We had to leave pretty sharpish. He was banging on the doors trying to escape and then we had to put his start date back by a couple of weeks. We had to get some anti-anxiety meds from his doctor. So once they started working then the plan were to take [child] to school and for him to just be in school for an hour or two hours and to

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Parent

gradually build up. But we took him and we left him and we said to the staff ring us if you need us to come and fetch him and the school rang and said that [child] wanted to stay all day and he's stayed every day since".

Indeed, for the majority of students, the transition process appeared to be quite a gentle process, in which the time and number of days per week the student spent in school gradually increased. One mother said that her child initially attended "one day a week for a few months" for "an hour or two". Another parent said that it took a while until her child

"knew it was not pressured like mainstream" because "he never felt in mainstream people understood or could help him". Staff were optimistic of the students' ability to re-integrate: "every child attends full-time eventually, it's just at their own pace". Nevertheless, one staff member explained that it can be a challenge to move children towards attending full-time, "because if you could have a day off why wouldn't you. Once the children are more comfortable, it's about offering them a 'wow-factor', so they want to come in that extra day. It needs to be their decision".
Although the majority of students refused to attend school

towards the end of their previous placements, students' levels of school attendance had improved considerably since being at the Hub. Most of the students attend school full-time – with few absences. Weekly reports from teachers during the course of the study confirmed that over 13 consecutive weeks (65 days), young people missed school on few occasions (maximum six days for one child). One student did not miss a single day during this period. Reasons for absence largely related to physical health/illness, mental health problems and, only in one instance, school refusal. The exception to this pattern was

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>
> **Young person**

the young person who had started at the Hub only recently and who had difficulty coping with a full week of school. In his case, the school had agreed for him to attend only for four days per week, with a start time of 11 am each day, "because it is wearing him out, the effort of speaking to people and communicating with people".

Importantly, many parents noted their child's newfound willingness to "actually go to school", stating that he "hasn't refused which is pretty amazing". One mother stated: "[my child] has completely changed since he came. He hasn't done a full day in school since he was eight years old [he's 15 now]. Within the first couple of days he was almost doing a full day, he was leaving at three o'clock, but after a couple of weeks he was staying 'til four o'clock and he was actually doing a full day every day and he's been doing that ever since, five days a week. I don't know if people here realise just how miraculous that is".

The students themselves were also positive about going to school and learning, with many stating that they "want to learn". One student said: "I never learn enough no matter how much work you can give me. I'm actually interested in everything". Others were more ambivalent in their expressed attitudes towards school. One

student said he was getting on "quite well", but made clear: "I'm not going to enjoy school but yeah I'm enjoying [this school] as much as school can be enjoyed".

Fostering a sense of security

In the knowledge that the young people transitioning to the Hub had often-distressing educational histories, staff were primarily concerned with improving students' confidence and reducing their anxiety. Doing so, they felt, was the first step towards ensuring the students' mental and emotional well-being, and thus their re-integration into the education system. Our conversations with parents showed that the Hub was some way towards achieving this aim.

Parents noted considerable changes in their children since attending the Hub. For some students, this progress was gradual ("[child] is improving slowly and the Hub seems to be giving him that bit more confidence"), while for others, it has been more dramatic ("I can't say highly enough what a change it's been for him and his self-esteem has just gone sky high"). One parent said of their child's anxiety that: "[child] was in total crisis before starting at the Hub, because of his social difficulties and being forced to conform.

It has changed his life, it's been incredible". Others noticed that these changes were centred on the child's own ability to deal with stress: "He is able to regulate his reactions to anxiety better… a miracle!"

While parents celebrated their children's successes they, nevertheless, acknowledged that their children were still not "coping perfectly". One parent described, how her son "has made such good progress over the last 12 months. I can't describe how happy I am. I mean don't get me wrong. He will always have these difficulties, due to his condition, and it's not his fault, every day is challenge, but over the past 12 months his behavioural difficulties have diminished greatly. He might still swear and he sometimes pushes, but he is not smashing things anymore, becoming violent". Another parent said, "the Hub has been the absolute making of him. How you've met [child] in school, if you'd done that a few years ago you wouldn't be able to be in the same room as him, he wouldn't have allowed it at all … so the change in him is miraculous".

Teachers agreed that students had progressed considerably since starting in the Hub. One teacher said: "I think we're getting it right for him at the minute, he's not had an incident in a long, long, time. He smiles a lot more now, he doesn't seem as anxious as when he first came". Teachers also reported that students are more tolerant of change and have fewer obsessions. For example, one student now shows "a lot of interest in things, it's healthier than what it used to be like. Now he is able to

focus more on his schoolwork and all the rest of it".

Although students are "emotionally in a much better place", some were reported to still have difficulties regulating their emotions. One parent stated: "he can't deal with his emotions very well at all. Emotions are very heightened at all ends of the scale so everything you've felt a thousand times stronger than we would feel it. He finds it very difficult to control those emotions". Another parent noted that her child "knows he's very moody and to be honest he doesn't like himself, he doesn't like being like that". Staff highlighted the importance of continuously monitoring and working towards improving children's well-being: "It's trying to teach them to self-regulate, not to get to the point where they get to meltdown situation. Then it will vary from child to child how quickly we can bring them back round and move them on. It's fundamental to work on that".

Both parents and teachers reported compelling changes in their children's emotional well-being and their behaviour. One important question relates to the specific ways in which staff in the Hub contributed to these positive changes – that is, what did staff do that managed to foster a sense of security in their students? Our conversations with parents, teachers and the students themselves identified three key features, including (i) making substantial adjustments to the physical environment, (ii) promoting strong staff-student relationships and (iii) ensuring that staff members understand and accept these students' needs.

i. Adjustments to the physical environment

Staff went to great lengths to ensure that the physical environment accommodated the students' individual needs ("removing anything that could potentially tip them over the edge") – including having their own classroom, which teachers noted, gives students a secure space to "be themselves" (see Box 2, p28): "if they were to be in a normal class you would need to be more careful about the others, but because they are in their own room they have a bit more freedom really".

Having their own room was also thought to help manage some of the students' sensory differences. One parent told us that her child complained a great deal about the noise of all the other children in his previous school: "In his own room, he hasn't got that distraction around him that he had before". Nevertheless, some children, who are particularly sensitive to noise, still struggle. In these cases, staff have arranged access to another room outside of the Hub, telling the students "if you feel yourself getting really upset and angry just say to somebody 'can you get me the key?', and go and sit in there [for half an hour]. It's nice and quiet".

Some students were described as "not being able to cope" without their own room. One mother stated: "this is exactly what my son needs. Absolutely amazing. It is just a room with a teacher. He doesn't need the other children around him, all that distraction. He pulls their hair, he picks their noses, he kicks them, he just annoys everybody because he's bored or he seeks that stimulus, and in his own room he doesn't have any of that". One teacher stated:

The Hub: A unique learning environment

Staff in the Hub make extensive efforts to accommodate the individual needs and preferences of the students, which includes making substantial adjustments to the physical environment. The Hub itself is situated away from the buzz of the rest of Robert Ogden School and contains two, spacious areas – one for Hub1 and one for Hub2. Each section contains a kitchen, a communal area and, uniquely, a separate "tutorial room" for each child. Teachers believe that having an individual room "sort of helps them, helps reduce that anxiety because it's a place they're supposed to feel secure and safe, because it's theirs" (see main text for discussion).

Each student's room is individualised according to his/her wishes. A member of teaching staff explained that, "their rooms are very, very personal to them, so whatever they want in their room, that's up to them". Before even starting at the Hub, students can decide the room colour. One child had his walls painted red, others chose "sonic blue" or "blue like the sky", and one chose purple. Upon starting, they "can turn their room into however they want it. It's their own space, they can put their own pictures and posters up". All rooms have a desk with two chairs and chest of desk drawers. Students are able to request individual equipment and teaching resources, including a computer, a white/blackboard and indoor tents. Teachers further reported that several children have brought in their own belongings or equipment from home, such as "a massive big plant", "air-con", "a little fan", a reclining chair, or office chairs, to either meet their sensory needs or make the rooms more comfortable. Some of the rooms also have safety installations, such as padded walls. Each room's temperature can be regulated, according to students' preferences.

Staff explained that students do not entirely have free reign on the decorating process. One student, for example, is "into clutter, he has stuff everywhere, he just gathers things, he hoards", so teachers "need to ensure that it doesn't get out of hand". One teacher explained: "we try and keep it low arousal and limit the amount of things that are going on all at once". Another staff member noted that office chairs were not a good idea because "they can ride around and race each other on them". This has meant that they had set rules in place, so that the students "know the boundaries".

For the students, their rooms were clearly very important to them: "That's one thing which is really awesome, 'cause you can just tell people that aren't at the Hub, 'well you don't have your own classroom'". Many children enjoyed showing us around their rooms and were proud to tell us about their personal items, including their drawings and art work, or posters and print outs of their favourite game characters.

Box 2

"especially for those students who have come so far since starting in the Hub, you often forget how much being here helps them to concentrate on their school work". He gave the example of one of his students who engages "quite well with lessons" being "really, really against" moving their lesson out of the Hub to a different part of the school where they would have been able to access more equipment: "He couldn't focus anymore. I realised it was a mistake, but it was worth trying. I think the [rest of the] school is quite a scary place for him". Other teachers reported that even those students who do access other parts of the school as part of their learning are "visibly more tense" outside of the Hub.

Nonetheless, having their own room seemed a greater necessity for some students than for others. For most students, having their own room appeared to enable them to regulate the amount of social interaction they engage in.

One student said, "When I am not in a lesson, I am probably not in here". Instead he liked to "just wander around" and "pop into" other students' rooms. Even though each student is taught in their own classroom, young people described several situations in which they had opportunities to interact with others, including "in the dining room" and doing joint activities with other students, such as a quiz every Friday: "that's when everyone gets together and joins a team". A considerable amount of socialising also seems to take place in children's rooms. One student's room seems to be particularly popular: "I have an open door policy – they come in during lunch, break times and also lessons … I have to say, if I'm having part of a lesson, 'do you mind waiting a bit?' and they're fine with that". Students seemed to see the benefit of having their own room, stating "if there was someone you aren't fond of, it would be quite easy to avoid them" and "if you want to have a friend in they can, and if you don't you don't have to".

Teachers' accounts suggested, however, it is not all so straightforward. Many staff members mentioned that they often influence how many and which students are in one room to prevent conflict from arising. One teacher explained, "we've got a lot of personality clashes. With a lot of them in one room, whether they mean it or they don't realise it, they do cause friction with each other". In most cases, staff said they need to be around to keep an eye on the situation "to prevent that before anything happens", particularly with certain combinations of students. One teacher clarified, "we never

really let them in their room by themselves, even if sometimes they think they're by themselves, the door is open and we're in the corridor just kind of listening, we don't like spy on them but just try to listen and if we can see that it starts to get a bit more violent we'll just try to separate them". Teachers often stay in the room to facilitate group situations either "because at least one will have a fall out, so it has to be managed" or to "make sure that none of the children take over and it's all about them". They explained that that they try to defuse situations "casually", often without the students "realising we are doing it".

Teachers mentioned that sometimes the students themselves say they want others to leave the room and "it can be hard on the others but at the same time they've got to respect that it's not their room". At other times they will have to "step in" and ask a student to leave, if "it's getting too much": "it's not an easy decision, because you want them to socialise and learn to accept groups and not just interact on a one-to-one basis".

Our observations supported teachers' accounts of managing group interactions. In one example, three students came together in one of the student's rooms after a lesson. Two TAs stayed in the room with them. The young people engaged in conversation for a while. The TAs chimed in occasionally, reminding students to "watch their language", or picking up on points another student made, if they got lost in the conversation or had been ignored by the others. When the conversation started to become

silly and inappropriate, one of the TAs introduced a more structured activity, a Pictionary style guessing game on the white board. While he prepared the first question, he invited them to initiate a conversation about a specific topic by saying, "by the way, what do you think of the quote of the day? Talk among yourselves while I prepare this". The students engaged in a discussion about the daily quote on the students' white board and then began to solve the first task of the game. During the game, the TAs acted as facilitators, ensuring that the students took turns in answering questions, and giving each student the opportunity to contribute, without pressuring them. When one student solved a task, but couldn't think of a question to ask, his TA jumped in: "why don't I do the next one, and you can have a think. Maybe you can come up with the next one".

Towards the end of the break, one of the TAs prepared the students for the transition to the next lesson: "okay we will have two more turns, then we will have to start the lesson, is that alright?"

ii. Promoting strong relationships with students and parents

Staff made extensive efforts to develop strong relationships with the students and their parents (see Box 3, p31), which they believed to be one key ingredient for the success of young people's placement in the Hub. With regards to building strong staff-student relationships, the group of staff working with each student is carefully matched, based on mutual interests and personality. One of

also can be a bit fun and crazy at times and they understand us or try to understand us depending at which point you are at and they try their hardest to communicate in meltdown and just they're the best at doing that sort of stuff. They should get a super badge". Parents agreed that their children get on with all staff members: "it doesn't really seem to matter which person is working with him, he seems to get along with all of them. He has never said negative things about anybody really".

Students valued what they reported as less-formal interactions with staff. They highlighted their sense of humour: "Most of them actually get jokes, a couple of them actually

connections with. Teachers stated that they adapt staffing depending on how well a child accepts a staff member: "it's getting him used to new staff, some he'll accept straightaway, some it might take a bit longer, some he'll not accept at the minute. We've got to go along, with what he wants really. You sort of know, after a few weeks, whether it's not gonna work so then we swap it".

Parents felt that a level of consistency and familiarity with staff is helpful for their children: "I think more than anything what's been good about it is that it's been a very small turnover of staff so he's tended to have the same members of staff all the time, and if they have someone new starting, it's just letting [child] know and introduce somebody in the right way to him". Indeed, one student highlighted changes in the staff timetable is what sends him "a bit off edge". Teachers agreed that, given that many young people have difficulty dealing with unexpected changes, amendments to staffing need to be carefully introduced to students: "now you've got him where he can accept change. As long as he's told slightly in advance and he knows what's happening, he's normally fine, because he knows all staff well. But he used to struggle [with this]".

> "I might have not said this, but the staff is really good. They take school seriously and they understand us … they should get a super badge"
>
> **Young person**

the teachers explained, "you look at the strengths of the children and you see if there's any strength in a member of staff. So an obvious example is [staff member] with his football, so straight away you're going to put him with the sporty kids as much as you possibly can".

Students generally felt positive about the Hub staff, stating that "they all make you feel welcome and happy" and that "they are quite good. I would give them 9 out of 10. Better than any other school. In all ways really". One student explicitly said, "I might have not said this, but the staff is really good. They take school seriously and they

understand sarcasm although most of them have like a sarcasm shield". They appreciated them joining in activities that the students would enjoy: "Some of them actually also play video games with you. You can play video games with staff in that way then you at least have something to do during breaks. Also you can talk to staff and learn about their lives and mock them about stuff".

A few students mentioned that there are certain members of staff they "just wouldn't really work with. I would ignore them". Indeed, staff also admitted that some students are more difficult to build

Trust was viewed as an important foundation for student-staff relationships. One staff member highlighted: "for all of them, trust is a lot, if anything happens and they don't trust you anymore it's really hard, so you have to build it up carefully". Another reported the importance of trust going in the other direction, that students

know that they are trusted by staff: "we trust them to do stuff like shopping. I've taken him to a supermarket and when he was coming back on the bus, he said 'I right enjoyed that', he says 'I've never done anything like that before because my mum doesn't trust me'. You're trusting them and they do like that". Teachers stated that the child knows that "he's going to lose my trust" if he is acting up, "it's a big thing for him, for me to trust him, and he'll get embarrassed".

Teachers made it clear, however, that they put more trust in some students than others: "he's very independent, he does like that time on his own, so we can leave him, he's not like one of those students that you have to watch everything he goes on".

The trust between staff and students makes it easier for students to seek help when they need it: "He's got a really, really close bond with [staff member].

She is his outlet where if he's got a problem and if he's going to speak to anybody about it, it will be [staff member], so that's a really good relationship for him to have, because there has been times when things have bothered him, and rather than sort of just blowing up about it he's managed to speak to [staff member] and calm himself down". Students confirmed that they feel they can turn to staff for help. One student stated he never has any problems "because if you

Strong home-school relationships

Both parents and teachers highlighted the "excellent home-school communication". The two Hub teachers and the teaching manager are the ones who generally maintain this relationship with parents; teaching assistants were reported to be less involved in home-school communication: "We sometimes talk to parents when they are here, but not much. It's [teacher] who is on the phone to parents a lot". The Hub used a variety of channels to communicate with parents, including home-school ('black') communication books and emails, in addition to face-to-face meetings: "they know to email me rather than put things in the black book because [child] reads it and he can take offence to stuff. The communication is good. I go in for meetings. I feel supported".

Parents felt that they could freely voice their opinions, which made them feel involved in their children's education: "for instance, we asked [the staff] if they could teach him to tie his shoelaces, and more recently something about puberty and you know they just take it all on board and go, 'yep no problem leave it with us we'll do it', so amazing". One child explained that if he has a problem, his parents and teachers will work together to find a solution: "my mum talks to [teacher] and they will work something out".

Box 3

Parents also reported that the school takes their concerns on board: "anything that we communicate is understood and action is taken. They never treat us like we're idiots, which is how we were treated when we said anything in mainstream". One parent emphasised that this communication goes "both ways": "If there was anything else within the unit that I wasn't happy with or thought could be done better, then that relationship's there to be able to tackle it. Or equally if they thought there was something that was happening at home, they could contact us about it and they know that this relationship is strong enough to be able to do that".

> "They [teachers] never treat us like we're idiots, which is how we were treated when we said anything in mainstream"
>
> **Parent**

have any problems you just tell staff and they'll try and sort something out". Students highlighted that they would most likely turn to the Hub teachers for help. One student stated that he trusts his teacher the most "just because I have known her the longest".

Students felt their concerns were taken seriously. One student explained that he "gave feedback once" because a teacher was shredding paper in his room: "I was not happy with it so I went to [another teacher] and I said, 'this is not okay'". His mother remembered this incident and said her child was "really impressed" because he felt listened to: "[the teacher] will say 'what do you want me to do?' or 'what do you need me to do right now to make you feel better?' and if what [my child] suggests is reasonable, they go along with it. If it's something ridiculous then obviously [the teacher] won't do that". As a result, her child "felt his well-being matters to staff".

Yet, teachers highlighted the fragility of students' trust in them and how difficult it can be to repair once broken. One staff member stated, "Sometimes you can get away with so much, but then if you bug him too much you'll be

out of his room, that's it, he's had enough". Parents agreed that the staff-student relationship can easily breakdown: "he adores his teacher at the moment and I always say 'at the moment' because it can change. If [teacher] does something that [child] takes offence to it can go downhill quickly. So it's tricky". One teacher explained that, "we have to be extremely careful, that we are not promising anything we can't keep, because that would seriously upset them".

iii. Staff acceptance of students
Parents were extremely encouraged about teachers' efforts to understand their children's needs and accept them. One parent stated: "I was just blown away and I thought this is exactly what my son needs. My son needs somebody to absolutely understand what [child] is about, what affects [child],

what makes [child] anxious, what takes him up the scale, how to bring him down, and I was so impressed. Absolutely amazing". Parents emphasised the staff's awareness of some of the students' extreme demand avoidance: "all I can say is they understand everything about PDA. Like [staff member], he knows how to get the best out of [child]. In his last school they thought that [child] was just being picky, they just didn't get him, they didn't understand it was his anxieties that were causing the behaviour, whereas they do here". Another parent adds: "they understand my child, you can't ask for more than that really with these children". Teaching staff came across extremely motivated and frequently emphasised how much they enjoyed their work, stating "the kids make it worthwhile" and "they are so interesting and brilliant to work with".

"They understand my child. You can't ask for more than that really with these children"
Parent

Teachers stated that students feel that they can be themselves, because they are not judged for their behaviour in the Hub: "he's so comfortable with us, you know, and we just accept him for how he is without any repercussions, no-one bats an eyelid when he's bouncing off walls and whatnot because it's just what [child] does. This is where he can be himself really, he's finally found somewhere that he can finally be who he is, and not get judged. We just accept it". Another teacher felt that being around people who understand him has a significant impact on her student's ability to control his anxiety: "he feels comfortable within himself in the environment, I think that's been his safety blanket".

Teachers emphasised that it takes a certain kind of person to work with these students and build successful relationships with them. One teacher explained: "people have to want to work with this particular group of children. They have to have the personal qualities to work with these children and we totally accept if a member of staff says 'look, you know, I can't work with these children', because they are quite emotionally draining, they're quite hard work and it's not everyone's cup of tea". Another one added: "people here need to have a calm manner, be non-judgemental and be able to manage their personal feelings and opinions so that there are no conflicts". For example, "you have to deal with the verbal abuse day in and day out, which can be a challenge". One teacher explained: "you have to remember that these children have a condition, but it can be difficult, when these kids appear to be in control of what they're saying and what they're doing".

> "Obviously, they are more trained in dealing with disability kids. It helps, you need to know this stuff. You need to be trained in it."
>
> **Young person**

Teachers also highlighted the need to be able to cope well with challenges: "People have to be able to remain calm in a crisis and not raise to the bait that sometimes the children sort of present at them". They also emphasised the importance of teamwork and stated that they are continuously learning from mistakes and help each other in different situations. To this end, the teachers reported using diaries in which each person who worked with a student during a day writes how it went and if there were any issues. This was important both for ensuring communication between staff and to detect any patterns in the students' behaviours.

Parents also highlighted the staff's ability to handle critical situations – much better and "a lot calmer" than the staff in students' previous placements: "if they have a problem with him they talk to him. I mean there's no grabbing hold of him, no restraint. Some students also showed awareness and respect for teachers' expertise, stating that staff are "professionally trained". One student explained why this was important to him: "obviously, they are more trained in dealing with disability kids. It helps, you need to know this stuff. You need to be trained in it. I mean, if my mother didn't have training in dealing with me, then I don't know how she would be where she was now".

Learning in the Hub

Making considerable adjustments to the physical environment, fostering strong relationships with students and parents, and having staff who were competent and accepting of the students contributed towards promoting their mental and emotional well-being. Staff critically viewed this as a necessary precursor to enhancing their learning, especially their social and academic skills. The next section describes the learning opportunities – social and academic – that the Hub afforded, from the perspectives of students, their parents and school staff.

Opportunities for social interaction

When asked about how they felt about other students in school, young people's responses varied. Some said that they enjoyed interacting with others. One student stated that his favourite part about coming to school is "definitely seeing my friends" and that he likes to "be around people 'cause I really like to socialise, talk, play. I like to have lots of friends. It's always been like that for me. My mum said that's unusual for an autistic person and I am a bit out there". At the same time he acknowledged that others sometimes can put him "a bit on the edge" and stated: "I do have these times when I want to be by myself and having my own chill time".

> "He used to try really hard to have friends but he just didn't know how to be around other kids his age and they just felt uncomfortable with him"
>
> **Parent**

Most children, however, described mixed relationships with other students, stating that some are "quite nice to hang out with" and are "incredibly funny", whereas others "mess up people" and "get on my nerves". One student reported that he is not interested in the other students: "I don't really talk to them". He described the students in the wider Robert Ogden School as "a bit nutty" and students in the Hub as "annoying" because "they play squeaky voices on the recorder and I don't like noise". Several students also reported experiencing conflict and tension with others in the Hub. Even though "it is much better than in the old school", one student stated that "[another student] doesn't like me. I don't know why, I've never done anything wrong". Another said that he gets "quite aggressive and completely pissed off" by people who call others' names and "don't stop when I tell them to stop doing something". Young people also described having been in arguments or fights with other children, which they found difficult to brush off.

Many of the students were unable to think of ways in which they might annoy others "I don't know, you would have to ask other people that", although showed some insight, "I probably do a lot of things actually, but I'm not aware of that because it's the sort of thing I normally do". One student mentioned that he "talks a lot", while another one said that "my swearing might annoy a few religious people at the school but I don't give a crap".

On the whole, parents noted the challenges their children faced with friends and peer relationships. With the exception of one parent, all said their child "doesn't have any friends outside school" and "doesn't really mix with any children his age". Some parents were of the opinion that their children are "just not really that bothered" by whether other children like them ("just finds other children quite irritating so he doesn't have a lot of positive stuff to say about other kids"). One mother mentioned that her son "is better with adults. I think it's just the immaturity [of his peers] he can't cope with".

Most parents emphasised, however, that their children wanted friends but often struggled to negotiate how to make and keep friends. One mother stated: "He used to try really hard to have friends, but he just didn't know how to be around other kids his age and they just felt uncomfortable with him. He'd be quite bossy with them and he wanted them to watch him doing something, he just didn't know how to play with them and now I think he's just got used to it. We've tried, he's had friends here but they don't want to come back".
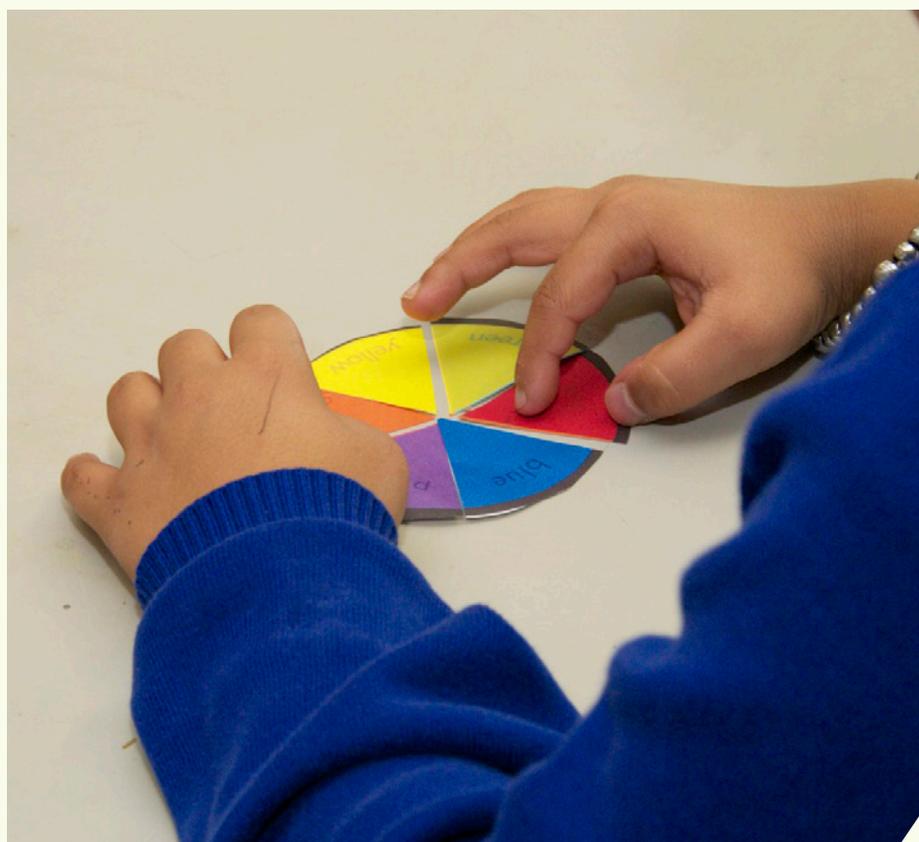
Parents also highlighted that being around other students "like them" was a positive influence on their children's self-perception and social abilities. One mother felt that seeing "other kids in the Hub who are very similar to him has helped him, maybe seeing some of their behaviours is making him think about his behaviour. He's learning by watching other people and their anxieties and how they react". One student told us that understanding others' autism helps him to take conflict less personally: "sometimes you can get like more severe autistic people round the school just saying something a bit rude, but that doesn't really hurt me because it's like I know that they're severely autistic and stuff and if it does really upset me, I just dance it off". He also explained that he tries to understand other people and make "good friends". With some this is "a bit harder", "but that's obviously not them themselves, it's obviously their condition". Teachers painted a mixed picture of children's social interest and ability. While most teachers felt that the students in the Hub "enjoy being sociable" and "feel involved and included", one staff member

> "There's a chance if we can get the student to overcome his anxieties that he'll meet people who will kind of accept him"
>
> **Teacher**

said that one student generally likes to keep to himself and is not very interested in other children or social contact. Another stated that one student would only have social interaction on his terms. Teachers agreed, however, that most students expressed a desire for friendship "but they just don't know how to do it properly". They also said that their students often struggled to respect social boundaries and personal space: "he can sometimes take personal space to the next level. It's not an intimidating thing, it's not sexual, it's just I don't think he's grasped that concept of this is my space, that's yours, and it's not socially acceptable for you to be in my face". They also felt some students struggle with the unpredictability of other people "because he doesn't know what reaction he's gonna get". As a result, "they like to tell people what to do" and "talk at them, rather than with them". Teachers felt that additional anxiety issues can interfere with students' ability to engage socially: "there's a chance if we can get [child] to overcome his anxieties that he'll meet people who will kind of accept him, so I believe he could sustain friendships".

Importantly, being in school was viewed as an opportunity for students to engage socially and have friends. Several parents reported changes in their children's social awareness and abilities since attending the Hub. One mother described a change in her child's effort to fit in: "he said he was quite conscious of his hair. Now that's not something that's normal for [my child]. He wants to fit in I think more than he ever did before". Others said that the Hub gives their

> "I am socialising with other people [in the Hub]. It makes me feel not as lonely and empty"
>
> **Young person**

children an opportunity to show another side of themselves, a side that they were unable to show in mainstream: "[Child] is actually very caring about other people … not all the time because he is autistic, but a lot of the other children in his unit feel similar things to what he feels and struggle with meltdowns and all the rest of it and because he understands that and identifies with that he helps them. It's gone from him being bullied to him being a helper". One child explained that he "quite often" feels lonely at home "since I don't have any friends at home", and that at school, "I am socialising with other people [in the Hub]. It makes me feel not as lonely and empty".

Teachers emphasised that students' engagement with others was "child-led": "most of the children who first come to us choose to be taught on their own. If they expressed an interest or wanted to join another class we would absolutely encourage that and support that. So if they were good at science for instance, and there was another key stage class that was equivalent, then they would go to that science lesson and then come back up to the Hub. But if they can't manage that, they can't".
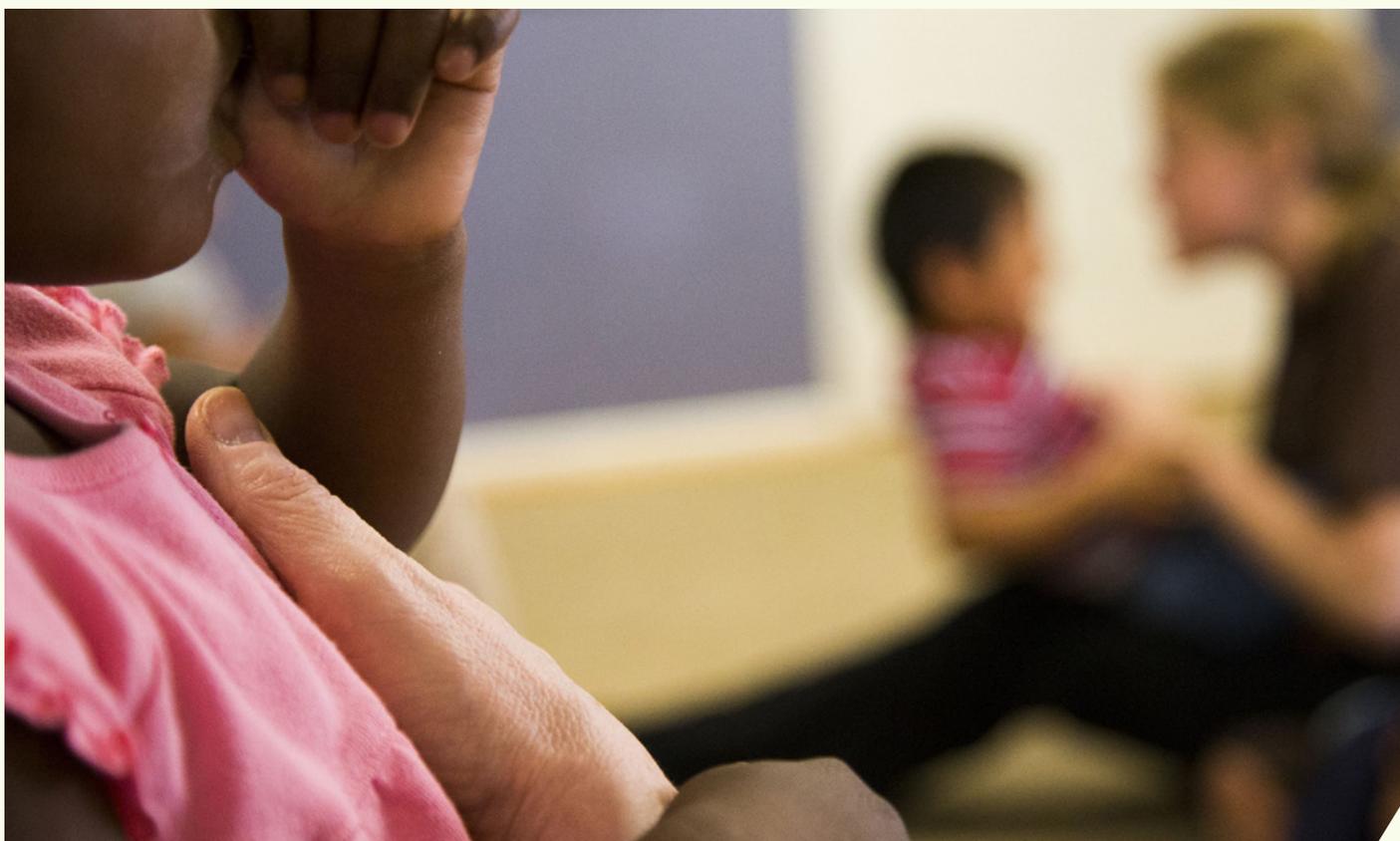
When the students expressed an interest in socialising with others, the teachers facilitated social contact with their peers: "He didn't used to go to the dining room but we would talk about it, because he told me that he wanted some friends, so I was like 'if you just take your food, go to your room you can't really make friends, because you won't really meet anyone' so he was like 'okay shall I try then?' and now he's eating every day in the dining room and he's started to have some friends".

Teachers said they "discretely manage" and observe how relationships develop. If they know that there is potential for conflict, because two children had recently fallen out and not yet resolved their issues, they try to co-ordinate their timetables to avoid them meeting until they have calmed down. Another teacher added: "we'd never ever just keep them apart because it's their choice who they

want to be spending their time with, but obviously it is minimising risk". When conflict did arise, teachers encouraged students to resolve disagreements: "We want to teach them the skills to get on and it's trying to rebuild that. Sometimes we have to sort of encourage [child] to perhaps write and apologise but we usually have to give them space and just keep them apart for a bit and then try and build it up".

While most teachers agreed that the Hub is a valuable opportunity to engage with other students, they also pointed out its limitations in this regard. Being around students with similar difficulties also increases the likelihood of tension between them. One teacher gave an example of the friendship between two students who "really kind of hit it off in a way, they really wanted to be friends", breaking down fairly soon, because "both of them find it difficult for somebody else to tell them they are wrong".

He explained that each child's EDA made it difficult for them to get along: "Neither of them can let something lie, so they really got on for a little bit and then there were fall-outs and then the fall-outs kept happening and I think both of them have now recognised that they can't manage that. You've got to remember you've got two young people with a PDA profile there".

Teachers also felt that the Hub was lacking in an 'appropriate' peer group, particularly for the students with "fairly good social skills". One teacher described his student: "I think he sees those people that will post online and probably make YouTube videos, young people who go to college and are discussing issues, more like the peers he should be with. So I think he'll recognise that the people up here aren't the same as those people. He sees himself as part of here, he does understand that he has autism and that it means certain

things are more difficult for him, but I think he also recognises that he should have, and he would like to have, more social contact with a more mainstream group of people".

Students' academic engagement

Most parents noted the strength of their children's abilities, suggesting that they are "very, very clever and bright", "very articulate", with a "fantastic memory" and "huge general knowledge". Teachers agreed that the students in the Hub are "academically more able than many other children in the rest of the school". Nevertheless – and despite children's encouraging levels of attendance and their positive attitudes to school – getting children to engage in academic work seemed to be more challenging.

Several parents believed that their children's previous refusal to engage in any schoolwork had set them back considerably in terms of their academic achievement. Parents explained that their children previously "wouldn't write anything", and did not complete many tests, because they were "permanently in meltdown". One mother stated: "In mainstream [child] wasn't meeting targets because the staff there hadn't got the time or [child] was running off". Consequently, students' initial academic progress at the Hub had been slow.

Parents highlighted the need to work on children's emotional wellbeing so that they could access learning, suggesting that it takes time to "repair the damage" of their previous experience and "build up the foundations" for learning.

One mother stated: "they've been kind of just working on getting his anxiety levels down rather than the academic side. If they'd pushed the academic too soon I don't think he'd have come to school". One student's teacher stated that she tried bits of school work, but the student just shook his head: "I think he does want to learn, but he's got to feel comfortable first in his environment. So the main aim at the moment is getting interaction from him, because he doesn't speak much!"

Teachers explained that, for some of the students, they need to "accept the fact that at the moment we're not educating them but we're dealing with their emotional well-being and until we get that right we're not going to get learning to take place. They might miss out on things but they will always have that [intellectual] ability and for us the challenge is to stabilise

"The learning that [child] does in the Hub is a different type of learning to the academic [learning] he would be getting in mainstream – it's social, it's daily living skills as well as academic"

Parent

that emotional well-being and reduce that anxiety for them to be able to access learning". Another teacher explained how one student's high self-expectations and awareness of his own difficulties hindered him to engage academically: "he likes to do well, if he fails at anything you've lost him".

Parents made it clear that their children's academic progress is

not their top priority: "He's come on further than we ever thought possible, yeah definitely, so we don't expect anything else. We've never put any expectations on him anyway, we've just hoped and prayed that he would cope and no so we're very pleased with his progress". Another parent stated, "he wasn't doing any learning whereas now in the Hub, the academic learning is bit by bit. During the day he's probably academically learning more in these small bite-size pieces than he would be doing in a full day of academic work within a mainstream".

In addition to difficulties with engaging children academically, both parents and teachers reported that it is "difficult to judge children's progress", because their engagement is so varied and that they can often "do more

than they show". One teacher explained that, although they are duty-bound to measure progress, it was sometimes difficult to apply standard ways of measuring children's ability. One staff member explained that, "each child is making good progress, it's just progress at their own speed". She noted that it is "difficult to say whether they should be progressing faster", as students in the Hub

learn "other skills that would not be taught in a mainstream school".

Indeed, parents highlighted that their children are learning "skills beyond academic knowledge". One mother explained: "I think the learning that he does in the Hub is a different type of learning to the academic [learning] he would be getting in mainstream – it's social, it's daily living skills as well as academic". Parents clearly prioritised children's independence, their ability to "cope and self-regulate" and to "understand their condition", over academic achievements. One mother stated: "we know he is a clever lad; we just needed him socially to be able to cope with other people, to cope with society".

Teachers agreed with parents on the importance of teaching life skills. When asked how the children were getting along at school, one staff member stated: "at their age it's quite difficult to go

by [academic learning] because a lot of them have been out of education for a while, we are teaching more the social skills of life, and the importance of accessing the community, how you deal with other people, how they deal with them demands that naturally in life are gonna be put on them, so teaching them algebra or Shakespeare in the great scheme of things in their life, it's not important, it's the skills behind it we are trying to teach. Simple maths skills, so they can go out to the shops, and cope very well on their own". Another teacher emphasised the importance of community visits for these children to develop life skills: "the community – that's where they will be. They're not going to be with us for very long. These children don't, or can't access clubs or any activities that a lot of kids do. Going out is difficult for them. So they're going to learn much more out there, there are life skills, there are people skills, learning how to use public transport, road safety skills, learning how to deal with the general public. We can't teach them those things in the Hub".

Students told us that they were generally satisfied with their learning and the degree of difficulty of their schoolwork. While some students felt they "don't really learn much", others stated that the level of difficulty is "perfect", and "they make me work hard". None of the students felt their work was too difficult. Some students reported that, "it used to be too easy, but I think this year it's becoming more harder". They felt that sometimes staff "don't really push it that much" but they would "not necessarily" learn more if they were pushed

more. One student stated: "well, some of it is a bit easy. I can't think of anything that is particularly difficult, but I mean everything I am doing now is at the level for the year I am in now, so that seems quite reasonable". One reported: "some of it's too easy, some of it's a little hard, but if it's too hard then I just say, 'bloody hell mate that's too hard' and they'll take it back".

One mother stated: "they're stimulating him enough. He's satisfied. When he first started there he just said, 'they're not teaching me anything, I'm there to learn, mummy, and I'm not learning anything'. I think he was finding he had too many breaks or something, too many tea breaks and things. So I said to [teacher], 'you just need to put it up a notch really, he's getting bored' and [teacher] said 'good we like to start them off quite easy so that they settle in and they feel confident, but if he's feeling bored we'll just step it up'". Teachers reported that it often takes them considerable time to "work out what he's capable of and what he's not". One teacher stated: "There's been a couple of occasions he's looked at it and said it's too easy. But then the next day when you come to it with harder work, he's clueless, he hasn't got a clue. So it's about finding that happy medium".

While the teaching staff appear well equipped to support emotional regulation and moderate the demands placed upon the child, they may sometimes struggle to provide teaching expertise, especially for the older children who require more advanced knowledge of subject areas. Because each student is taught

individually in their room, the majority of lessons, although put together by teachers, are delivered by teaching assistants. Students only get occasional direct input from teachers. One of the students stated: "lessons are brilliant actually, they're great, but the issue I've always had is the staff changes, because since there's not a lot of teachers. [Teacher] is the only teacher in the Hub so he has to sort work for every kid, so he's basically overworked, and that's why he's too busy, he works continuously because he's thinking about other stuff as well. We need a second teacher".

One teacher echoed this student's sentiments: "there is a compromise because the kind of social and environmental support that we've given him, which was a hundred percent necessary, now comes at the expense of that teaching expertise, where if he was in a mainstream school he'd have an RE teacher, a science teacher, an English teacher, a maths teacher, all with real expertise in delivering GCSE. That's just something that we can't offer, as a school, so there is a compromise there".

One mother stated: "The [teacher] is absolutely brilliant, they're very good, but I do sometimes think they could do with more teaching staff. Because for somebody like [my child] who has although he's missed a lot he is very bright and he does have the potential to take GCSEs. I know it's a way off because he's missed so much, but I do think the teachers up there are run ragged in trying to provide all the lesson plans and I can't imagine what they have to go through. I think that's the only thing

that I would say is that they need more qualified teaching staff".

Students' lives outside the Hub

Despite many reports of improvements in students' well-being and behaviour at school, the degree of impact on family life was more varied. Many parents witnessed improvements in their children's behaviour at home, stating their child is "miles better", "just very different to live with" and their behaviours "a lot more manageable". One parent stated: "we see so much more positives at home, because of his increased self-esteem", which included interactions with family members ("now he actually talks to [his sister]"). Parents further reported a change in young people's ability to cope in situations that they would previously have found distressing.

Other parents, however, stated that their life at home can still be very

stressful. One mother reported, that her child "is a different child now, but he still has potential to kick off and he still does sometimes kick off". Another one stated that, while the number of meltdowns her child is experiencing at home decreased, they still very much affect family life: "it was six to eight meltdowns a day … we can still have a couple a day on really, really bad days, but he might only have what two bad days out of the week and might have 4 meltdowns a week instead of 6 to 8 a day, you know". Despite "all the positive things that are happening at school", at home her child "does not self-regulate well at all".

The difference between young people's behaviour at home and in school seems to be partly explained by the nature of challenges they face in the two different contexts. Parents reported that more unexpected issues arise at home (e.g., interactions with siblings) that the children are
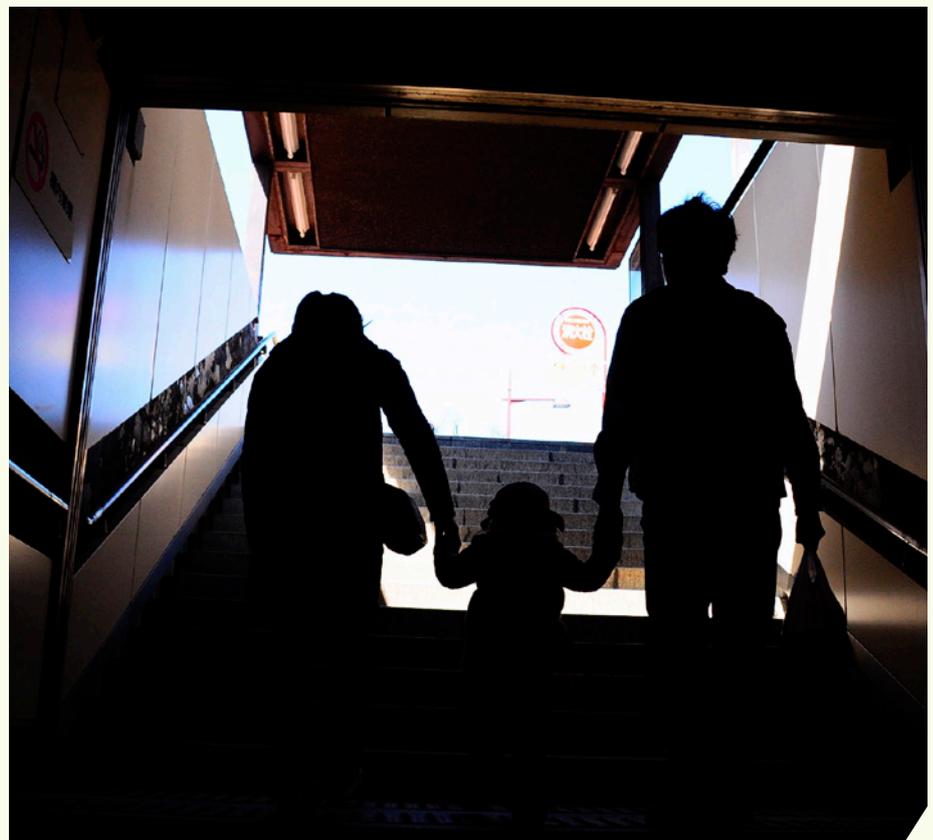
not necessarily confronted with in school: "I think it's just normal sibling stuff … he doesn't hit her anymore, he used to, but they can't be in the same room without arguing. So the relationship is not much better than it was". They also felt that there are times when their children are "more stressed" and "more difficult", which tends to be "when he is away from school", "during holidays". Other parents reported that their children have difficulty dealing with life-events. A favourite teacher leaving or the death of a grandparent can set their children off balance. Another mother mentioned that coming home coincides with her son's medication "wearing off", which can cause challenges: "You've got like my child under medication and you've got my child without medication. It's so different; you can sort of talk to him under medication and try and calm him once he's lost his temper. Without medication it can last a good few hours and

sometimes he still doesn't even proper settle 'til he's gone to sleep".

Teachers explained that addressing home issues is important to help the students to cope in both environments, at home and school. One teacher mentioned that they are often acutely aware of students' behaviours changing (usually worsening) at school, which sometimes suggests that something has occurred outside of school. For example, with one student "we're seeing a slightly different character of [child] than we're used to seeing, I mean he's always had major issues as you know, but the last two weeks is something else. There is something external to school that's bothering him". To resolve these issues, they often involve parents. Nevertheless, they were cautious about how much they should get involved in students' home life: "some of these children have massive issues at home, so when something has

happened, an incident, we need to know so we can prepare ourselves and understand why that child might be off that day, but at the same time, what happens outside, stays outside. The child needs to know that we are not judging him for it. The way he behaves at home does not affect how we treat him".

Discussions with teachers also revealed that the extent to which the Hub can support students' home life is limited. One staff member explained that some issues parents share with the school are beyond their influence: "parents tell me about the issues they are having at home, that they can't cope, don't know what to do with him. But we can't help with that, we don't have the power, time or expertise".

Staff also suggested that, while many parents are keen to hear from staff and accepted their advice, some are more resentful: "it's often a difficult and lengthy process to build relationships with parents. Many have had bad experiences and feel very let down. A lot of work goes into engaging parents and securing their co-operation". While all of the parents in this study emphasised that they valued the Hub's efforts to maintain communication, it is possible that those parents who decided not to take part in this project feel differently.
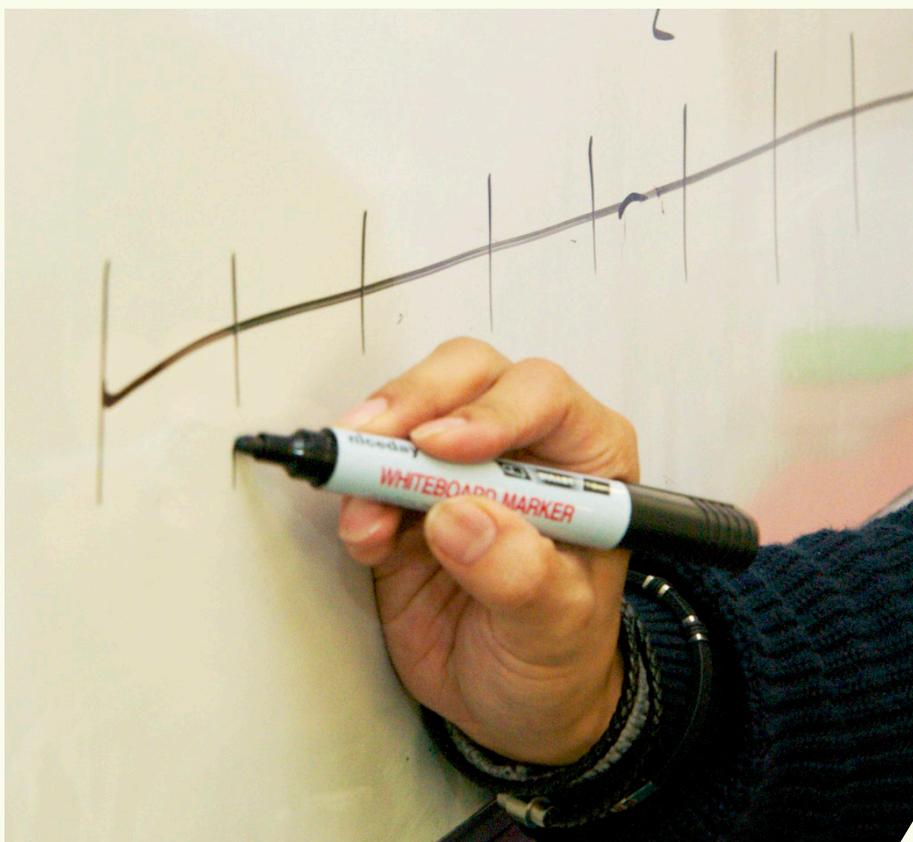
SUMMARY

- Staff in the Hub made extensive efforts to understand and accommodate the individual needs of students to ease the re-integration process, which was much valued by parents. Despite these efforts, the transition process was often not straightforward and had to be conducted very gradually.

- Parents felt that their children had discovered a newfound enthusiasm for school upon transitioning to the Hub. They also felt that the students had increased confidence, reduced anxiety and less-challenging behaviour as a result of attending the Hub.

- Staff made key adjustments to the physical environment, which included providing students with their own classroom. Teachers, parents and students all valued having a secure base from which to learn, socialise, and retreat when necessary.

- Staff fostered strong connections with their students, enabling them to build and maintain trust with the students, which facilitated their readiness to attend school and to regulate their own behaviour.

- Teachers noted that, while their work was rewarding, it could also be emotionally draining.

- Students' sociability varied: some enjoyed having friends in the Hub, while others showed little interest in them. Young people's social skills were a major concern for parents, but they felt that this was being addressed by providing opportunities to engage socially and practice their social skills within a safe environment. The range of potential interaction partners is limited, however, to other children in the Hub, who are also autistic.

- Students still found it difficult to participate in schoolwork and it was unclear whether they were being sufficiently challenged academically. There were also concerns from all involved about whether the staff had the requisite expertise to fulfil the students' academic needs.

4. WHAT WORKS FOR THESE YOUNG PEOPLE

In this chapter, we identify the specific strategies adopted by the Hub staff to re-engage these young people in learning and education and promote reintegration into school life.

We begin by describing some of the issues that staff face when supporting the students in the Hub, followed by the strategies they use to manage these behaviours in the classroom.

Staff make exceptional efforts to promote their well-being by developing strong connections with them and attending to their specific needs. There are extremely difficult choices to be made, however, regarding the appropriate balance between the support and encouragement on the one hand and stretching expectations and aspirations on the other. This comes into especially sharp relief with regard to adequately preparing students for life beyond the Hub as will be explored in this and the next chapter.

According to school staff, the Hub caters for "hard-to-include" autistic children and young people, who often show "extremely challenging behaviour" [45]. As described in the previous chapters, these young people have had often-distressing developmental and educational histories, which has reportedly left them lacking in confidence, extremely anxious and avoidant of others' demands and expectations, presumably creating an additional barrier for them to access education – above and beyond the potential challenges they already face by virtue of being autistic.

Understanding students' needs

Staff told us that they encounter a variety of challenges on a day-to-day basis when working with the students in the Hub. Teachers reported that the students frequently opposed requests or demands, even if it is a request to do a preferred activity. One teacher stated that one student refused to engage in an end-of-term activity that was thought to be a treat: "I knew he wanted to do it, he just couldn't get himself to give in. That's the difference with kids with PDA. It's not that they don't do work, because that's a naughty kid just not wanting to do their work. It is stuff they want to do".

Students were also described as having a strong need for control, which teachers felt outweighed any other motivation. One teacher stated that students will only engage in activities they choose to do and will insist on having control over the lesson times and who the lessons are with: "he really likes mental maths, and he wants to get better at them. But he has said I'm the only member of staff he'll do it with".

Students were also reported to be very "set in their ways". Several teachers explained, "it's very hard to get [students] to move on to something new". One teacher stated that one student "will only do what he thinks is necessary for him. If it's not a topic that he's interested in, you can't cajole him around to do it, it's just a blank wall".

Students' engagement in activities was also reported to vary hugely depending on their "frame of mind" and "what mood you catch him in", which often varied on a day-to-day basis and was highly unpredictable. The teachers found this made it "very, very difficult" to prepare effectively: "if you were to take something in one day he might be 'OK we'll sit down' and do the full worksheet and you'd think 'wow', and then the next day it would be, 'oh I'm not doing that'".

The teachers explained that many of these behaviours were compatible with EDA characteristics. They felt that managing and supporting these children required strategies beyond the usual approaches adopted

for supporting children on the autism spectrum. According to school staff, autistic children with additional EDA characteristics need a less directive and more flexible approach than those without these characteristics. To this end, staff described adopting a range of non-pressurised strategies and child-led approaches to overcome students' defensiveness and increase their engagement with education. Below we describe some of these strategies, as reported by teachers, and how they are applied within the Hub.

Giving students control over their learning

Staff carefully consider the issue of authority within the Hub. Teachers explained that "in the Hub you can't point fingers" or tell students off, because "shouting and saying no will just escalate things, it just doesn't work". One student did not understand the need for rules and authority figures: "they don't serve any practical purpose. It's just, you have to listen to what people, who are above you say. That's the point of it. It's basically, saying, that people with more authority, you have to listen to every single thing they say, no matter how sensible it is. It doesn't make sense".

Instead of instructing students, teachers therefore aimed to give students more responsibility for their own learning. One teacher stated: "What works really well is that they think that we see them as a partner, as an adult, and we speak to them in that sort of language, I think that's key. The relationship that you develop with

a child is absolutely paramount and that they don't see that you're domineering a situation and controlling it somehow. You get them to feel that they have got some control. That's really, really important". Another teacher explained that she "always tried to make that child feel like I don't know any more than them".

Due to students' objection to demands, teachers stated that they try to have as few rules as possible. Where there are rules, these are often communicated in written form so that they are depersonalised and have less negative impact on the student-staff relationship: "the focus of any disagreement [then becomes] the written word, not the person who wrote it". Staff also acknowledged that some "ground rules" are necessary and emphasise that these rules are

purposefully set: "So by introducing the booking system for the Xbox, that has taught them that they can have it, we're not going to deny them but it's just teaching them social skills. You can't always go through life getting everything that you want".

Related to students' need to be in control, teachers reported that they often have difficulty accepting suggestions from others. Instead, "it needs to come from them". Teachers therefore use "positive language and indirect instructions to help them make the right decision". One teacher explained he tends to "play it down" and uses subtle and indirect phrasing to avoid pressuring children towards an activity: "If I realise it's about dinner time and we've still not done anything, I'm like 'c'mon right, let's do speed maths, let's do it. Right,

let's get it out of the way'. And it's done. That type of thing works, because it's all in their control. Whereas if I would increase the pressure like 'c'mon let's do our work, we've not done it, this is bad, the time is running out', it wouldn't work". The same light-hearted approach applies when they need to contradict or correct a child. One teacher stated: "you can't be like 'no don't do that, you've got to do this', it's just all very casual".

An individualised approach

The approaches taken in the Hub are highly individualised and dependent on the student, environment and staff-student relationship: "it's quite a holistic approach really, it's not just one thing. There are many, many factors and strategies that we use rather than 'oh, this is the way we work'. Our whole teaching approach might need to change from child to child, but the key is that they get something out of every day".

To begin, teaching is adapted to each student's needs on a regular basis. One teacher described, "for certain children in the Hub, it's all about what's in it for them. They have to see a reason why they are learning a subject. So if they see purpose and meaning to every situation, then you can perhaps

> "We don't put pressure, there's absolutely no pressure whatsoever"
>
> **Teacher**

> "We negotiate the day with them right from the start so they have some say in what they want to learn"
>
> **Teacher**

encourage that learning to take place. We negotiate the day with them right from the start so they have some say in what they want to learn". For example, one student "loves science, so that's what we do a lot". At the same time, they try to ensure to cover other subjects as best as they can: "he still does his maths and English, history as well and geography, project, cooking. It's more an extra science lesson to keep him going". They also add extracurricular subjects, such as gardening, expressive arts or coding, to students' timetables, if "they expressed an interest and there is a way to accommodate them". The length of students' lessons, or the number of breaks, is also adapted according to students' level of ability and preference. One young person stated: "I made my lessons longer, I want about half an hour to 45 minutes to an hour lessons, because I just need to learn a lot more". Every student has their own planner to visually guide them through the day.

Teachers also embedded students' interests into the curriculum to "comfort children" and to increase their engagement. For example, one teacher stated, "we used to do the history of computer consoles"; another did a lesson on measurement, using the heights of different football players. Teachers also described using students'

interests to get them to practice skills in which they otherwise would not engage: "He does love to do his arts and crafts, and so like come Christmas he'll be decorating all his room up, but it is good for his fine motor skills – it's not just letting him do anything".

Teachers sometimes make tasks optional, if they know they might be challenging for a student. One teacher stated: "if a child doesn't want to do an activity, we offer alternatives, we can change it. We don't put pressure, there's absolutely no pressure whatsoever. Sometimes it will be that you can't do that lesson at all. It depends on their anxiety levels at that particular time. But there are always alternatives you can offer". Another member of staff stated: "we're very non-confrontational, we just have to roll with it sometimes and just see what they want to do".

Staff emphasised that while they try to give students as much influence as possible over their learning, sometimes students "do try and test you" and "try to outsmart the system". Teachers explained that they manage this by maintaining an element of control and integrating some form of learning: "We always try to turn it around, so they are learning something from it". If the students' requests are impossible, teachers try to negotiate an alternative, rather than refusing it

all together. For example, one of the teachers explained that her student "loves his baking, but if you just let him do that, the kitchen is a mess. We've initially pre-weighed ingredients out, but he said 'it's too babyish, you're not giving me anything to do'. So I gave him two recipes, saying 'you have the choice, but you must follow the instructions'. And it absolutely worked. He chose what he wanted to do. You let him feel responsible and in control, but indirectly we've got him there without him realising".

Indeed, giving students choices was another way of allowing them to have control over their learning: "when I prepare a history lesson I always make sure there's alternatives. They choose". Teachers also described how they sometimes encourage students to make choices they initially object to: "If you offer 'that's fine, okay, you don't want to do that, but I'll tell you what you're going to do this instead' and make sure that the alternative is one that you know they really, really don't want to do. So if you give them a choice, so they've still got that control, but

given the choice between the two, they're going to choose the one that you want them to do anyway". Staff emphasised that they would not push a student to do something that they did not want to do. Nevertheless, they do try to offer "it in a different way where they've maybe not clicked that you're still doing the same thing". They tailor topics so that the student feels they are more relevant and engaging. A teacher gave the example of one student who stated very clearly "I don't like graphs, I don't like algebra, and I'm never doing them". So he presented the subject from a different angle to make it appealing and more "realistic" for the student: "I was telling him how algebra can be used like if I knew my mate spent £15 and two tickets cost £6 each, how much did he pay for the popcorn? And he would tell me the answer. So then I would work backwards from that and say "let's call x tickets", you know, that type of thing". He also stated that he writes daily algebra sums on the student's whiteboard: "For us I call it algebra, for him I call it a puzzle, a daily puzzle. I think that's the only way you can get really tough

subjects through to people is just by phrasing it in a non-tough way".

Reducing Anxiety

Reducing children's anxiety levels and maintaining students' calm state were central to many of the strategies: "it's important to understand that any non-compliance is anxiety driven, it's not necessarily about behaviour, it's about anxiety they've got about doing something". Teachers reported that they try to reduce the particular aspect of a task that is causing students' anxiety. For example, several children seem to have trouble with their handwriting and so teachers try to find alternative ways of doing a task, leaving handwriting optional: "If I gave him a worksheet and handed him a pen, I'd be chasing him around the unit with it. I think a lot of it is down to his confidence with his writing skills. So we do a lot of mental math, or I'd actually written it down just so he could visually see the numbers we were looking at. Sometimes he'd take the pen of me and write himself". One teacher felt that it helps to reduce the amount of handwriting that is required "so he gradually gets used to doing it". Another teacher described how whiteboards can be useful because "if there's something wrong, you just wipe it out. There is no permanent record".

Some students can get overwhelmed if presented with too much information at once, and simply refuse to do the activity. For example, for one student the prospect of going shopping seemed "too much", because of the uncertainty in the shop ("too much unknown, he'd just get too anxious"). To support the student, he broke the task down

and prepared the student for each individual step: "we take pictures of the shop, explain how far it is to go, and discussed what [student] would buy before they went out. This approach has enabled the student to engage with the task: once the student "got to know the shop assistant, and knew what responses he would get – you could see the weight lifting off his shoulders".

Teachers further described that they need to be acutely sensitive to the students' needs at any given moment. It was critical to be patient, waiting for students to gain enough confidence before increasing the demand of a task: "just being in school is a good enough achievement some days". One staff member emphasised: "If it's getting to the stage where their anxiety levels are rising it's not worth ruining the whole day for a structured lesson". Another teacher stated: "it's not that we don't want to push him further", but that the student will only engage if it's "very much on his terms". One teacher said there is a fine line between "trying again" and "pushing that child too far": "it's knowing when to push and when not to … sometimes you get it wrong". Teachers also reduced expectations on students and gave them the opportunity to take control for their learning by "pretending they don't

care whether a child participates or not". For example, when wanting a student to start a lesson, one teacher explained: "you've got to subtly do it, like put the work in front of them and go 'I don't care if we do maths, I don't mind'. If I then carry on the conversation, they'll be like 'is it actually time for maths now?' and I'll be like 'I think it is yeah, do you want to do it yeah?' 'yeah let's do it'". Another teacher stated that it can help to involve another teacher to remove the attention and pressure from the student: "If a child didn't want to engage, but I wanted them to do a task, I just do it with another staff member and then [child] sort of finds his way 'well I don't want to miss out, what you talking about', he wants to be

part of it, he wants his element of control". They noted that "if you make [something] a big issue with a child with EDA then you're going to make [it] more of a problem. So you have to go in and speak to them as if you don't care at all. Obviously you do care, but they have to believe that you really don't".

A flexible approach to education

Teachers explained that they use moments creatively to increase students' engagement. One teacher stated: "it's very much 'seize the moment', no matter where you are and what you're doing". She described a scenario, where she did a history lesson

that she had initially prepared for another student, laying on the floor of the corridor, because she saw an opportunity to get her student involved: "he definitely hadn't got history on his planner, but as long as you can get them to learn something – anything then it's a bonus".

This approach was witnessed first-hand by the researcher during one of her visits to the Hub. One of the students initially had English on his planner, but was reluctant to engage. After the student's interest in his English work had completely diminished, the teaching assistant (TA) decided to introduce a change of scenery, asking the student whether he wanted to go

into his room or outside to the playground. The student chose the playground and they ended up sitting on the swings, where they were joined by another TA. As they sat on the swings chatting away, the TA seized the moment and started directing math questions at the student to solve as quickly as he could. This observation demonstrated the challenge of engaging reluctant students and of their varied engagement, as well as staff members' use of creativity and flexibility to introduce learning, while following the students' lead. Staff also reported using spontaneous or unexpected surprises to defuse a situation or to divert students' attention.

> "It's knowing when to push and when not to … sometimes you get it wrong"
> **Teacher**

One teacher explained: "you just do something spur-of-the-moment, something the kids aren't expecting. For example, I took [child] up to see my horses, because he was getting really, really quite hyper, hyperactive if you like, and then he's running round and he'll pull things off walls and he just goes completely crazy. I'll say 'right come on then I've got a treat for you', and straight away you have got him focused on something else".

Use of rewards and motivation

Teachers reported that they tend to avoid using "traditional rewards" in the Hub. One teacher described that students in the Hub "don't buy into" conditional rewards: "they'll take the reward and not do the work. Like they'll just not see it as conditional, they'll be like 'why can't I have it now? You've got it right in front of you'". Rewards were also described as a source of anxiety. One teacher explained that "they find it very difficult to work towards

a reward because the reward is a demand itself. Their anxiety about getting the reward overpowers anything. Very often the rewards are controlled by somebody else, so they struggle with that, which can be quite stressful". Another teacher said: "if I had a chart on the wall with stars or earning rewards with all their names on it would just cause massive, massive anxiety problems. Especially for people like [child] whose self-esteem is rock bottom anyway. He already thinks everybody is better than him at everything".

Instead, rewards are used in "more instantaneous ways" as a "bit of kindness in the very spur of the moment". The researcher observed this method during one of her visits. After attending football club, two boys were returning to the Hub walking across the playground. Instead of heading directly back to the Hub, they ran off and started climbing up a children's climbing frame, despite knowing they needed to be on their way back to the

classrooms. Their teaching staff encouraged them to be careful and to climb down, reminding them that they should be on their way back to the Hub, but without using any threats. When the students failed to react to these requests, they called the teacher from upstairs for support. The teacher said, "you know, students are not allowed to go all the way up there, [the head teacher] wouldn't be happy to see this, better come down, otherwise we might not be allowed to take you out anymore. Choose wisely!" In this way, she passed the blame on to other authorities and at the same time gave the students a choice about their actions. The two boys were initially hesitant, but eventually came down. Once they were back upstairs, one of the teachers came into one student's room and asked: "do you want to go outside to the go-carts?" The student looked surprised and said: "yes, why?" His teacher answered: "you and [other child] have been very good at listening and making the right decisions". In this way, the teacher

used a reward in a spontaneous way to reinforce positive behaviour. Notwithstanding, the students can respond to monetary rewards. For example, to encourage one student to attend school, he would get 20p for walking through the door and for every lesson he completed, to a maximum of £5 per week. In this way, the teacher "built up a 'good-feel' factor about coming into school". Staff also emphasised that such reward systems do not work for every student, however, and can be "tricky", because "they're masters at finding a loophole in the system".

One teacher noted that they were also wary of giving out praise "because of all their difficulties. You might use a loud voice and say 'did anybody see so and so's work yesterday, it was really good, I was really impressed', so indirectly or in passing, 'did you hear so and so playing that music, wasn't it good'. They certainly will process it. They're not bothered about certificates or achievement certificates, because of that feeling of 'oh god, high expectations, and now I've always got to do this'". Teachers were convinced that these approaches are successful, stating "there's always a success story every day … there's always things that surprise you. They do fantastic things all the time". Nonetheless, they admit that they don't always get it right and that there are limitations to how much they can involve students: "you do hit brick walls where you know you're not going to get anywhere" or that "you feel maybe like you're just babysitting all day and you've not really achieved anything productive".

SUMMARY

- School staff described the students in the Hub as being very "set in their ways" and having a strong need for control.

- An authoritarian teaching approach does not work with students in the Hub. Instead, they adopt a range of non-pressurised strategies and child-led approaches to overcome students' defensiveness and get them ready to learn.

- Staff are highly attentive to the individual needs, motivations and interests of students' and are flexible in their response, accommodating them on an often moment-by-moment basis.

- Reducing students' anxiety levels and maintaining their calm state were central to the staff's approach. They therefore placed very little pressure on the students – making few demands and expectations and avoiding the use of explicit rewards – thus allowing the child to feel as if they have some control over the learning process.

5. LIFE BEYOND THE HUB

Thinking about, and preparing for, the future can be difficult for any young person, but particularly for those on the autism spectrum.

In this final substantive chapter, we focus on where students see themselves in life beyond the Hub and examine the substantial task that confronts teachers as they aim to prepare children and young people for the future.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, staff face exceptionally difficult challenges as they attempt to strike a balance between supporting the young people to re-integrate into school and setting them up for their future lives.

Staff told us that when the Hub was initially established its aim was to offer these "hard-to-include" young people the opportunity to re-engage with education, and eventually to re-integrate them into the main Robert Ogden School. However, since the Hub began to receive referrals for more "complex children with bigger behavioural issues, who had been out of school a long time", the primary focus became more about "stabilising their emotional well-being and engaging them in learning". Staff therefore acknowledged that the majority of students are likely to remain in the Hub until they are 16, with some staying until they are 19 "because we still feel we can educate them".

Few of the students currently in the Hub join the other students in the main school for lessons. The few students who do so on a regular basis tend to be older students, joining others from the post-16 provision on outings, such as to the gym, or for specific classes, such as computing and English. Most of the younger children will only engage with other students outside of lessons, for example in the playground, in the dining hall or during enrichment. Even those for whom reintegration was initially an explicit aim, tend to remain in the Hub. One staff member explained that for one of the students, "it was always on the cards that it was never going to be full-time, he was always going to spend a couple of days up here [in the Hub] and a few days down in primary [in the main School]. But I think he probably will end up staying here, until he's at least a bit older … he's got his own room, you know, we are much more lenient up here, he just wouldn't want to go now. But I think he could benefit from it".

When we asked parents whether the Hub was a temporary measure, one mother explained that, "that was always our question to start off with but [child] is doing really well and there's absolutely no plans to move him as we think that would have the opposite effect". In fact, all of the parents were of the view that their children would be in the Hub as long as possible: "as long as he is willing to go and keeps going, it's permanent". They were adamant that "there's not another school that'll be able to meet his needs" and "he would be out of education permanently" or "just wouldn't learn anything", if it were not for the Hub. One explained that "he wouldn't last longer than a week in mainstream; he'd refused to go, he wouldn't cope with it". Another simply said, "I can't see it working anywhere else. I really can't". Teachers generally echoed this view, with one stating, "the idea of actually going into a school [other than the Hub] I think would be a really difficult one".

Some parents were desperate to ensure that their children remained in the Hub. Several were concerned that the local authority, who reviewed each child's placement each year, would be "the main stumbling block" to letting their children stay at the Hub. One mother explained that, "it's almost like a double-edged sword because he's done so well since he's been [in the Hub], the local authority might turn around and say, 'oh well, he can obviously

cope, he can go back into mainstream now'".

The majority of students, however, were clear that they did not want to stay in the Hub until they were 19: "'cause some people stay here 'til they're about 19 but I really don't want to do that unless it's really necessary. I'm going to get out of here as quick as I can". One student said, "I will be in the Hub probably until I am about 16, and then I will move on to college, I hope", while another noted, "my mother wants me to stay here but I want to move on to college". Only one student intimated that he would be transitioning to another school: "I will be doing my GCSEs, so I imagine help with that, but anything other than that, everything else I will be doing will be at another school".

In fact, many students were ambitious about their futures. They described a range of aspirations for their lives after the Hub, including a performer, politics, something to do with animals, engineer, mechanic, scientist, genetics, psychology and law, computer programming, excavation. Although some conceded that they were "not really that good at thinking ahead", many

> "'There's not another school that'll be able to meet his needs"
> **Parent**

were aware that, to achieve their aspirations, they needed to "work hard", "focus on my work, get my [GCSE] exams done and hopefully get into the courses I want to". Others explained that, "I just need to get through my GSCEs … at this point, I would probably pass if I had to do them now. But now it's about getting maybe a little bit above passing". This focus on getting "through their GCSEs" and moving on to college was influenced by school staff as well as other key people in their lives, such as their older siblings: "I don't want to stay here 'til about 19 because I want to start going to college about the same age as my sister".

While some students were quite determined to sit their GCSEs, others noted that this was not their only option: "the majority of people I have seen here that have gone have not done GCSEs, but they still managed to get to college or something". Another student felt that it was not necessary to do GCSEs to get on in life after the Hub: "Not many people here tend to do [GCSEs]. I mean it is a school for the autistic, I am sure that makes sense. Even the more intelligent ones haven't done them and they still do fine".

Students also recognised that they would also need "help in learning" and that the Hub was "quite useful in helping people to get on to whatever it is they want to do afterwards". One student explained, "if I wanted to do like two GCSEs a year until I was 19, if I really wanted to, I could probably do that … it is quite reasonable in

how [the Hub] is managing that". Some students were also aware of potential barriers to achieving their goals: "well, my condition can get in the way sometimes, like I'm able to control quite a lot of things right now, so by the time I leave school, I should be ready". Another suggested that, "people will occasionally get in the way [of his goals] … just distracting me".

Although many young people reported not having spoken to school staff about their aspirations directly, teachers' reports suggested that this was not the case. One teacher commented that students' aspirations for the future are of "varying levels of realism" and that they spend a lot of time helping students to develop realistic expectations and to understand how much work will be required to achieve their aims: "[one student] wants to do music at college, which is a realistic thing, potentially, but he needs to understand that he's only going to be able to do it at GCSE level one rather than at A-level. [Another student] believes he is going to be a theoretical physicist and go to Oxford or Cambridge, which is sadly less realistic. I think the journey we're going to have to take with [this student] for the next few years will be trying to get him to understand the work that has to go into achieving those things and kind of bring down that those expectations to a more realistic level".

One of the challenges in supporting students to reach their aims seems to be their difficulties with engaging in academic work. One

mother stated that her son said he "wants to go to university" but "he wouldn't do any academic work. He hates doing it all. He says that he already knows it". She explained that, "it was difficult to get him to understand that he had to prove to people that he can do stuff. He's only just started really buckling down to some work, because the teachers have spent so much time with him. They have been very good with taking him to Sheffield and showing him the university and we did say to him, 'you know if you are wanting to do things like this when you get older then the

academically because "he wants to do it, we wouldn't make him do it, if he said 'I'm not ready for my SATs', he wouldn't be made to do them at all, but he really wants to do them".

Beyond further education, the students reported everyday life aspirations. While they were keen to get a "decent job", they were aware that they would need to "probably start off with a simple job like some sort of Sainsbury's guy but then earn enough money" to get a better job and "hopefully end up getting enough money to live in my own house".

future, particularly with regard to "what he's going to do when I'm not here". They felt that they "couldn't see that far ahead … it will be a wait and see". One parent explained that, "I am hoping I am gonna be able to drop him off at school and go home; that's my mission at the moment. And I don't look any further than that because I don't know what the future holds".

For those parents that were able to consider their child's future, they wanted their children to be "independent and happy" and to "cope with everyday stuff". Some were cautiously optimistic about their children's futures now that they had re-engaged with school: "It used to really worry me especially when he wasn't at school or when he was at that dreadful mainstream school that didn't understand him and he was getting quite violent and it really, really worried me that he would end up in prison. Now I think he would be fine, I mean he would be able to do a job, although he will always need help I think". Others agreed that their child's placement in the Hub had made their child's future "more rosy": "we always thought [child] would have to live with us, we never thought he would have an independent adult life but I don't know, I do see that there is potential for that now".

> "We never thought he would have an independent adult life but I don't know, I do see that there is potential for that now"
>
> **Parent**

only way you can get into places like college is by doing some work now'. So it's taken up until now, he's certainly not interested in proving anything to you or me; he's doing it for himself".

Teachers also stressed that they would not – and could not – force the students to take on GCSEs, for example, if they did not want to. Rather, the students needed to come to these decisions on their own terms and in their own time: "what's going well for him is that he has made the decision that he wants to pursue GCSEs seriously, and he knows they are boring, but he's willing to go through that because he sees a purpose to it, he's kind of made the decision". Another teacher explained that one student is working hard

One student wanted "just a little house, enough room to fit me and a dog, I suppose, assuming it will not be too much work, again just enough to manage. I am not too bothered about too much stuff, just enough". Another student explained that, "I am sure most people would say they want to do the thing that pays the most and then get the best bloody house ever. Unnecessary. I would rather like to have a reasonable house and a reasonable job, that wasn't particularly difficult, that paid just enough to get along".

While young people's accounts were generally positive about their futures, their parents and teachers' accounts varied considerably. Many parents did not want to think about the prospect of the

Despite many "positive things that are happening at school", some parents were nevertheless worried about the extent to which their children will be able to live independently, "where his mental health will be" and what kind of job he will do "because he can't socialise". Some were worried that their child's oppositional nature

> "He's in his little bubble here when he's in school because it's so comfortable … when he does leave us I do worry about that. I think that's the same for them all"
>
> **Teacher**

would get in the way of them getting a job or living on their own: "if he don't want to do something he's not willing, then that's it, final; it's not easy to persuade [child] to do something he really doesn't want to do". Indeed, one teacher noted when speaking about one child who "is not very good when he's not in control" that "life does put demands on you, you do have consequences for your actions in the real world". She further explained that, "he's in his little bubble here when he's in school because it's so comfortable … when he does leave us I do worry about that. I think that's the same for them all".

Teachers were ambitious for the students but were also more pragmatic about what they might achieve in their future lives. For some students, teachers felt that their futures were "amazingly bright" and that they were "capable of all sorts of things". Others, they felt, would need a very gradual transition to college because "you can't just throw him in there because his anxieties would go back through the roof again and you'd be starting back from ground zero". Others still felt that some of the students would not be able to live independently or have a job outside of home: "I think he's probably got as far as he's going to get". These

perspectives differ markedly from those of the young people themselves. One mother stated: "he feels he's not as bad in terms of the condition as other children are. He thinks other children have far worse problems than him. I get the impression from school that that's not the case, that he really does need to be there and you know he just doesn't appreciate all the difficulties that he has".

Parents and teachers were also well aware that many of their children would need continual support as they moved on from the Hub. One mother was concerned about "how much support he'll need, going off the amount and the level of support he needs here", while another felt that "he'll always need that base to go back to where he felt calm". One teacher also described how one student is always "going to have big social anxiety so I think however he organises his life he's gonna need probably a lot of time somewhere quiet with very limited social contact, because I think he'll need that to regulate himself". One parent was also troubled by the possibility that her child "will not be able to catch up on all that he's missed … I just think there's too much work to be done with [child]".

Both parents and teachers were also worried about how others

– who the child would come across at work, college or in the community – would fail to appreciate the unique needs of the student. One parent felt that labels could help – or hinder – her child in the future: "[child] doesn't actually have a diagnosis of PDA, he's only got a diagnosis of his Asperger's and, which is why his last school didn't work, there's a big difference with how you approach someone with Asperger's and how you approach someone with PDA … so the future worries me because unless somebody says, 'look you're going to have to approach this from a different angle', a part of me feels that he needs the diagnosis of PDA for people to understand or to take him seriously".

Teachers highlighted how "other people don't understand him as much as we've understood him throughout the years". One teacher explained that, "that's going to be the challenging transition for them, because we are so aware of their needs and possible triggers that could make a situation worse and more tolerant than even some staff in [Robert Ogden] school … if you don't understand the child, I think

> "He thinks other children have far worse problems than him…he just doesn't appreciate all the difficulties that he has"
>
> **Parent**

> "He's got people around him who understand him, whereas when he's not here, the rest of it's all up in the air"
>
> **Teacher**

that's where your difficulty can lie". Another teacher also noted that the challenges will occur when "the people don't see the bigger picture, they see the person in front of them and they don't see the disability which is very, very hidden because the autism is a little bit hidden". They also noted the challenges of transitioning from the Hub, which has been their "safety blanket": "he's got people around him who understand him, whereas when he's not here, the rest of it's all up in the air".

Young people's future social lives

Although social and communication skills were reported as a key priority for parents, very few talked about the future social lives of their children. The students themselves also did not mention friends or intimate relationships with others. One teacher felt that they were potentially not providing enough social opportunities for some of the students now to prepare them for the future: "I think I do need to be looking for opportunities for him to get to some kind of social contact with people around his age group over the next year, just so he's getting used to that atmosphere … I think that will kind of help to lower his anxieties when he's actually more involved in that".

One staff member expressed concern that one student will lose the few social contacts with other students he has managed to build up once they leave school: "I've tried to encourage him and [another student from post-16] to exchange numbers, because there's some form of [bond], maybe they can build on that. [The post-16 student] leaves at the end of the year, and he is not going to see him anymore after that, so if they at least exchange numbers there's a likelihood they might continue that friendship on beyond school, which would be great. It would just be nice for them to have that peer to go out with, not just being sat at home, because once they leave they wouldn't be able to come to school to see people".

Another teacher highlighted the challenges some of the students will face developing relationships with those who support them: "He's got a really, really close bond with [staff member]. That's obviously a good thing, but when he leaves school and [staff member]'s not there as that figure for him to lean on, that's gonna be another obstacle that he will need to get around. I'm in no doubt he will get around it, but it's just change, [child]'s not great with big change".

SUMMARY

- Despite the apparent success of re-integrating these young people back into education, staff and parents felt that most students would spend the majority of their schooling, at least until they are 16, in the Hub.

- Students were keen to leave the Hub earlier than their parents and teachers felt would be best and had aspirations to go on to further education and/or get a job.

- Students' aspirations were not necessarily matched by those of their parents and teachers, who instead had often-serious concerns about how well the young people would get on in life, particularly in terms of their independence and emotional well-being.

- Parents felt that thinking about their children's future lives was "scary" and some parents and teachers were worried how the students would cope in a world that "does put demands on you". They agreed that most students would need ongoing support as adults.

- Teachers highlighted that their hidden disabilities might be a considerable challenge in eliciting people's understanding and support when they left the Hub.

6. CONCLUSION

Despite their often-harrowing previous school placements, the students who attend the Hub describe themselves as happy. They feel secure, understood and accepted by those who support them. These outcomes are testament to the impressive efforts made by the staff in the Hub. The work that remains, however, is to ensure that these students can also succeed in later life and that more students across the country are able to experience the kind of high quality, caring educational experience that those at the Hub enjoy.

Children and young people on the autism spectrum are already at risk of poor outcomes in adulthood, including unemployment and poor mental health, by virtue of being autistic [49,50]. This report focused on some of the most vulnerable autistic children and young people – those previously excluded from education.

Unfortunately, being permanently excluded from school is an all-too-common occurrence for students with special educational needs (SEN) but especially so for those on the autism spectrum. Despite this knowledge, there is disappointingly little research seeking to understand the views and experiences of these students and families, particularly with regards to getting them back into school life. There is also no research examining the strategies and methods used by teachers and school staff to support them in doing so.

This study therefore sought to understand the perspectives and experiences of young people, their parents and their teachers on precisely these issues. We spent 6 months speaking to students attending the NAS Robert Ogden School's Inclusive Learning Hub. We also elicited the views of their parents and the teachers who support them to gain a fuller picture of their previous experiences of exclusion, their current experience of education within the Hub and their aspirations for the future.

Overall, our findings suggest that, despite often-harrowing experiences in their previous schools, the students participating in our research are happy in the Hub. They feel safe and secure, supported by their teachers and positive about their futures, albeit sometimes without explicit awareness of the continued challenges they may face. In many cases, the responses from both parents and children to their experience in the Hub were not only encouraging but also deeply moving.

This is a testament to the design of the Hub, to the efforts of those who work there and also often to the dedication of the children and their parents to making the experience work.

There were, however, three other key messages that emerged from our work with students, parents and teachers.

1. Promoting inclusion for autistic children and young people

Since the Warnock Report [51], the aim of education policy has been to include children – including children on the autism spectrum – within mainstream provision at the child's local neighbourhood school [52]. Indeed, section 33 of the Children and Families Act 2014 [6] places a duty on the local authority to ensure that a child or young person with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan is educated in a mainstream setting. The parents and young people in our study reported that inclusion simply did not work in their previous schools; children "hated it", often refused to go to school and increasingly showed behaviour that challenged teachers and school staff, which ultimately led to extreme anxiety, self-harm, emotional and physical abuse, and disengagement from education.

Although we have only heard the views and perspectives of the children and parents involved, it is nonetheless clear that the

system seems to have failed these children – a system that is meant to provide the right to education no matter who they are, regardless of race, gender or disability [53] and to ensure that some of the most vulnerable young people are in safe, secure, and inclusive learning environments has clearly not done so.

The children and young people in the Hub and thousands more like them deserve to enjoy stable, trusting, nurturing relationships in school environments far beyond the Hub.

It should not be beyond educational authorities, teachers and school staff to create greater opportunities for autistic children well before they reach a facility like the Hub. That kind of education would be attentive to the unique needs of individual children, would echo the accepting ethos of teachers in the Hub, grounded in an awareness of the potential barriers to inclusion for autistic children and young people and the strategies to overcome them, thus preventing subsequent exclusion. Most crucially of all, mainstream school environments should be aspiring to foster relationships between staff, parents and children and to promote the mental health and general well-

being of these children and young people within the education system – two key features of good practice in autism education [4].

2. The Hub as a stepping-stone

The Hub was initially created to be a stepping-stone to re-integrating this particularly vulnerable group of autistic children and young people into education but seems now to be a permanent solution. Perhaps because of the continual failures of schooling beyond the Hub for the children affected it appears to have largely lost that focus.

This is a shame for at least some of the individual children concerned, who will always associate mainstream schooling with the traumatic experiences of their past when they have the right to have a different experience. But it also may hinder the Hub reaching more children and young people, who have unfortunately endured similarly negative schooling experiences. Provisions like the Hub should seek to have a bigger impact, reaching more children, by encouraging young people and their parents to move on as soon as possible.

The Hub's relative lack of focus on academic learning is one key reason to re-establish it as a

stepping-stone for these children and young people. In part, this seems to be a result of the Hub taking on many responsibilities that are beyond the support educational settings normally provide. There seems to be a need to focus intensively on their mental and emotional well-being, repairing the unfortunate damage often-done by their previous schooling experiences. This should be done in collaboration with outside agencies, especially mental health services (CAMHS), who are able to provide ongoing support for young people and families as they gradually re-integrate into an educational setting that is more appropriately set-up for academic learning. Educational provisions like the Hub should also seek to act as a centre of excellence in autism education practice, working together with mainstream and specialist schools across the region to support this particular group of children and young

"The relationship that you develop with a child is absolutely paramount"

Teacher

people with additional mental health issues and behaviour that challenges to receive the inclusive education that they deserve.

3. Preparing young people for their futures

Relatedly, the most difficult task facing Hub staff was clearly striking a balance between rebuilding the confidence and self-esteem of the children in their care and making them aware of the difficulties ahead so as to help prepare them for adult life. In doing so, they must foster resilience in these young people – promoting self-awareness, self-regulation and high aspirations – as well as their immediate sense of well-being.

This is of critical import. It is well known that the life chances and opportunities for autistic people are limited. As they enter adulthood, they are less likely to have a well-paying job than non-autistic people, many have problems in their social lives, with a limited number of friends outside their immediate

family, and many also continue to struggle with their health and their material well-being [49,50].

This is far from a straightforward task. As we have seen, while these young people are generally calm and more confident as a result of the extensive efforts of Hub staff, they have nevertheless become accustomed to the safe and secure environment afforded by the Hub, including an individual classroom and dedicated, flexible staff who attend to their specific needs and clearly care deeply about their well-being. At present, it is unknown whether the strategies and approaches adopted by the Hub are key for ensuring success in post-Hub settings; a longitudinal study in which the same young people are seen again at a later time point would be necessary to examine their impact more directly.

Nevertheless, the often-extreme accommodations made by staff, including the individual classroom, the few rules and demands, are

unlikely to be matched in the world outside the Hub. More could be done to ensure that children and young people – and their parents – are well-equipped for managing the obstacles they are likely to face in the remainder of their school career and their longer-term futures.

These three conclusions, of course, also point to some of the remarkable successes of the Hub. Our findings show that, despite their often-harrowing previous school placements, the students who attend the Hub describe themselves as happy; they feel safe, secure, and understood and accepted by those who support them. These outcomes are testament to the impressive efforts made by the staff in the Hub, often in very testing circumstances. The work that remains, however, is to ensure that these students are capable also of succeeding in later life and that more students across the country are able to experience the kind of high quality, caring educational experience that those at the Hub enjoy.

About us

The UCL Institute of Education, University College London, is the world's leading centre for education and related social science. It houses the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE: crae.ioe.ac.uk), a unique centre focused on helping to enhance the lives of autistic people and their families through (1) conducting groundbreaking scientific and applied research to enhance knowledge about interventions, education and outcomes for autistic children, young people and adults and (2) working with professionals on the ground and with those directly impacted by autism to promote awareness, and acceptance, of autism.

Citation

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