Instrumentality of Communication between Home and School in the Educational Development of Children with Autism

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to determine if communication between the home and school environment impacts on the academic development of a child with autism. Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. The experiences and perceptions of four parents of children with autism who attend secondary school provided a rich dataset. A deductive approach to data analysis identified four themes, each with two subthemes: (1) Parent Objective; (2) School Objective; (3) Additional Challenges; and (4) Experiences. The first three themes supported current literature but additional findings indicate that existing laws and policies are not being implemented. There was no literature on the fourth theme of Experiences and this may be of particular interest for future research. This study found that communication is essential for the child with autism to progress at school, however parents focus more on the progression of social skills rather than progression of academics.

Introduction

In 1984 Tompkins defined communication as the study of sending and receiving messages that create and maintain a system of consciously coordinated activities of two or more persons, a system that underscores the dynamic and interactive importance of effective communication. This research will determine if there is communication between home and school and if so, does this communication have an effect of the educational development of autistic children. Autism was first systemically described by Leo Kanner in the U.S.A in 1943, while a remarkably similar account written by Hans Asperger in Austria, appeared in 1944. Autism is a behavioural diagnosis defined by a triad of impaired communication, social skills and behavioural flexibility expressed through restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours. Therefore, children with autism often display marked impairments in social interaction and communication. The term "executive dysfunction" has been used to describe impairment in frontal lobe mediated behaviour where the person with autism has trouble locating where activities and information fit into the big picture. This results in difficulty in organising and sequencing activities, impulse control, working memory and mental flexibility (Happé and Frith, 2006). These impairments affect almost every aspect of the child's functioning. People with autism have been described as having a spot light focus as opposed to the gestalt of big picture thinking. They will benefit from participating in valued social roles making it more likely that they will have a good quality of life and less marginalisation. Impaired social skills found in those with autism are underpinned by impaired theory of mind. Theory of mind is the ability to put oneself in another's shoes, which supports an understanding of empathy and is an essential element of social communication (Howlin, 2004; Senju, 2012). For some on the spectrum, there is no inclination to become socially involved. However for those who do wish to engage socially, impaired theory of mind often results in the constant tripping over of social conventions and

being mystified by the unwritten rules and etiquette of social contact (Wing, 1996).

Autism affects about 1% of children and young people. The natural history of the autism is usually enduring and has serious effects of development and lifetime costs including health, education, social care, family out-of-pocket expenses and productivity losses. An alarming aspect of autism for school systems has been the dramatic and continued increase in prevalence rates. In 1992, 5,415 students with autism in the U.S were declared eligible for IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) services (U.S Department of Education, 1995), representing less than one percent of all students with disabilities. In 2007, this number reached a quarter of a million (224,594) and accounted for 3.69% of all students with disabilities. This represents an increase of 4,047% since the category was first established. Although autism can occur in individuals of all levels of ability, the majority (around 70%-75%) have some associated learning disabilities. It is estimated that almost half of all children with autism fail to develop functional speech (Lord & Rutter, 1994) and amongst those with a good expressive vocabulary there are persisting and pervasive impairments in the communicative use of language and in understanding complex or abstract concepts. The continued increase of students identified with autism has placed significant stressors on public schools and the educators that serve them.

Inclusive education with accommodations and supports for students progressing in the academic curriculum (Harrower, & Koegel, 1999) is now perceived in modern society to be the 'norm'. Much research has been carried out in the area of how communication affects people with autism, from the early integration of children using signing to the modern day discrete trial teaching where children are provided with resource hours, Teaching Assistants and Special Needs Assistants. At a time when the stakes are high to maximise student learning, enhance academic achievement, and prepare students to enter post-secondary educational opportunities or the work force, innovative approaches to addressing the

academic and non-academic needs of students are increasingly important (Adelmen & Taylor, 1999; 2000; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2008: Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, Iachini, Bean et al., 2010; Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, Iachini, Flaspholer, et al., 2010; Weist, 1999). As both academic and non-academic barriers persist in influencing student success at school, both the school and their surrounding communities will have to continue developing innovative solutions to meet these ever-changing needs. The challenges of this growing population have promoted an increased focus by educators and families on issues related to effective instruction and appropriate social and behavioural supports for students with autism within school and community settings. Increasingly, students with exceptionalities are being served in general education class rooms but need support to develop the self-regulatory skills demonstrated by successful learners in these settings (Konrad, Walker, Fowler, Test, & Wood, 2008; Ness & Middleton, 2012; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Scott et al., 2012). Self-management skills taught in isolation often fail to generalise or transfer to the situations where students need to apply them (Gresham & Elliott, 2014). To ensure consistency between setting for students who are challenged by a lack of self-regulatory behaviours, collaboration and clear communication among professionals providing classroom and supplemental instruction become even more critical. Communication deficit is central to autism and no amount of therapy will overcome this entirely. However, there has been limited research carried out to discover how communication between the parents of a child with autism and the attending school of the child impacts, if at all, on the academic progression of the autistic child. Therefore this study will attempt to address this shortfall and add to an area of research that has been overlooked.

Educational Impact for ASD Students

Special education enrolment for children with autism in the United States has quadrupled

since 2000 (Scull & Winkler, 2011). Schools struggle to provide adequate programming to these students. Allowing children to avoid socially demanding situations by letting them spend time in the library or carrying out other tasks, or providing them with a set place in which to sit, may have much greater impact than a complex behaviour programme. If obsessional skills and interests are appropriately encouraged and developed they can play a crucial role in later social and educational integration (Kanner, 1973). It is recognised that provision of appropriately structured educational programmes is one of the most important aspects of successful treatment of autism (Rutter & Bartak, 1973; Schopler, Brehm, Kinsbourne, & Reichler 1971). Implementation fidelity is the degree to which a treatment is implemented as prescribed, or the level of adherence to the specific procedures of the intervention (Gresham, 1989; Rabin, Brownson, Haire-Joshu, Kreuter & Weaver, 2008; Schoenwald et al., 2011). Procedural fidelity is the degree to which the provider uses procedures required to execute the treatment as intended. Examination of implementation fidelity is important to advance the understanding of how evidence based interventions are being applied in schools. This research will provide an opportunity for parents to share their experience of these interventions in school and discover if they have impacted in the home environment.

To Assist or Not To Assist

A study of students with SEN (special education needs) were tracked for a full school week with individualised case studies put together comprising of interviews with teachers, TAs (Teaching Assistants), SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Coordinators) and parents/carers. These pupils spent less time in lessons with teachers and peers and were three times more likely to interact with TAs than teachers. This predominantly one-to-one interaction with TAs was often at the expense of interactions, with teachers and peers.

Support provided by TAs was well intentioned, but it eclipsed focused input from teachers. For pupils with SEN, the common practice of specifying a set number of hours for TA support tended to get in the way of thinking through appropriate approaches for pupils with learning difficulties. This can cause a direct conflict with parents/guardians as the belief of "More TA hours = more academic and social progress," is strong. Research evidence suggests that parents and schools ought to be more concerned with the quality of support for pupils with learning difficulties rather than with the quantity. It may be more productive where appropriate, to steer away from TA-led provision towards more inclusive, teacher led practices. This finding was solidified by the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff who found that pupils receiving the most TA support made less progress then similar pupils receiving little or no TA support, even after controlling for factors such as prior SEN status.

Pearpoint et al (1996) reflect upon the fact that frequent and close proximity are not always sufficient for adolescents to feel connected to each other and children with special needs find it difficult to build networks of friends. EPs (Educational Psychologists) should be proactive in promoting the idea that mainstream classmates be informed about the nature of autism. Ideally, this would be best completed as early as possible after the autistic child starts school. Children of all ages would benefit from information about an autistic classmate with the content adapted for the children's age. The expectation that an academically able child with autism can cope in mainstream is not always fulfilled. Features of the condition can interfere with learning (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Parents often advocate strongly for the right to include their child in the general education classroom, but some worry their child will be neglected without the support of a paraprofessional. Teachers and parents continue to consider paraprofessionals an essential support for students with a range of disabilities. There is also evidence that it is the continuity of support and communication, rather than the amount, which facilitates positive transitions for children with SEN (Maras & Averling,

2006). This study allows the researcher to expand on parent's beliefs regarding SNAs (Special Needs Assistants). Despite the belief that paraprofessionals are essential, Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2012) also reported little or no positive outcomes for students working with paraprofessionals. Giangreco (2010a, 2010b; Giangreco, Suter, & Hurley, 2011) found that students with disabilities felt stigmatised and rejected by their peers and they faced inadequate instruction when working with paraprofessionals. However, it is important to note that paraprofessionals hold a significant place in the education of students with disabilities. They assist students in maintaining and generalising learned skills, organise the environment for seamless teaching and protect teacher's valuable time. When paraprofessionals teach students independence and self-advocacy skills, they create more time for instruction.

Teaching Strategies for the Autistic Student

In K-12 schooling, students are supported with an IEP (Individual Education Program/Plan) that provides a comprehensive structure for support services and accommodation. These are determined collaboratively among the student, parents, school counsellor, teacher, and other school personnel that relieve the student from negotiating educational services or academic accommodations. Discrete trial teaching involves the presentation of highly structured learning opportunities designed to maximise the probability of a successful response, which is then reinforced. Traditional students also participate concurrently in a seminar to enhance their understanding of young adults with autism. This encourages school connectedness which can be defined as the belief held by students that their school, peers and teachers accept them and support their academic and personal needs (Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009: Goodenow, 1993). Howlin (1998) stated that no single mode of treatment is ever likely to be effective for all children and all families. Instead, interventions need to be

adapted to individuals and the value of approaches that involve a functional analysis of problems explored. A key to accommodating students with autism is the provision of social and behavioural programming to develop meaningful participation with neurotypical peers. Intervention components include peer training and increased social interaction between students with autism and their peers across academic and social contexts. This is beneficial in progressing communication skills. Increased social interactions can lead to the generalisation of social skills. A trend where social situations become more naturally reinforcing for students with autism, with an improvement in general responsiveness on the part of peers to students with disabilities would be a realistic goal. This study provides an opportunity for parents to expand on their child's inclusion and school connectedness.

Parental Inclusion

It is apparent that development of effective, simple communication strategies from early childhood help reduce or avoid disruptive behaviours which may otherwise become the child's principle means of controlling his or her environment. EPs might debate the evidence with parents and encourage them to consider and articulate meaningful outcomes and indicators, such as progression to independent working or tolerating uncertainty and failure when presented with learning challenges. Parents should be encouraged to discuss their perception of the function of education for their child and satisfaction with communication networks with the attending school and their child's EP. Although previous research has demonstrated the importance of acknowledging parental expertise and incorporating parents' own strategies into school based practice (e.g. Feinberg & Vacca, 2000; Starr et al., 2001), there is evidence that parents are often left out of educational decision making (Turnbull et al., 2006) and there has been relatively little focus on parental experiences. This study attempts to address this issue. Parents believe that poor communication often stems from a

lack of understanding autism. They deem good communication to have occurred when understanding, preparation and acceptance has been displayed. Parents require easy communication with the school and to feel that their concerns are being heard. Ballan et al's (2006) research suggested that communication is essential for continuity of support. Maras and Averling (2006) held that continuity of support and communication, specifically facilitates positive transition. Tobin et al. (2012), indicates that preparation, communication and coping skills were core to parents' experiences of their children's transition to mainstream secondary school. To assist the best outcomes for young people with autism, collaborative working and clear communication within the family unit and between family and schools is imperative. Collecting opinions from parents is important for the purpose of developing appropriate and effective support systems for both the child and the wider family unit across a range of settings. Understanding of parental experience has been put forward as being fundamental to helping a child (King et al., 1999). Obtaining a holistic view of the child's needs is imperative to providing effective interventions by psychologists. This involves talking to a range of people including parents who hold vital information about their child and how they are coping with school life (Dillon & Underwood, 2012) while not forgetting to talk to the children themselves (Dillon et al., 2014). This triangulation of knowledge is key to ensuring education professionals offer appropriate support. Given the well-being benefits of the psychological coping strategies, parents and their child could potentially benefit from educational and psychological interventions delivered by EPs to promote successful coping. Parents, schools and EPs need to work together to teach adolescents with autism strategies for emotional regulation and when possible, interpret social interactions. Parents are best placed to provide information of idiosyncratic behaviours and successful strategies, therefore open communication should be encouraged. Some researchers have shifted the focus of attention onto non-autistic peers, systematically teaching

them to play and interact more effectively with the child with autism (Lord, 1995a; Wolfberg & Schuler, 1993). This study is therefore important as it has the potential to add to the growing evidence of parental knowledge and skillset for the integration of students with autism.

Family Influence

Researchers have consistently found development to be strongly influenced by the home environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Renzaho, Mellor, McCabe, & Powell, 2013; Vickers, 1994: Wigfield et al., 2006). Families play a crucial role in fostering early development and promoting independence across the life span of their children. Parents can reinforce developmental, academic and language skills because they are knowledgeable about their children's current skill levels and are with them across a variety of contexts (Park, Alber-Morgan, & Fleming, 2011). Parental involvement in the education of their children with disabilities is the cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2006), and the U.S law mandates that schools and parents collaborate to develop IEPs. It is essential for practitioners and parents to work together to maximize each other's capacity to support children's development (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak & Shogren, 2011). Pletcher and Younggren (2011) identified the development of rapport between family members and their service providers as an influential and important characteristic in the delivery of family service. Communication with the family should acknowledge their expertise in relation to their child, focus on their strengths and respect their priorities (Turnbull et. al., 2011). In ABA (applied behaviour analysis), parent participation is crucial to help ensure learned behaviours generalise across environments – e.g. home and school. This research will present an opportunity for parents to expand on this theory. Identifying effective interventions to use with children who have autism can be challenging for educators

and parents alike. According to Ivey, Ivey, Zalaquett, and Quirk (2011), clear communication requires seven basic skills: listening, asking open-ended questions, asking closed questions, clarifying, paraphrasing, acknowledging, and providing reflective feedback. Differences over time confirmed that students who received intervention over multiple years would also show more generalisation. Effective early treatment that alters the long-term course of autism would therefore have greater potential benefits for individuals, families, and society. The aim is to gradually get students to do things independently. A break through study published in October 2016 used video-aided intervention in PACT (Parent-mediated social communication therapy) with the parent rather than with the child, aiming to optimise developmentally relevant parent interactive behaviours, which in theory will enhance parent-child dyadic interaction consequently improving child communication and more general autism symptoms. The logic of this treatment procedure is that the dyadic interaction is the proximal target of the intervention and the delivery mechanism by which the child gains benefit. The finding of this study supports the potential long-term effects and value of early parent-mediated interventions for autism. It provides evidence that sustained changes in autism symptoms can be possible after early intervention, something that has previously been regarded as difficult to achieve. PACT is designed to work with parents to reduce autism symptoms through optimising naturalistic parent-child social communication in the home setting. The effects of parent interaction style were responsible for the positive child changes during the treatment period.

Teaching Strategies

Smith, Donahoe and Davis (2000), suggested a possible disconnect between school administration and teaching staff when mandating the use of specific teaching programs. To educate a child with autism, numerous methods may be applied which are not common for a

neurotypical student. Aubyn et al (2014) mentioned various different methods of teaching such as ABA, Discrete Trial Teaching and Pivotal Response Training and the implementation of these strategies to children with autism. While community settings were mentioned, no parental involvement was apparent in their approach. Mount and Dillon, (2014) concluded in their study that to assist the best outcomes for young people with autism, collaborative working and clear communication within the family unit and between family, schools and support services is imperative. To achieve concurrent mastery of several different intervention techniques and to incorporate the development of appropriate student goals, teachers may need a year or more of full-time supervised practicum training. Providers who achieve mastery of intervention strategies are likely to lose those skills or the motivation to use those skills over breaks from teaching, thus, ongoing consultation well past the initial didactic training is likely needed to maintain mastery (Stahmer & Rieth, 2014). Tobin et al, 2012 suggests further investigation of Autism Units within schools, highlighting evidence that it is continuity of support and communication, rather than the amount which facilitates positive transition for children with SEN (Maras & Averling, 2006). Webster (2014) partly addressed this in his study when he indicated that due to reforms to the SEN System in England, key implications for educational psychologists are drawn out, with particular reference to their role in parent liaison during the statutory process. A logical deduction would indicate that continual and continuous meetings between home and school would be of benefit to the child with autism. This qualitative study aims to investigate inclusiveness of the home environment from the school environment and how this impacts the child with autism in academia?

Methodology

Participants

This study yielded a total of six participants who were recruited through two closed Facebook Pages called LOFFA (Laois Offaly Family's for Autism) and Autism Mamaí. The post informed members about a study being conducted in relation to communication between the home and school environment. The requirement for volunteers to participate were having a child who was currently attending secondary school and had a diagnoses of autism. Parents were asked to respond with their name in the comment section if they were willing to participate. From these posts, twenty-three parents commented, three members from LOFFA and twenty members from Autism Mamaí. All respondents were Mothers. A private message via Facebook with more information (See Appendix I) about the study was sent to these volunteers. Volunteers were informed that they would be provided with the findings of this study on completion of the research if they wished to have it. Following from this information eleven volunteers were still interested in participating. Participants were randomly selected by their name being wrote down on a blank square of paper measuring 9cm X 9cm. These papers were divided into two groups, one from LOFFA and one from Autism Mamaí. The papers in their separate groups were then placed with names face down on a flat surface. An independent observer choose two pieces of paper from the LOFFA group and four pieces of paper from the Autism Mamaí group. These selected participants were then sent a message via Facebook inviting them to interview (See Appendix II). Volunteers who had not been selected were also sent a message (See Appendix III) thanking them for their time and asking their permission to retain the information already provided in case of future research. Four volunteers granted permission and one volunteer asked for her information to be deleted.

A pilot interview was conducted with two volunteers from the LOFFA group. These volunteers were selected for pilot as one was known to the author and the other lived in the same locality as the author. This decision was made to ensure that data would not be unintentionally skewed and to enable a true interview to be analysed. The pilot interviews were conducted to develop the author's interviewing skills and to ascertain from the participants whether they felt any additional questions should be included or excluded from the interview. These participants were happy to leave in all the questions asked (See Appendix IV) with one participant requesting a question added about communication between the autistic student and his/her peers. While this is an important area of research that should be developed further, it does however, lie outside the remit of this study. The remaining four participants of this study lived in Ireland however not all were of Irish nationality.

Design

Qualitative semi-structured interview methods were used to draw on parent's perceptions of communication which they have with their child's school. All interviews were conducted in the participants' home. Purposive sampling (parents who have one or more child with Autism) currently in secondary level education participated. Interviews lasted between twenty-three minutes and one hour and were digitally recorded. Thematic processing as explained by Braun & Clarke, (2006) was used to highlight essential themes that were found within the interview transcripts.

Materials

Preceding interviews, participants were given two copies of a consent and information document (See Appendix V). The participant was asked to sign both copies confirming they understood the nature of the research and to grant permission for their interview to be

recorded. This document also explained how the interview would be conducted and reassured the participant of anonymity. One signed copy was returned to the researcher and the participant held onto the other copy. The interview had a total of twenty questions (See Appendix IV) with additional prompts used if needed to draw on the participant's response. For example, Question 4 asked the participants if they felt their child enjoyed school and then asked them to explain their answer. All interviews were recorded on an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-7800PC. After the pilot interviews it was decided by the researcher to use a peripheral Olympus Noise-Cancellation microphone: ME52, to ensure all interviews would be clearly recorded.

Procedure

Before commencement, the researcher reassured the participants they were not obliged to answer questions which made them feel uncomfortable and they could stop the interview at any time. Signed consent forms giving permission for data were obtained. On completion of the interview, each participant was given a debrief sheet (See Appendix VI), which provided support to the participant if they felt any discomfort during or after the interview. Once recorded, the data was then copied over to a hard drive on a secure HP Pavilion laptop before being imported into a qualitative data analysis computer software called NVivo 10. Interviews were transcribed verbatim with names and personal information made anonymous during transcription to maintain anonymity. This was completed by assigning fictitious forenames to the participants. Following familiarisation with the data, NVivo 2010 was used in the initial stages of analysis, as it is an efficient way to sort large amounts of data into manageable chunks (Welsh, 2002). Quotes perceived as being immediately significant were highlighted and then loosely sorted into codes. This coded data was then copied into a Microsoft Word document to facilitate the finding of recurring themes within the data. The

data in the word documents was subsequently divided and moved into separate word documents to determine which themes naturally clustered together. Data from these additional word documents were checked repeatedly and continuously moved until it was merged with similar content. A table depicting fifteen themes was constructed which was then continuously adapted and merged with new themes being brought to light while some of the smaller codes merged together and formed subthemes. All these themes were reread ensuring that each bit of coded data was correctly placed. These subthemes were then grouped together to form the master themes, which were broader in focus. This is the procedure explained by Braun & Clarke, 2006 when identifying themes from a dataset.

Results

A theme model was developed (*Figure 1: Communication Model*) displaying how Communication played an intrinsic role in the four master themes and their subthemes. All were discovered through thematic analysis: One participant stated, "*We don't have extreme communication. The communication isn't that much. But, I am happy that what is there has good quality.*" This was a common underlying theme with all the participants. Another stated "*They're (school) actually so tuned in with him I don't be emailing them on a daily basis. I might email them once a week.*" In addition to the diagram below, it is interesting to note that the Negative and Positive subthemes where influenced by Resources and vice versa. Also, Parent Objective was entwined with Additional Challenges as Team work and Co-Operation was needed to achieve the Parent Objective of Community and Inclusion.
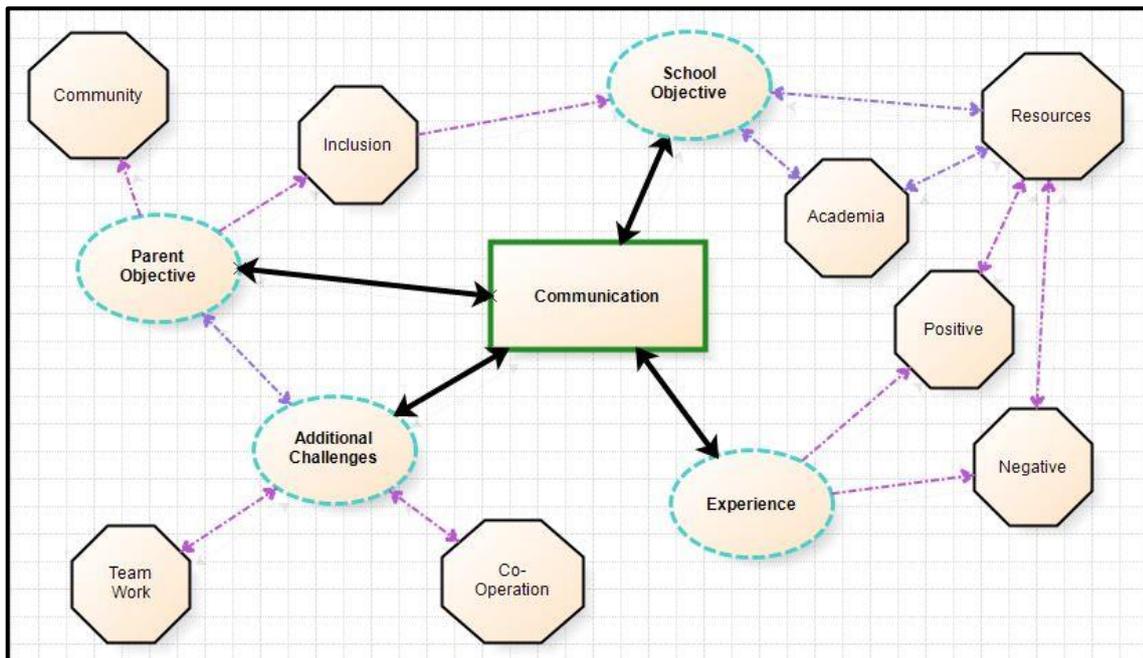

Figure 1: *Communication Model*

Theme 1: Parent Objective.

While the research question asks specifically about communication impacting on the academic development of the child with autism, academia was low on the priority list for the parents who were interviewed. Their child's happiness was of the utmost importance. A participant said *"They have to be happy, they have to be safe, learn something, yes obviously learn something, you want to see some progress."* Schools, however, by their nature are driven mainly by academic progression for their students. Expectations from parents of what a school should provide for a child with autism can sometimes exceed the school's capability and capacity. Therefore, it is vital that a good communication channel develops between the home and school either before the child starts in secondary school or very early into the school year to address this. When communication does not occur this mismatch of objectives between home and school can lead to a negative experience. However, when communication occurs, objectives shared between these two elements lead to planning and reaching a combined objective for the child incorporating academic and social skills. Flexibility is a key characteristic for both the home and school in order to reach this desirable medium. A participant explained her flexibility. "*Be open, be flexible, you have to be flexible, you have to be willing to say, okay, that's not going to work out for your child as well as for the staff. You know we started off, we are going to do the Level 2 Junior Cert. The school asked do you mind if this year we do Level 1. So he's doing Level 1 at the moment but she's bringing in elements of the Level 2 into it. Because we were flexible, we could do that*."

Subtheme A: Community

While the subtheme of community may at first be difficult to associate with academia and communication, it becomes evident in the transcripts as to why this is an important and

desirable objective for the parent. Children of participants attended primary schools outside their locality. One child was offered a place in a school that was a two hour bus journey each way. Another participant explained how it was difficult for her child to develop friendships during primary school as he attended a school that was ten miles from home. A participant emphasised that due to the proximity of her child's secondary school to home, he is now "*Part of his community, it's a local community. He'll grow up with these kids, become an adult, they'll know him. I want him to be happy, to be healthy and to be part of the community.*"

Subtheme B: Inclusion

"*The meeting was very good. They first meeting they listened to Jim. They made him feel very welcome. They said Jim if you are ever unhappy here, I as the principle will throw your bike in the back of my car and I'll bring you home if you need it.*" This participant had previous experience in which her child was isolated from his peers. It may be deducted because of this, inclusion was a high priority for her. Another participant also remarked on the importance of inclusion for her child; "*He just feels included, he feels part of it and it's a huge thing.*"

Theme 2: School Objective

It was evident that participants respected educators with additional qualifications in SEN who were interacting with their children on a daily basis. It could be argued that this respect led to a greater likelihood of positive communication between the home and school environment. More than one participant mentioned these additional qualifications. "*She's done her Masters in autism and everything, she is really really invested in it.*" This leads to a trusting relationship for the parents with their children's educators. When an adapted curriculum was

suggested to and accepted by a participant, acceptance of the new curriculum was justified by mentioning the qualification of the teacher: "*She had university degrees on autism*." It could be deducted that once parents know that their child's educators have invested time on learning about their child's condition, they are more willing to listen. Whereas, breakdowns in communication become apparent when educators have no qualifications or experience in working with children with autism. One participant explained why communication broke down with her child's school. "*Did you work with autism before? It's a horrible question, isn't it*?" The answer to this question was negative. The participant elaborated further during interview by exclaiming: "*This is what they put in a newly set up unit and I knew it because the mistakes were being made. Of course my communication was destroyed that time asking those questions*."

Subtheme A: Academia.

Academia did not feature high on the priority list for the parents who were interviewed. The schools however, continued to implement their objectives by incorporating the academic curriculum with daily life and social skills classes. It should be noted that all participants eagerly shared their delight when their child did learn something new at school. One participant stated: "*He's taking on new skills. Teacher has thought him how to use a calculator. I never thought he'd figure out how to use a calculator and she has him counting money and using a calculator*!" In many cases, the school sought permission from the parents to include the children in academic subjects. One participant explained "*They did say 'We want to give him science because it's so fun with Science projects'*" It became evident through the thematic analysis of these interviews that schools often see academic potential within their students where parents do not.

Subtheme B: Resources.

This is an extremely important theme as it is interlinked with both the positive and negative subthemes of experiences. For the purpose of this study, resources are deemed to be any additional features that a child with autism is entitled to when compared to neurotypical children. Resources range from Autistic Spectrum Disorder Units, IEPs, resource hours, electronic devices, experienced and qualified (specialised) teachers and Special Needs Assistants. The availability of resources greatly affects the academic development of the child and can influence the communication route between school and home. A participant explained that her child's school experience: *"Has improved since he got the laptop. He's less tired."* More than one parent has mentioned the lack of IEPs. One participant stated that "*I was the first person in the school to demand an IEP. I have yet to see the actual physical paper but I had a meeting.*" While another participant revealed that her child's school do not do IEPs: "*I asked do they do IEPs and they said no. Now I've never sat down with the teachers.*" Individuality of autism is evident with some parents mentioning the lack of SNAs "*He needs to have an SNA so we're really fighting to get that now.*" While another participant has let her son try secondary school without an SNA, as he had progressed through primary in the same manner. It is important to note that while this child had multiple challenges comorbid with autism, he is high achieving academically. Another participant was very happy with the resources available and stated repeatedly during her interview how happy she was with her child's school. It is important to note that the school which her child attended were not lacking in any resources. This correlates with the positive experience as shown in *Figure 1*. "*There's an SNA assistant for everybody in the classroom. There's two SNA and a TA unit co-ordinator. Then there are teachers who come into the class.*"

Theme 3: Additional Challenges

It was discovered through analysis that all children of the participants had other challenges and diagnoses alongside autism. Similar to the respect given to educators with qualifications with autism, the parents who participated in this study took their cue from diagnoses given to their children by psychologists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists to determine which secondary school fulfilled their child's educational needs. It is from these official documents that parents' choose their child's academic path.   Schools in closer proximity to the child's home and who were willing to accept children with autism were rejected by parents as they did not have a 'unit'. One participant explains her reason for choosing the secondary school for her child as: "*I had no choice. We were told he needed a unit*."   It was acknowledged by parents that some of the schools try to facilitate these additional challenges where possible. One participant explained to her child's school. "*If you want to take my son, you need to understand his sensory issues*."

Subtheme A: Team Work

It was discovered that a lot of additional challenges where overcome and compromises were made when both home and school worked in unity towards a specific goal. Team work developed in two ways. The first was the initiation of the parents. "*I said the only way this is going to work, is if we are open, we communicate. If you've a problem you tell me. If I've a problem I tell you.*"   From this a communicative relationship formed which at first, had regular communication but gradually eased as the school began to understand the child and the specific needs of the child and the parent acknowledged and accepted that the school could comprehend the challenges which the child faced. "*They're actually so tuned in with him I don't be emailing them on a daily basis.*" The second way in which a communicative

relationship developed was unplanned with unofficial meet and greets during school drop off and collection. A trusting relationship built up which was seamless in formation but reliable on exchange of information. "*It just kind of evolved when we started. I met the special education needs co-ordinator for the school. I said to her look, the communication is a huge part of this being successful.*"

Subtheme B: Co-operation

Co-operation is dependent on communication and is at an optimum when communication is shared. A participant highlighted how co-operation and team work helped her child. "*It probably wouldn't effect anybody else but will greatly impact him and the school A) needs to be aware that something has happened and B) I need their assistance in dealing with it.*" It is most advantageous for academia to develop when school shares their methods and goals with home and vice versa. Another participant explained "*Sometimes because he's working on an adapted curriculum I might have something here that ties in with what they are doing.*" A third participant co-operates with the school by signing the journal "*even though it is blank.*" This informs the school of her commitment in co-operating with them.

Theme 4: Experiences

The experience of primary school played a large part towards how communication was managed by parents in secondary school. One participant said "*I've much better communication with this school than I had with the primary school. I email them multiple times a week.*" By the time children reach secondary school, the parents seemed to be very proactive in communicating with their child's school with one participant claiming that "*I have to ride them like a crazy autistic mother.*" It could be ascertained that the earlier school experiences lead participants to appreciate the chosen secondary school or to reject the school

and look for a new one. One participant shared this experience when her child was accepted into a secondary school: *"They said 'We are very grateful you choose us as a school for your autistic child because we don't have an autistic child in this school. It's a small school so we think he is an asset because all the other children here can learn about how to deal with autism.'"*

Subtheme A: Positive:

Positive experiences with the secondary school education system were a result of resources and communication. Educators who had no experience with autism but were willing to learn, were given the same respect as the educators who had qualifications on special education. Because of this receptiveness to learn about the challenges their child faced, the school engaged in continuous communication with the parents. *"It's lovely to talk again. I felt they listened to me*."

Subtheme B: Negative

Experiences which parents found difficult were usually the result of a lack in communication. It could also be ascertained that the expectancies of the parents exceeded the schools abilities. *"You need to work on his happiness. You need to take him out swimming or walking or cycling*." The schools may not have communicated their lack of resources which would restrict the school in carrying out the wishes of parents. When a school has lack of resources, such as SNA support they are faced with decisions that impact on many children and staff within the school. *"The special needs assistant was constantly used for the small children as a helping teacher*." When a child was isolated and not being educated in a manner which the parent expected, this also lead to negative experiences. *"He was hardly attending any classes anymore. He was isolated in a room with a special needs assistant."*

Discussion

The aim of this research was to discover what impact, if any, communication between the home and school environs affect the academic development of children with autism. It found that while communication did have an impact, academia was not a high priority for parents. Academia was discovered as a subtheme of school objectives and was mostly driven by schools. Another subtheme under school objective was resources. When schools and parents had adequate resources available to them, communication was deemed at an optimum. This lead to academic advancement for the child. The parental objective for the child was that of happiness and had two subthemes of community and inclusion. Parents stated their child was happy when included within the school setting and also external to school, being involved in the community. The third theme was additional challenges. This incorporated diagnosis which had been given to children comorbid with autism, ranging from intellectually challenges to sensory processing disorders. Parents and schools had to manage these additional challenges and to do so successfully, the subthemes of team work and co-operation were formed. Team work saw both parties working together to achieve a shared objective while co-operation can be explained by one party willing to listen and implement the advice from the other. The final theme was that of experience which had subthemes of positive and negative. Experience parents gained from their child's primary school was fundamental in how they communicated with their child's secondary school. The parents interviewed appeared to be motivated by this previous experience to obtain what they deemed to be the best solution for their child during secondary school. Positive and negative experiences were relayed by mentioning how their present school compared to their previous school. Positive experiences where incorporated by the parents into the secondary school routine whereas negative experiences were determining factors on what parents deemed acceptable for their children during secondary school. It is possible that a more fluid communication route

between the home and school could enhance the academic development of the child with autism. This is in line with a study conducted by Mount & Dillon, (2014) who stated that parents, schools and educational psychologists need to work together. Parents were unsatisfied with schools who had no qualifications relating to autism, however, a study conducted in 2003 by Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov concluded that teachers reported receiving inadequate training for working with pupils who had autism. It is possible that schools are still not in receipt of adequate training today. The policy advice document, The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland, submitted to the Tánaiste and Minister for Education & Skills in 2011 states that staffing levels and pupil/teacher ratios should reflect the complexity of need that exists within individual schools and should not be solely determined by a special school's designation (p. 17). While the EPSEN (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs) Act of 2004 revolves around inclusion, this advice has not transferred to mainstream schools who are trying to provide this integration for pupils with SEN inclusive of autism.

Tobin et al, 2012 found that the optimal progression for teaching children with autism was flexibility and adaptability. While there are many different approaches to teaching children with autism, some involve integrated provision, some segregation and some a mixture of the two. The essential component is that educational strategies and curricula should be adapted to the specific patterns of skills and disabilities shown by the child. The participants of this current study were reflective of Tobin's study regarding the integrated provision and all had some form of an adapted timetable. However, not all students had adapted teaching strategies. In 2004, Glashan et al perceived that parents required a high level of support and specialist provisions in a non-specialist environment. Due to the dissemination of special schools in Ireland today, this continues to be the situation in which parents find themselves. While some parents' perceptions that some schools did not have the

motivation to implement specific skill set teaching to individual students, other parents had perceptions of their child's school implementing specific teaching strategies unique to their child. This variation may be due to the current method on how teachers are being trained. At present, there is no mandatory training required for teachers working with SEN students including autism, (Section 2.3 para 1 of NCSE Policy Advice Paper No. 5 – Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools, p. 64).

It was evident from the interviews that parents are not being included in the academic path of their children with more than one seeking an IEP. This was of particular interest as it is in direct defiance of Irish law. The EPSEN Act, 2004 specifically dictates in the 'Duty of Schools' section 14, para b) that parents of a student with special education needs are (i) informed of their child's needs and how those needs are being met, and (ii) consulted with regard to, and invited to participate in the making of all decisions of a significant nature concerning their child's education. In contrast to our neighbours in the United Kingdom it is evident that Irish laws are not being enforced. The United Kingdom's code of practice (2014) indicates strongly if it is not implemented there will be implications for practitioners at school. It makes repeated statements about the significance of "high quality teaching" and gives coded warning about how "special education provision is compromised by anything less." (Department for Education/Department of Health (DFE/DOH, 2014).

One participant's objective for her sons' academic path fell in line with the findings of a study by Whitaker et al., 1998 who found that generous staffing ratio given to students with autism can actually reduce opportunities to these students to learn from their peers. The added benefits of learning from peers both academically and socially is further supported by Wentzel & Watkins, 2002. Despite the research in 2011 by Stymes & Humprey who found supporting evidence that pupils who have teaching assistants underperform academically, receive less attention from their teachers and be isolated from their peer groups, this

participant fell into the minority regarding this train of thought. This study found that by the time parents have communicated with their child's secondary school, they are understandably more determined and proactive in knowing want they want for their child and more knowledgeable on their child's entitlements, therefore their focus can often be directed to obtain quantity of hours for their child while quality of these hours can often be overlooked. Whitaker, 2007 stated that parental satisfaction with the mainstream school has been found to correlate with the willingness of the school to listen and its capacity to respond flexibly to a child's needs. This study confirms that Whitakers paper still holds true today. There is often a deficit in resources allocated to schools restricting the provisions provided to the child with autism. This can result in conflict between home and school leading to negative communication between the two parties. This is supported by Murphy & McKenzie, 2016 who found that major contexts of family and school arise with the power to either facilitate or impede positive development. Inclusion which was a shared objective between home and school was supported by Roffey, 2013 who stated that the sense of belonging toward school represents the basic psychological need for social acceptance. Children with autism have problems generalising learned skills from one environment to another due to the underdevelopment of theory of mind. This finding supports Curtiss et al, 2016 who acknowledged that while parents have expert knowledge about their children, without support they may have a difficult time creating learning opportunities at home that best fit their children's unique developmental trajectories. There are many additional challenges encountered by children who have autism, their families and their educators. The majority of students diagnosed with autism have IQ scores categorizing them with intellectual disability, with only one third (25%-33%) having an IQ in the average or above-average range (Heflin & Alaimo, 2007). For academic progression to take place, a greater emphasis should be placed on the communication link between the home and school environment to enable the

understanding of these additional challenges. Teamwork could ensure achieving both school and home objectives. Where possible, communication should include all elements of the school environment such as the teacher, the special needs assistant and unit co-ordinator where appropriate. This was also noted by Stockall, 2014 who stated that effective communication is necessary for understanding roles and assignments, co-ordinating approaches to students, and building a positive relationship with paraprofessionals.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the findings garnered are from a small number of participants and therefore, it is not possible to determine if this is reflective of all parents of autistic children who attend secondary schools. This study did not include schools, therefore it was very one sided and biased from the parental side. It is also possible that participants were of a similar social economic background and experienced with technology, further reducing the reflectiveness to the generic population of parents of children with autism. Schools and educators who teach students with autism where not included in this study. No Fathers volunteered to participate along with Mothers who worked outside of the home thus narrowing the findings. All information extracted for this research was therefore from a specific group of Mothers who worked in the home. It is possible if these additional elements had been included within the research, different themes to the ones discovered may have become evident. However, due to the nature of qualitative research, all provided data was rich in content. Parents of secondary school children were specifically requested for this study due to the knowledge they would have gained from the education system. They would also have a better understanding of their child's unique requirements thereby providing rich data for analysis. Because of this, quality communication with their child's school was established which in turn provided quality data for analyses.

There has been a deficit in research which engages the parents view point regarding their child's academic route. While many studies find that a holistic approach is necessary to

give the child with autism a more seamless integration into society, these studies are usually confined within the school, home or the health environment and there is little cross over between the groups. While there is heavy involvement from educational psychologists in schools in the United Kingdom, there is minimal input from the NEPS (National Education Psychological Service) in Irish schools with one Psychologist given multiple schools within his/her jurisdiction. Many schools are allocated a number of NEPS visits which they are entitled to have each year. This restricts the involvement of educational psychologists thereby delaying the implementation of strategies to help the child early on in their academic journey.

There is growing evidence about limitations met by a child who has a special needs assistant for support. An area that is not often explained. This information should be made available to parents giving guidelines and advice from an educational psychologist to enhance their understanding of the role of special needs assistants. It could thereby provide parents with more options available to them and their child thus reducing the demand made on this valuable resource. It could be deducted from this research that communication between school and home enables the child with autism to learn more socially and academically. This study aimed to bridge the gap between home and school to ascertain how and if academia can be progressed for the child with autism. What the overall results did find was that open communication between parents and schools should be established before the child with autism starts in the chosen secondary school. This communication should discuss the parent's objective and the school's objective. These two objectives are not always compatible, therefore early communication between the two parties is essential to achieve a positive learning experience for the child. This can be achieved by teamwork, co-operation and resources. Parents would benefit from receiving a more thorough overview from the school by the sharing of the school's vision for the child's education development while the

school would benefit from understanding the additional challenges faced by the child with autism. Brooks and Goldstein (2002) claimed that understanding of the parental perspectives would be useful for professionals supporting them through the educational process for children with autism. Miranda et al, 2015 explored how autism affects the stress level of parents, thereby, knowing what the school is capable of providing for their child should have a reductive impact on stress levels.

The mandatory provision of specialist training for educators as a preventative measure against future difficulties would be beneficial. This would lead to a more positive communicative route between home and school, which would cascade to a better educational experience for the child with autism. Schools should also comply with the law by facilitating IEPs. This study has real life implications as the prevalence of autism and the integration of students with autism in the mainstream setting is increasing. Therefore, in order to utilise resources productively, the Department of Education and Skills should work towards implementing their advice policies, ensure that all schools comply with the law and employ more educational psychologist to meet the current demands. The family should never be overlooked in the educational process. Inclusion of the family from the beginning of their child's educational journey will enable schools and resources to be used constructively without valuable time being given to families who continuously need to fight for their child's entitlements.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Dear

Thank you very much for volunteering your time to give an interview which will enable me to complete my research. Due to the structure of this research, the number of interviews held will be limited. Therefore, I would really appreciate it if you could message me back with your location, your phone number and a time you would be available to conduct a 30 – 40 minute interview.   This will enable me to make the best use of time for everyone involved.

Due to the large response I have received, I will not be able to interview everyone who volunteered. At present, I am looking for six volunteers so please do not take offense if you are not selected. I will however, make all findings of my research available to everyone who volunteered if they so wish to see it.

If for any reason, you no longer want to participate in this study, please do not feel obliged to follow through with the interview. Just let me know in your reply to this message and I will remove you from the list.

Thank you again for all your support

Kind regards

Sinéad Wearen

Appendix II

Dear

Once again, I would like to thank you for volunteering to participate in my research project. Through a randomised process, you have been selected for interview.

I will send you a text message confirming a date and time for the interview to take place.

Please do not feel under any obligation to continue with the interview. As a volunteer, you can withdraw at any time.

I appreciate your volunteer status and if requested, I will provide you with the findings of this study.

Kind Regards

Sinéad Wearen

Appendix III

Dear

Once again, I would like to thank you for volunteering to participate in my research project. However, due to the large numbers of volunteers, you were not chosen for interview through the randomised process.

If you would like, I will delete all information which you have provided or I can retain them and possibly use them in future studies.

If you do not reply, I will retain this information, i.e. phone number, name and location.

I appreciate your volunteer status and if requested, I will provide you with the findings of this study.

Kind Regards

Sinéad Wearen

Appendix IV

Interview Questions

1. What age is your child with ASD?

2. What year is your child in now?

3. What school type does ASD child attend? For example, a unit or mainstream or mix of both?

4. Is this a similar set up to when your child was attending primary school?

5. Can you tell me the factors that helped you to decide on the secondary school you chose for your child?

6. Do you think your child enjoys school? Can you expand on why you think this way?

7. Do you feel you have good communication with your child's school?

8. Can you tell me the method of communication you use?

   (Possible prompt -For example, can you contact the school through phone call, text messages or notes in homework journal?)

9. Can the school contact you in the same way?

10. Can you remember who initiated this contact? (Possible prompt -You or the school?)

11. What is your opinion on how you feel this communication has impacted on your child's school experience?

12. Can you give me your opinion on how the communication route between you and the school impacts on your child's education?

13. Can you give me your opinion on how you'd feel that changes in this communication channel would impact on your child?

14. Can you give me your thoughts on what you feel would constitute an 'ideal' method of communication between you and your child's school?

15. How do you feel that this would impact on your child's academic development?

16. Can you share with me any successful tips from home that you shared with your child's school?

17. Can you tell me how you feel this worked out?

18. Can you share with me any strategies implemented by the school that you may have tried to use at home?

19. Can you give me your opinion on how you feel this impacted on your child's education?

20. Finally, what advice would you give to other parents of children with ASD who will start attending secondary school?

Appendix V

Information Sheet for Interview regarding Communication between the Home and the School

environment of the child with ASD

My name is Sinéad Wearen and I am conducting research in the Department of
Psychology in Dublin Business School that is exploring the educational development of a
child with ASD. This research is being conducted as part of my studies and will be
submitted for examination. The purpose of this interview is to ascertain how your child
is developing in his/her academic environment and how communication (if it does)
impacts on this process. You are invited to take part in this study and your participation
involves an interview conducted by myself.

This interview may take 30 Minutes to 40 Minutes and you are welcome to contact me
after the interview via email, through 1718608@mydbs.ie if you would like to add some
extra information which you did not have the opportunity to include during the session.
Some questions asked in the interview might cause some minor negative feelings. You
are not obliged to answer any questions which may make you feel uncomfortable. If
any of the questions do raise difficult feelings for you, I have provided contact
information for support services on the debrief sheet which you are welcome to keep.

Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part.
Confidentiality will be a priority and all effort on my part will go towards ensuring
anonymity within the study. For the purpose of the study all interviews will be recorded
on an electronic device. The recorded data will be securely stored and data derived
from the interview transcripts will be saved onto a password protected hard dive. All
participant's names will be changed to ensure anonymity is maintained throughout.
Quotes used within the study will not be attributed to any participant to ensure
anonymity.

If for any reason, you wish to withdraw from this study, I will ensure that all data which
you have provided will be eliminated and you will not be directly quoted within the

study. However, withdrawal cannot commence after this study has been submitted for examination.

Thank you for your time. Please sign below to indicate that you understand the terms of this interview.

_____

Appendix VI

DEBRIEF

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. If you have experienced any questions which may have made you feel uncomfortable, please find a list of websites and support services in which you may contact someone to help with any distress you may have experienced.

www.asiam.ie

www.iaa.ie

The Samaritans: (045) 435 299 or www.samaritans.org