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The potential impact of the SEN Green Paper ‘*Support and Aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability*’ on the educational inclusion of autistic children in mainstream education

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The potential impact of the SEN Green Paper ‘*Support and Aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability*’ on the educational inclusion of autistic children in mainstream education

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Abstract:

Since every child with a diagnosis of autism is assumed to have special educational needs (SEN), any new SEN policy and legislation will impact on their education. I consider why children with autism are more difficult to include in mainstream schools than those with other SEN and what, if anything, is being proposed to address this difficulty in the SEN Green Paper ‘*Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability*’. I position the Green Paper in relation to current good autism practice guidelines and international SEN inclusion policy; and evaluate other recent developments in UK SEN policy and autism-specific teacher training. I highlight why mainstream teachers need a thorough understanding of autism to successfully include autistic children in their classrooms and conclude that, in order to achieve a positive impact, the aspirations of the Green Paper must be enshrined in law¹ and appropriately funded.

Keywords: Asperger’s syndrome; autism; good practice; inclusion; special educational needs

Introduction

Since every child with a diagnosis of autism is assumed to have special educational needs (SEN), any new SEN policy and legislation will have an impact on their education. As a parent of four autistic children I am keen to

¹ The Green Paper has now been enshrined in law following the passing of the Children and Families Act in 2014. I have made some key points in connection with the Act in a letter to the editors of *Autism Policy & Practice* and am working on a further article in this regard.

understand the context of their mainstream educational provision and any issues and policies likely to affect their futures. According to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006) children with autism are more difficult to include in mainstream schools than children with other forms of SEN. I would like to know why this is and what, if anything, is being proposed to address this difficulty through the latest government initiative - the SEN Green Paper '*Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability*' (DfE, 2011a).

In order to position the Green Paper within the current educational context I shall identify developments in the understanding of autism and how this has led to the provision of good practice guidelines for the education of autistic children; briefly describe international SEN inclusion policy and how the current UK position fits with this; evaluate recent developments in UK SEN policy and autism-specific education training, in terms of the potential impact on autistic children; and use relevant research literature concerned with autistic pupils' learning style and behaviour to highlight *why* teachers need autism knowledge in order to be able to include autistic children effectively in their mainstream classrooms. My aim is to determine whether the Green Paper includes strategies which are likely to be of benefit to, and increase the effective inclusion of, autistic children in mainstream education.

When discussing educational inclusion it is important to consider how its meaning is construed (Humphrey, 2008). The intended meaning will be context and research specific, depending on the theoretical and ideological position of the author/s and, in some cases, the commissioning organisation. My personal definition of inclusion has been influenced by what I would like my own children to experience in their schools and what I have learned about good (effective) inclusive practice from the autism literature (Jordan, 2008; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Wilkinson and Twist, 2010). I agree with Connor (2006) and Dybvik (2003) that, for inclusion to be achieved, the school system must adapt itself to the child's needs, rather than expecting the child to accommodate the demands of the school. For me, inclusion involves a flexibility of procedures and teaching style, in a school with a culture of respect and acceptance of diversity and with a willingness to identify and meet the idiosyncratic needs of the child. In addition, educational inclusion should not only be concerned with where, what and how a child is taught. For inclusion to be considered a success an autistic child's acceptance into a school *must* be more than physical (Jordan, 2005). The child must *feel* included and valued within their school community. The consideration of the emotional aspects of inclusion is not usually written into the definitions of national/international

policy documents (EADSNE², 2010a; UNESCO³, 2005) but is frequently discussed in research literature (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Jordan, 2005; Whitaker, 2002) and is sometimes included in local policy, such as that provided by individual schools. I will be looking for evidence that emotional aspects of inclusion have been addressed when evaluating the new policy and strategy proposals.

Understanding of autism and development of autism-specific policy

A decade ago there was a real lack of understanding of autism and the best methods for teaching those diagnosed with it (Myles and Simpson, 2001). A study carried out by the National Autistic Society (NAS) found that one fifth of autistic children had been excluded from school at some time - most commonly because their school felt they could not cope with the child's behaviour (Barnard et al., 2000). Professionals involved in the education of pupils with autism were advised to make themselves familiar with the DSM-IV-TR (2000), a psychiatric manual listing the criteria necessary for a diagnosis to be given. Educators were expected to develop and implement appropriate and effective practices, supports and interventions for autistic pupils with little understanding of the characteristics most directly related to and affecting school performance (Myles and Simpson, 2001). This limited understanding of the needs of autistic pupils was linked to academic failure and decreased social inclusion (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). When traditional forms of SEN research were replaced by methods that sought the voices of disabled people, their families and advocates (Barnard et al., 2000; Batten and Reid, 2006; Whitaker, 2007), researchers began to understand more about what it was actually like to live with autism. These researchers concluded that in order to meet the educational needs of autistic children, and to create autism-friendly environments in which to educate them, autism-specific staff training was essential. In order to include autistic children successfully, teachers must have a working knowledge of autistic children's school-related social, behavioural/emotional, intellectual/cognitive, academic, sensory, and motor characteristics (Barnard et al., 2000; Myles and Simpson, 2001). Without this knowledge it would not be possible to establish even a simple routine of autism-friendliness, which relies on teachers thinking about things such as their use of language when teaching, the structure of their classroom and the removal of pupils' anxiety by avoiding any uncertainty about what is expected (Barnard et al., 2000).

Soon after the publication of the NAS research (Barnard et al., 2000), the government produced specific information to guide service provision for autistic children with the DfES (2001) and DfES and DH (2002) producing

² EADSNE - European Agency for the Development of Special Needs Education

³ UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

good practice guidance about autism for local authorities which included information for schools (POSTnote, 2008). Further guidance ‘*Supporting pupils on the autism spectrum*’ was produced by the DCSF (2009) as part of their Inclusion Development Programme and the Autism Education Trust (AET) has recently been commissioned to develop a set of ‘National Autism Education Standards’ for good practice in the education of children and young people with autism. I shall look at this in more detail later.

Unfortunately, although explicit concerns were raised about how well the earlier guidelines were actually being used by schools (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006) there is no evidence that the more recent ones are being utilised any better. Many teachers (55%) still feel that they lack the ‘specialist knowledge’ to enable them to provide effectively for autistic children (Charman et al., 2011) and 76% feel that better autism knowledge would help them to help autistic children have a more positive experience of school (Macbeath et al., 2011). Such lack of professional development in autism is a barrier to teaching autistic children (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008).

International SEN policy and the current UK position

In the UK autism is considered to be a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). Under the Disability Equality Duty (2006), all public bodies, including schools, must promote the equality of autistic individuals (POSTnote, 2008). The UNESCO (2005) guidelines for inclusion state that education policy and provision should aim to promote child-friendly school cultures and environments, which are conducive to effective learning and inclusive of *all* children and they have recently produced a document titled ‘*Everyone has the right to education*’ (UNESCO, 2011). Within Europe, the EADSNE aims to highlight and promote principles of equal opportunities in terms of genuine access to learning experiences that respect individual differences. It promotes ‘Quality Education for All’ focusing on personal strengths rather than weaknesses. The ultimate aim of the EADSNE is to improve educational policy and practice for all learners with SEN and it is hoped that the key principle recommendations of the agency will contribute to the work of policy makers across Europe concerned with inclusive education. The current UK position is that schools are required by law to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that autistic pupils are not disadvantaged compared to their peers (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA), 2001). Furthermore, teachers *should* understand their responsibilities under the SEN code of practice, differentiate their teaching to meet individual needs and be able to identify and support pupils who experience behavioural, emotional or social difficulties (Pearson, 2007); local education authorities (LEAs) are *encouraged to* provide clear guidelines on their policies and practice and to demonstrate a flexibility and willingness to listen to requests and ideas from

parents and professionals; and schools and LEAs are *expected to* develop their cultures, policies and practices towards achieving an inclusive educational environment, ensuring *all* pupils have equal access to the curriculum (Wilkinson and Twist, 2010). The use of these non-compulsory terms ('should' 'encouraged to' and 'expected to') when referring to teachers' and LEAs' inclusive practice, highlights the lack of legislation in this area. Despite a general agenda for inclusion and research suggesting teacher education in autism is vital for the successful inclusion of autistic children (Wilkinson and Twist, 2010; Myles and Simpson, 2001; Barnard et al., 2000), there is still no legal requirement for teachers to receive any autism-specific training (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008), nor obligation to make use of the good practice guidance that exists (DfES, 2001; DfES and DH, 2002; DSCF, 2009) and unfortunately the gap between inclusion rhetoric and classroom reality remains very wide (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Parsons et al., 2009). Although the current UK position regarding the inclusion of children with SEN *sounds* positive, the reality for autistic children and their parents is often that their experiences do not match up to expectations and successful inclusion is not achieved.

Why are Autistic Children More Difficult to Include?

It has been reported that children with autism are more difficult to include than children with other forms of SEN (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006) and that children with autism need 'different' forms of provision (DfE, 2010a). The very nature of autism as a social and communication difficulty means that many traditional teaching methods, which rely on an understanding of language and social behaviours, leave autistic pupils at a disadvantage and teachers having to find alternative methods of communicating with them (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). To better understand the many challenges that face teachers when they have an autistic child (usually with a diagnosis of AS) in their mainstream class, I shall highlight some of the particular thinking and learning styles and patterns of behaviour common to these children and suggest how these might impact on teachers' ability to include them successfully.

Motivation, anxiety and behaviour

Unlike many other disabilities, AS is not immediately apparent to others (Myles and Simpson, 2002). Because of this, some teachers can find it hard to recognise, and in some cases difficult to believe, the extent of the problems which can arise from it. Children with AS understand and respond to the world in a very different way from non-autistic children (Jacobsen, 2004) and it is very easy to attribute meaning to their behaviour that is wholly inaccurate (Jordan, 2008). It may be difficult for mainstream teachers to appreciate the extremes of anxiety that can be produced by everyday situations (Powell and

Jordan, 1991). Daily occurrences that cannot be planned for or anticipated can lead to major distress and challenging behaviour. Autistic children are sometimes labeled as lazy, difficult or defiant when they fail to complete a task (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008) because their teachers fail to understand their autistic perspective (Jones et al., 2009). Often children with AS have obsessive or narrowly defined interests (Myles and Simpson, 2002) and they lack motivation towards 'other-directed' or 'socially-meaningful' tasks. The teacher cannot use his/her own enthusiasm to motivate (as he/she might with a PNT child) if the autistic child does not care about what the teacher cares about (Jordan and Powell, 1991). Even with the motivation some autistic children have fundamental difficulties which affect their capacity to become independent learners. High levels of anxiety about whether their responses and actions are appropriate can prevent them from carrying out a task and this performance anxiety may bear no relationship to their actual abilities. They may not do anything, physical or intellectual, without continual encouragement or approval, even when they are perfectly able to complete a task. This dependency on their teacher is likely to increase when 'new' activities are encountered and the class teacher may simply not have the resources to devote to the autistic child when they need it. To compound this difficulty for teachers, what works to motivate and support an autistic child one week (or in one situation) may not work the next and this will be influenced by many factors including the child's mood, pre-school stress, or changes in their sensory environment. Smells, sounds and other sensory stimuli may affect the autistic child and their ability to concentrate, stay seated, remain calm etc. but may remain undetectable to the teacher. Such sensory stimulation is likely to have a profound effect on a child with AS and determine which learning environments are most effective and which are counter-productive, leading to withdrawal or distress (Jordan, 2005). The class teacher may not be able to tell that the autistic child is becoming distressed until it is too late, as many children with AS do not reveal stress through voice tone or overt agitation (Myles and Simpson, 2002). As a result they may escalate to the point of crisis before their teacher becomes aware of their excitement, or the discomfort they feel due to their inability to predict, control and manage uncomfortable situations (Myles and Simpson, 2002). Teachers need to become familiar with individual children's anxiety triggers and telltale signals of stress and remain attentive to the child at all times in order to help them manage difficult situations effectively. This level of attentiveness is likely to be difficult for a class teacher who also has the diverse needs of thirty other children to meet - and even more so because it is not always easy to predict when the autistic child will cope and when they won't.

The child with AS may not be able to tell what others are thinking and may be very rigid about the way things need to be done. This can cause difficulties between the autistic child and their PNT peers who might want, or have been

instructed, to share or co-operate in a play or group-teaching situation. Often the child with AS wants other children to play with them but insists that they follow strict rules which may or may not be articulated, making it extremely difficult for the PNT child to join in. The autistic child might find it difficult to accept the ideas of their non-autistic classmates, understand what they are thinking or why they want to do something in a particular way and neither one is able to communicate their ideas effectively to the other. Such situations can lead all parties involved to feel frustrated. The difference for the child with AS is that they (unlike the PNT child) might react to high levels of anxiety or frustration with verbally aggressive or physically violent behaviour. This type of challenging behaviour must be particularly difficult for a teacher to manage in a mainstream classroom. Even when teachers understand and accept that these behaviours are not deliberately defiant or disruptive (Connor, 2001) they still have the task of containing and calming the child who may be out of control. At the same time they are responsible for protecting the other children present and for keeping their classroom a safe, supportive and accepting place for everyone. Children with AS can be easy targets. They tend to be gullible and naïve and are easy to manipulate into having extreme reactions. Expecting and ensuring that all children respect, support and take responsibility for each other is at the centre of any commitment to embrace diversity (Safran, 2002). PNT children might need help to recognise the positive characteristics of autism (of which there are many) and friendships should be facilitated and encouraged as much as possible. The PNT children need to understand that their autistic classmate is treated differently because he/she *is* different and not because of some form of injustice or favouritism on the part of the teacher. The production of inclusive policies and the creation of inclusive communities and cultures underpin inclusive practice in schools (Humphrey, 2008). The ethos of the school, and in particular the way in which 'inclusion' is understood, is crucial in determining the extent to which government policy and guidance are followed (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). A true (rather than token) commitment to inclusive principles from the leadership team seems to make the difference when it comes to translating policy into practice (Jordan, 2008). I have seen evidence of this first hand. My son has exhibited all of the difficulties and behaviours described above since starting school and many 'reasonable adjustments' have been made by his teachers in order to include him. It has taken a year for staff to really get to know and understand him and they have shown a real commitment to trying to meet his needs. He attends a school with a reputation for effective inclusion, where the culture, practice, management and deployment of school resources are designed to ensure *all* children's needs are met and that *all* children, regardless of ability, are valued equally. Children with SEN are not viewed as a separate entity, but are part of a whole school approach. Different children's needs are recognised and met through varied and flexible provision throughout the curriculum (extract from his school's SEN Policy, 2009). The inclusion

policy sets out the school's aims to provide equality of educational opportunity; to engender a culture of tolerance and acceptance of all; and to help the children develop self-respect and a sense of responsibility and caring for each other. Inclusion is seen as an ongoing process that celebrates diversity and involves identifying and minimising barriers to learning and participation that may be experienced by any pupils. I believe that my son's inclusion is a success. He 'feels' part of his school community and is respected and accepted by his peers. He is happy to be in school and is beginning to reach the targets which have been set for him. His teachers have had to manage many conflicting and fluctuating demands. For teachers with less knowledge of autism and without such a strong commitment to inclusion and training from the head teacher, his successful inclusion into a mainstream environment would have been much more difficult and perhaps impossible.

Assessment

The accurate assessment of children's capabilities and potentials is one of the key processes involved in all teaching (Jordan, 2005). The development of inclusive policies, such as *'Removing Barriers to Achievement'* (DfES⁴, 2004); the 2004 Children Act; and the *'Every Child Matters: Change for Children'* policy (DfE⁵, 2004), which requires all schools to consider factors in meeting *all* pupils' needs (Watkins (Ed.), 2007), led to the development of inclusive strategies for assessment, such as *'Assessment for Learning'* (AfL) (DfES, 2004) and more recently the *'Assessment for All'* (AfA) pilot programme (DCSF⁶, 2010). The aim of these strategies was/is to enable teachers to adjust their teaching to meet the needs of *all* their pupils and at improving educational achievement for *all* children, by treating them as individuals which is the 'only way to achieve equity in the classroom' (Jordan, 2008). It is suggested that the AfL and AfA methods and tools can be used for all pupils including those with SEN and therefore autism. Teachers are expected to modify and adjust these assessment methods and tools appropriately for use with autistic children although there is still no evidence that these tools *are* effective at evaluating the performance of autistic children (EADSNE, 2010b). With so many teachers reporting that they have not received the training they feel they need to teach autistic children (Charman et al., 2011; Macbeath et al., 2011), getting these assessments right without further autism-specific training might not be possible. Even with appropriate tools and training, the continual fluctuation of autistic children's performance is likely to make accurate assessment a real on-going difficulty for their teachers who need to seek direct evidence of their pupils' understanding. They cannot rely on the child communicating his or her thinking or the reasons for it (Powell and Jordan, 1991). A teacher who does not

⁴ DfES - Department for Education and Skills

⁵ DfE - Department for Education

⁶ DCSF – Department for Children, Schools and families

understand how a child is affected by their autism might wrongly attribute lack of task performance to lack of ability, when actually the autistic child is confused about what is expected of them or distracted by some external stimuli. Their poor self-management skills (Jordan, 2003), concrete and literal thinking styles, poor organisation, distractibility, and difficulty discerning relevant from irrelevant information might all interfere with the teacher's ability to assess their true capabilities (Myles and Simpson, 2002). Many children with AS have visual-motor coordination difficulties and find it hard to produce work that is legible or fulfill the requirements of a written task in the time they are given. These children need their teacher to recognise their need for more time or an alternative method of completing the task (such as using a keyboard for writing). Children with AS might have visual memory weakness (Myles and Simpson, 2002) or poor working memory. They might not remember what has been learned or, if remembered, not be able to generalise learning from one situation to another, or from one day to the next. They might even be able to do something in one room but not in another depending where they were when they first learnt to do it. All of this poses a challenge for a teacher trying to establish what they *can* do. The autistic child's apparent competence with verbal language might mask a lack of comprehension. They might not realise when they are being spoken to and not consider themselves to be included in instructions that are directed at 'everyone'. Their processing time might be slower than would be expected for a child of their intellectual ability and they could need much longer to respond to even a simple question. They might be exceptionally skilled in some areas but lack basic knowledge in others. The fluctuating academic profiles and day-to-day behaviours of autistic children means that there is no particular recipe for their teaching in general, or even of an individual child throughout the school year. Teachers need to possess a particular kind of sensitivity to feedback gained from their pupils (Powell and Jordan, 1991). This feedback must be informed by an understanding of the reasons why pupils are learning and behaving in the ways that they are coupled with an understanding of the individual child. This is why high quality autism-specific training for teachers is so important.

The SEN Green Paper

The SEN Green Paper, '*Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability*' (DfE, 2011a) includes many of the recommendations made by the latest international conference concerned with inclusive education (EADSNE, 2010c). The authors of the Green Paper suggest it 'marks an important milestone in the development of the government's approach to supporting children and young people with SEN'. I am interested in the potential impact of this 'approach' on the educational experience of autistic children.

Several organisations have published responses to the Green Paper as part of the government's on-going consultation process. In my analysis of the Green Paper, I shall highlight some of the issues put forward by organisations that have a particular commitment to/interest in educational inclusion, autism or both. I have chosen to concentrate on those issues within the Green Paper that I feel have the greatest potential to influence the educational inclusion of autistic children. These are the introduction of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs); the removal of Individual Education Plans (IEPs); the collapsing of the current School Action (SA) and School Action Plus (SA+) levels of SEN into one single school-based level; the commitment to reduce exclusions; the introduction of the Pupil Premium; and the commitment to improve autism-specific teacher training.

The National Autistic Society (NAS), Ambitious about Autism (AaA), The Council for Disabled Children (CDC), National Parent Partnership (NPP) and the Special Education Consortium (SEC) have all welcomed the aspirations and intentions of the government to improve the SEN system to make it work better for families. However, these groups believe that children with autism will continue to be failed by the system unless, amongst other things, a 'legal duty' to assess and provide for all their support needs is introduced.

One criticism of the Green Paper put forward by all these agencies is the notable absence of the voice of children and young people. Children with SEN are experts in the support they need, and are well placed to determine the support and services that will work well for them (SEC, 2011; CDC, 2011) but the importance of their views is not adequately recognised (NPP, 2011). A consultation by the SEC found that many disabled children, including those with autism, are still experiencing barriers to inclusion and indeed the Office for National Statistics (2009) puts that figure at 30% compared to 3% of their non-disabled peers. It is apparent that there are still many failures to make 'reasonable adjustments' (SENDA, 2001; Equality Act, 2006) to school policies and practices, to prevent *bullying*, to celebrate achievements and to take account of the different ways in which children learn (SEC, 2011). The main barrier to inclusion identified is the attitude of others (SEC, 2011). The SEC and the CDC both feel that the Green Paper does not focus adequately on the removal of such barriers or the improvement of quality of education and outcomes for disabled children. For example, there is no reference within the Green Paper to the Equality Act Duties (2006) to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled pupils. Many adjustments, both to teaching style and to the educational environment, have to be made by mainstream teachers in order to successfully include autistic children in their classrooms. Lack of focus on (or any dilution of) the existing legislation in this area is likely to have a negative impact on children with autism.

Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)

The focus of the Green Paper appears to be on children and young people with high-level multiple disabilities. It is not clear from the new proposals what (if any) statutory protection is going to be available for children with autism or whether autistic children will be eligible for the EHCPs which are due to replace Statements of SEN by 2014 (SENlegal, 2011). Under the current system it can be more difficult for autistic children who are academically able or even gifted to get support through a Statement (NAS, 2011), despite the clear social difficulties these children have and their need to gain other skills and understanding, such as communicative competence; social understanding; physical and emotional well-being; and independence skills. Without these skills they may fail to benefit from their academic successes in terms of their future education, employment or living arrangements (Parsons et al., 2011). I have been told that none of my autistic children would receive Statements of SEN because they are *too* academically able and intelligent. As children with AS have average or above average intelligence by definition (DSM-IV-TR, 2000) they are likely to be academically competent. It shows a complete lack of appreciation of the social, emotional, behavioural and sensory difficulties experienced by these children to deny them a statement of SEN, and therefore guaranteed support, on the grounds of their academic strengths. When left unsupported, social and emotional difficulties can have a profound impact on children's wellbeing and progress (NAS, 2011) and must not be overlooked. The NAS would like to see a coherent process, which meets the needs of all children with autism, whatever level of official support they are on.

Consultation has shown that parents at SA+ are twice as dissatisfied about most areas of their child's education as those parents whose child has obtained a Statement of SEN because of the difficulty they have accessing the right support for their child. The NAS (2011) urge the government to make sure that *all* children identified with SEN have clear rights and entitlements in order to give parents confidence that the system will meet their child's needs and propose that *every* child with autism will need an assessment of their needs regardless of whether they are thought likely to get a Statement or EHCP. Other agencies have gone further and suggested that *all* children who would benefit from an EHCP should get one (CDC, 2011; SEC, 2011). This should include children currently at SA+ and *all* children identified as having a disability (which includes autism) who are therefore considered as being 'in need' through the Children Act (2004). There is no suggestion in the Green Paper that this will be the case. If the EHCP is to have a positive impact on children with autism it must be backed by a legal right to assessment and support which is coordinated across agencies and it must be clear about who is accountable for funding and delivering both the assessment and the plan (AaA, 2011). There is no

commitment provided by the Green Paper that this will happen either.

Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

The Green Paper proposes to abolish IEPs in order to cut bureaucracy. Currently all children with SEN, and therefore all autistic children, should have an IEP. It should include details of the criteria used by school to measure and evaluate a child's achievements and provide details of the methods and approaches used to ensure the child achieves his/her targets. IEPs can be useful tools for parents to understand what their child is working towards (NAS, 2011). As a parent with autistic children, I find that their regular IEP reviews provide me with a welcome opportunity to go into school to meet their teachers to discuss their progress and attainment. These meetings provide much needed contact and information including what I can do to support my children's learning at home. Autistic children need a consistency of approach and it can be very helpful for school and home to be working on the development of certain skills in the same way at the same time. As well as proposing to abolish IEPs, the Green Paper makes no mention of Annual Reviews. Depriving parents of these opportunities to find out information from the school on a regular basis is neither a parent centred, nor a child centred approach (NPP, 2011). Rather than abolish IEPs, the introduction of SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic) with an agreed date for completion, to be set, monitored and re-set through the IEP has been suggested (SENLegal, 2011). I think this proposal is a good one. I really appreciate the time I am given to discuss my children's IEPs and the information I learn about them through doing so. It will be very disappointing if they are abolished and I am concerned that it is yet another safeguard of autistic children's needs that is going to be withdrawn. A close partnership between school and parents is important for the inclusion of autistic children (Jordan, 2008; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Wilkinson and Twist, 2010) and any erosion of the pathways of communication parents have with their child's school is likely to be detrimental to that child's educational inclusion.

The single SEN category

The Green Paper proposes to replace the current SEN levels of SA and SA+ with a single school-based SEN category and several organisations have real concerns about this (AaA, 2011; NPP, 2011; NAS, 2011). It is possible that merging the two categories will reduce the access to the support that children need in order to make progress (AaA, 2011) and might lead to children with autism who have less obvious needs being overlooked (NAS, 2011). The NAS (2011) propose that the definition of the new category of SEN *must* continue to take into account wider social aspects of a child's education and not focus purely on his/her academic attainment. Clarification that children currently at

either SA or SA+ will still be able to access the support they need, and information about how they will access it, has been asked for (AaA, 2011).

Reducing exclusions

The Green Paper acknowledges that exclusions can often be the result of an unrecognised or unmet SEN, which has led to challenging behaviour. Exclusions have a disproportionate impact on children with autism and can damage children's progress, behaviour, confidence, relationships, mental health and social development (AaA, 2011). The Green Paper proposes that the risk of exclusion should trigger an assessment of additional needs, to ensure children are not excluded because a school fails to meet their needs. If implemented, this proposal has the potential to impact positively on children with autism who are the most excluded group, with 43% being excluded over a 12-month period (AaA, 2011). The proposal to put an end to unfair exclusions by introducing assessments to identify unmet SEN at school is welcomed by agencies concerned with inclusion issues and/or autism (NAS; AaA; CDC; SEC).

The Pupil Premium (PP)

The Green Paper acknowledges the need for better funding of children with additional needs. The PP has been introduced to provide extra money 'directly for those pupils who need it the most' (DfE, 2011b). The government believes the PP, which is additional to main school funding, is the best way to address the current underlying inequalities between children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and their wealthier peers, as 'all the evidence and facts make it abundantly clear that poverty is the single most important factor in predicting a child's future life chances' (DfE, 2011c). Whilst I am not arguing this point, I maintain that to *only* target children entitled to FSM is to deny support to other underperforming groups which includes children with SEN. Prior to the introduction of the PP, SEN funding was allocated to individual schools according to the needs of the children they had on role, with additional money provided for children with Statements of SEN. This has now changed as it was thought head teachers might be incentivised to request statutory assessments for Statements in order to procure additional funding for their schools. Schools now receive a set main budget per year. This includes their SEN funding, which is no longer calculated according to the needs of the pupils on role. Each child entitled to FSM is then awarded an additional £600 each year, which *is* provided to the school they attend and must be spent on enhancing their individual attainment in some way. As 30% of pupils with SEN are known to be entitled to FSM, and therefore the PP, and schools already have some money allocated in their budgets for SEN, the government argues that this distribution is still the best way to help the poorest pupils whilst still reaching many with SEN (they make no mention of the 70% of children with SEN who are not entitled to FSM). Unfortunately this system disadvantages schools in affluent areas that

still have many children with SEN but few children who qualify for the PP. This is the case at my son's school where only 8 children on role are entitled to FSM (bringing in an extra £4800/year). The number of children on the SEN register at the school is much greater (47) with 4 identified as autistic and another 4 undergoing assessment and expecting a diagnosis of autism. No additional financial provision is made for these children through the PP. A child with a Statement of SEN is legally entitled to the specific provision set out within that Statement. Under the new system, the funding for this individual provision no longer exists. In schools where the provision for children with Statements of SEN uses up the entire SEN budget, no further funding is available for other children with SEN who do not have a Statement. Without the legal protection of a Statement the provision of support depends on the priorities and ethos of the head teacher, who has to balance the special needs of the exceptional few against the needs of the other children in the school. This situation is likely to have a very negative impact on the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream schools. For children with Asperger Syndrome (like mine) who are 'too high functioning' (according to their educational psychologists) to be considered for a statement of SEN (and probably for an EHCP in the future) there is a real danger that the support they need will not be available due to lack of funding. Without a head teacher committed to inclusion for all, parents could find themselves having to fight to obtain the right support for their child. This is exactly the sort of barrier to inclusion that drives parents to seek a place for their child in specialist educational provision where the sort of support they are fighting for is more likely to be given as standard. The head teacher of my son's infant school is currently sitting on a steering group trying to influence the funding provided for children with a Statement of SEN. The group's aim is to secure individual funding for those children with exceptional need (a Statement allocating 15 hours/week or more of support) in order to prevent their presence in a school using up the entire SEN budget as it does now.

Improving the Standard of SEN Teaching and Support in Schools

The Green Paper acknowledges that, at present, initial teacher training does not always equip teachers with the tools to identify and meet the broad range of SEN they are likely to encounter in the classroom. Reference is made to the White Paper '*The Importance of Teaching*' (DfE, 2010a) which sets out plans for new standards in qualified teacher status, with a stronger focus on support for children with additional needs. Autism has been identified as 'a specific category within the wider group of SEN' (DfE, 2010b) and the difference between the needs of autistic children and those with other forms of SEN is recognised in the Green Paper.

That teachers need better training in SEN and autism is nothing new. It has been over a decade since the publication of the NAS report (Barnard et al., 2000)

which concluded that autism-specific teacher training was crucial to the successful inclusion of autistic children in the mainstream and since then many other researchers have said the same (Myles and Simpson, 2001; Batten et al., 2006; Whitaker, 2007). Inclusive schools are understood to be those that make major adjustments to their organisation and processes in response to their diverse populations (Nind and Wearmouth, 2006). A key element of adjustment is the way that teachers teach. To develop inclusive pedagogy teachers need access to good information (Barnard, 2000; Batten et al., 2006; Nind and Wearmouth, 2006; Jordan, 2008). Parents agree that skilled and competent staff make the biggest difference for their children in school (AaA, 2011) and it is certainly my experience that my autistic children have been happiest and most successfully included when they have had knowledgeable teachers who understood their needs.

To address the on-going need for better training for teachers who are already qualified, the Green Paper promises 'free' online training materials about autism to schools and it is intended that these will be nationally recognised and flexible. These will replace the previous Inclusion Development Programme (IDP) teaching resource '*Supporting pupils on the autism spectrum*' (DCSF, 2009), which was withdrawn following the change of government in 2010 and archived because 'it may not reflect current government policy'. The Autism Education Trust were commissioned by the current government to produce a report characterising aspects of good practice in autism education and have since produced an autism-specific resource, '*Tools for Teachers: Practical resources for classroom success*' (AET, 2011). School staff are able to view the PDF guide online at no cost but, contrary to the promise of 'free' training resources, the '*Tools for Teachers*' pack and interactive DVD have to be paid for by schools. This is a real shame when school budgets are already under increased strain. Interested staff might have to persuade school leadership to purchase the resource against other competing priorities. Making the toolkit free to schools, as the IDP (DCSF, 2009) was, would ensure it reached more teachers and therefore had a better chance of benefitting more children.

Tools for teachers

It was suggested (Humphrey, 2008) that what schools need is evidence based on what works, how it works and why, to enable them to provide better education to autistic pupils. In my opinion the '*Tools for teachers*' kit (AET, 2011) has the potential to provide this. The 'toolkit' examines social imagination, communication and understanding; sensory sensitivities; and behaviour management. The effect of each area of difficulty on a child's functioning at school is described and strategies for compensating for these difficulties and their effects are suggested. Specific tried and tested 'tools' such as visual timetables; workstations; prompt cards etc. are demonstrated and available to

print, with clear instruction for their use and when and why they might be appropriate. I am particularly impressed by the unit focusing on sensory sensitivities, which gives examples of how a child with autism may be affected by hyper- or hyposensitivity; the impact such sensitivities might have on a child's behaviour; and strategies to address his/her needs as a result. In my experience, the area of the sensory difficulties experienced by children with autism is often the one least understood by school staff. This comprehensive guide provides teachers with a good basic knowledge of sensory issues and insight into why their autistic pupil might be behaving in a particular way. The 'toolkit' concludes with a 'recommended reading' list and links to 'useful websites'.

Teacher training - continuing professional development

It is intended that the DfE supported AET training programme, '*National Autism Education Standards*', due to begin in 2014, will be delivered through 'Training Hubs' and provided at 3 levels. Professionals who complete all three levels will be able to train as trainers, enabling them to deliver levels 1 and 2. It is hoped that this will extend the reach of the programme and enhance its sustainability. Level 1 (whole school) training is free but there is no mention on the AET website (www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk) of how level 2 and 3 are intended to be funded or how schools are going to be encouraged to take advantage of it.

Conclusion

The intentions of the government, to improve the SEN system to make it work better for children and their families, are only likely to have a positive impact on the educational inclusion of autistic children if legislation is passed to ensure the measures needed to achieve the aspirations of the Green Paper are enshrined in law. If 'legal duties' to assess need and provide support are not introduced, it is unlikely that the situation for those autistic children, too 'high functioning' to be considered for statutory assessment at the moment, will become any better in the future. In fact, there is a danger that the implementation of the Green Paper recommendations could actually serve to reduce services currently accessible to autistic children through SA and SA+. It is clear that teachers still lack understanding and knowledge of autism. The government has gone some way to addressing this with proposed improvements to initial teacher training and the commissioning of '*Tools for Teachers: Practical Resources for Classroom Success*' (AET, 2011). This resource provides the sort of information which, if understood and acted upon by teachers, could really improve the educational experience of autistic children in mainstream classrooms academically, socially and emotionally. However, training teachers costs schools money - even if the training itself is free. Schools are already operating on reduced budgets and have to prioritise their spending. Without an appropriate funding package from

central government, to enable schools to release teachers for compulsory training, there will always be schools who do not make use of the new resources and autistic children who are left misunderstood and under-supported as a result. I have an ethical objection to the very existence of a SEN Green Paper. If *all* children's needs were met in an appropriately funded education system we would not need a separate SEN category. Governments should not be making value judgments about which of the most 'disadvantaged' groups of children to help and offering them a 'premium' - in this case those entitled to FSM. There should be a large enough investment in schools that the needs of *all* children can be provided for to ensure full-inclusion is achieved and every child is able to reach his/her potential. Unless this happens the successful inclusion of autistic children will still largely depend on the commitment of head teachers to promote inclusive practice and of individual teaching staff to try to understand and empathise with the autistic child's difficulties and to be flexible in their response to his/her needs. My children attend mainstream schools where this is the case. They feel valued and respected within their school communities and are happy and achieving their potentials. I recognise how very lucky they are.

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