

Parents of children with ASD: Perception of challenges and needs in engaging with secondary education providers

Michelle Stokes and Kym Macfarlane
Griffith University

Abstract

There are many factors that contribute to parental engagement with secondary school settings. For parents of children with autism, their collaboration and engagement with school providers is further complicated through the complexities associated with their child's disability. In regard to communication pathways, it is significant to understand and address the needs of parents. Such a process allows programs designed for students to be more cohesive, consistent and essentially successful. The results of this research have been obtained through focus group sessions. This paper highlights the parent experiences in collaborating with the school to support their children in this context. The results of the research identify that parents have concerns regarding the role and ability of special education staff in both supporting their child, and communicating information to the families and to mainstream teachers. Parents believe this ineffective distribution of knowledge affects their child's ability to have social and academic success. Additionally, concerns are raised regarding the inappropriateness of accommodations implemented for their children.

Keywords: inclusion, parents, secondary school, autism, mainstream

Introduction

This research has been conducted to explore the challenges and effects of involvement of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), inclusive of Asperger Syndrome in mainstream secondary school environments. The role parents play with school settings may not be a choice made independently; rather, their engagement with schools will be significantly influenced by the schools ability to collaborate and communicate effectively with them, and vice versa. For parents of children diagnosed with ASD their ability to communicate with the school is further influenced by the complexities associated with their child's disability. Students with a diagnosed ASD who attend mainstream secondary settings are generally supported through special education teachers, commonly referred to as case managers. The structure of the high school setting and the role of special education staff within the school may also impact upon parent/ school communication pathways (Strom & Strom, 2002).

Families of children diagnosed with ASD are greatly affected by their child's diagnosis. Through this diagnosis, a relationship between the school and families is forged that is 'necessary, interdependent.... with no possibility of divorce,' (Stoner & Angell, 2006, p 178). The relationship that is established, and parents ability to engage effectively with school settings can be overwhelming and tense, or rewarding for all parties. Parental engagement largely involves communicating with teachers, and assisting to establish expectations and boundaries for the child (Oimette, Feldman & Tung, 2006). Parents, particularly mothers, do demonstrate a strong desire to contribute to their child's schooling (Vincent, 2002). However, this does not necessarily translate into having active, professional or collaborative relationships with school personnel.

The Department of Education and Training Queensland maintain that they promote and encourage parents and the extended community to play an active role in the education of children. (Department of Education and Training (DET, 2007). They also uphold that the partnership of parents is valued by Queensland schools. Queensland schools do provide regular opportunities for parents and teachers to communicate with each other such as through teacher-parent nights and the distribution of newsletters. However, it must be questioned whether these communication pathways do actively encourage parents to be involved in their collaboration with the school setting.

There is limited research on parental involvement and parent opinion regarding their ability to participate with secondary schooling and the education of students with disabilities in these settings. This study aims to consider the following; What are parent experiences in collaborating with high school settings? What are the barriers limiting parents ability to collaborate meaningfully with their child's education providers? In addition to positively impacting on parental voice, it is desired that this study will promote best practice in special education, allowing teachers to consider elements contributing to the most effective programs and outcomes for students with ASD.

Review of Related Literature

Adolescents with ASD have increased prevalence of depression (72% prevalence in 11 – 17 year olds with high functioning ASD), anxiety (88% prevalence in 11 – 17 year olds) and irritability (Zoler, 2011). Whilst children with ASD are not instinctively prone to violence, the social difficulties that they do experience in school settings does create stress responses (Simpson & Smith Myles, 1998 cited in Foster, 2005). These stress responses can take the form of aggressive behaviour. These students who fall below the benchmark for behaviour that is considered 'general' and 'average' are already at risk of having a less than prime education (Ashman & Elkins, 2002, p32). This issue sparks a need and a desire for parents to be involved in all aspects of their child's education, to ensure some form of educational accountability.

A case –control research that compared individuals with ASD against their typically developing peers found that students with high functioning ASD are under-achieving (54% as compared to 8% of typically developing peers)(Ashburner, Zivianni and Rodger, 2009). An earlier study by Dempsey (2002) also notes the underachievement of students with ASD. This information suggests a long term problem in mainstream education systems in facilitating the growth of these students academically. Thus a further investigation into practices to promote further success for these students is necessary.

Effect of Parental Involvement on Students

Positive outcomes related to parents of students with disabilities engaging with school providers are widely acknowledged within literature (e.g., "Ashman & Elkins, 2002," "Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006," "McInerney, Dowson & Seeshing Yeung, 2008," and "Strom & Strom," 2002). The ability for parents and teachers to communicate effectively with one another contributes to the positive growth of feelings of self worth in adolescents

(McInerney, Dowson & Seeshing Yeung). Additionally, students are shown to have an increased interest in the social, academic and extra-curricular sides of schooling life. Results from various studies demonstrate that with increased support for students in a high school environment, there is an increased interest in academic learning, levels of self esteem, self worth, and possibly retention rates (McInerney, Dowson, & Seeshing Yeung). These findings strongly support a collaborative approach to education.

Behaviour Management

Children with ASD can present with seemingly challenging behaviour due to their inability to adapt their behaviour when presented with a frustrating situation (Autism QLD, ND). Many children with ASD have limited language (Autism Partnership, 2010) Due to the typical limited language, and rigid behaviour, the child's communication and behaviour needs to be supported across settings. For example, if parents do not receive information from the school environment, it is impossible for them to resolve behavioural issues proactively (Strom & Strom, 2002). This means that there needs to be consistent, clear communication between the school and home settings

It has been consistently found across a number of studies that appropriate teacher training is an indicator of effective behaviour management in students with ASD (Foster, 2005, Mohay & Reid, 2007, Murik, Shaddock, Ashburner, Zivianni, Rodger, 2009, Sutherland, 2002, Lopes et al, 2004). As mentioned, for students with ASD, their functioning in a high school environment can be complicated through their limited understanding of social situations. Very often, teachers respond reactively to students with ASD (Hay & Winn, 2005). This consequently sees them frequently incurring the wrath of the school's behaviour management system. Reactive management of behaviours leads to a deficit based perspective when communicating with parents (Drolet, Paquin, & Soutyrine, 2007). A deficit based perspective focuses parent communication on a child's inappropriate behaviours. This is a negative for students as it reinforces their inappropriate behaviours. Additionally, it is a negative for parents, as reactive behaviour management very often results in blame for the child's behaviour being placed on the parents. Strom and Strom (2002) maintain that if effective communication exists from the beginning between parents and teachers, the need to place blame on others is reduced.

Furthermore, reactive management of behaviour sees increased use of exclusionary practices. Exclusive and withdrawal practices for students with ASD limit the student from

developing effective social skills (Belini, 2006). Additionally, the use of exclusive practices, such as suspensions, permanently damages the ties between parents and teachers (Gasson, ND). For these reasons, it would be considered important to actively implement strategies to decrease the use of reactive and exclusive behaviour management strategies for students with ASD.

The role of behaviour management in Australian schools is an increasing issue for parents, particularly with the use of exclusive practices (Keeffe-Martin, 2001). In fact, Dickson (2008) and Jacob (2005) both report increasing rates of exclusions and suspensions of secondary students with ASD within Queensland state schools. Strom and Strom (2002) report that when parents are involved proactively in their child's education, rates of suspensions and academic failure are decreased.

Secondary Environment

Strom and Strom (2002) report that alongside the transition of students from primary to secondary settings, there is an obvious drop in parent teacher communication. It is suggested that this is due to the fact that the number of teachers involved in managing a child academically increases significantly (Strom & Strom). Generally, in a high school setting there is no structured system for teachers to communicate with one another or with parents regarding the child's behaviour and learning in an ongoing capacity.

Teachers in the mainstream express a desire to work collaboratively with parents of children with diagnosed disabilities; however they also recognise this collaboration is not commonplace (Pearce, Campbell-Evans & Gray, 2010). Due to the organisational structure of a secondary school environment, it is by nature difficult for information to be distributed. This said, it takes a long time for information on students with disabilities to be collated and distributed meaningfully (Pearce, Campbell-Evans & Gray).

Family Stress

Bitsika and Sharpely (2004) report that ninety percent of parents account feelings of helplessness and an inability to effectively manage the behaviour of their child in the home environment. Additionally, parent perception of their own inadequacy at managing their child results in decreased parent wellbeing. It is a priority to focus on a child's educational needs; however, it is also important to deal with parental anxiety as they are clients of a school's service. Bitsika and Sharpely (2004) report that parents of secondary aged children exhibit significantly higher levels of stress than parents of children in primary settings. Additionally,

parent feelings of inadequacy and an inability to access relevant information can result in escalating levels of depression (Bitsika and Sharpely).

There is a strong desire amongst parents to adhere to and operate within the notions of dominant discourses (Grieshaber, 2004), and governing perception of moral and appropriate performance. Parental inadequacies and perception of self directly affects their position in relating to others due to marginalising themselves. It is found that parents can ascertain what they *should* be doing and what they are *actually* doing (Macfarlane, 2006). Parent's perceived inabilities and downfalls affect their motivation to strive toward dominant practices. This clearly affects their ability to engage with school providers. Engagement with schools is a result of policy discourse (Macfarlane). As such, parents are required to engage on some level. Macfarlane compares parent engagement with schools to playing a game. Parents strive to 'win' through achieving the normative discourse of being a 'good parent' and their child achieving educational success. This position lends parents to exhibiting anxiety regarding their own performance, which further increases feelings of guilt.

A collaborative approach increases parent self-efficacy and their ability to help their children succeed (Brookman-Fraze, 2011, Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006). Brookman-Fraze (2011) outline two models of assistance - the traditional expert model, which is professional driven, and the enabling model which is family focused. It is highlighted that effective parent-professional partnerships are steered toward the enabling model as this equips parents with further skills. In allowing parents to be professionals and partners, managing the child's behaviour will be more consistent across settings. Additionally, through discussing strategies with parents to assist them to regulate their child's behaviour, family quality of life is increased through the reduction of parental anxiety and stress (Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006). To further support the child's behaviour, communication pathways between home and school should be utilised to share knowledge and exchange strategies to support each other emotionally, mentally and spiritually, and also to support the growth of positive, more social behaviours. Additionally, if schools are not providing consistent and appropriate feedback, student's efforts and desirable behaviour remain ignored, thus not reinforced.

Vincent and Martin (2000) led a review of secondary schools that offered a 'supportive' parents' forum. These groups were controversial, as under the facade of a supportive environment, it was felt that schools still acted according to their own desires and decisions. Bachrach and Baratz (1970, pp, 44 – 45, cited in Vincent & Martin, 2000, p 20) coin this as 'participatory democracy' which actively discourages parents presenting

challenging beliefs. This forum presents the ‘illusion of voice, without voice itself.’ Additionally, there are further limits placed on the parents ability to effectively ‘speak up’ within Queensland school systems. These limits refer to the parents own education status and material circumstances (Vincent, 2002).

A prominent finding from this literature review is that exclusive practices such as suspensions seem to be increasing in relation to students with ASD. Additionally, these students are failing to achieve their full extent within secondary environments. The research supports parental engagement in their childs’ education and there are many perceived benefits. It is seen within the literature, that the transition to a secondary environment further complicates communication and support pathways for parents. Literature and research within this field is minimal. There is a call for more research of any nature to more effectively guide service provision and inclusive systems currently existing within schools. It is important to unearth through research, parent perception and experiences of their challenges in engaging with secondary school providers. This will provide insight into the weaknesses in current home-school communication channels, and hopefully provide a clearer direction for further research into the promotion of positive school relationships and programs for this cohort.

Method

The participants in this study were all parents of children with a diagnosed ASD. All parents had a child currently attending, or having graduated from a mainstream secondary environment in a regional Queensland town. These were volunteer participants, hence the groups were made exclusively of parents willing to discuss their experiences and perceptions. Ethical clearance was obtained through Griffith University in March, 2011. Signed permissions were sought before participating.

Participants took part in focus groups that were held at a convenient place and lasted for approximately one and a half hours. Two separate focus group sessions were conducted in April, 2011. Altogether there were ten participants. The first focus group had four female participants; the second focus group had six female participants. Thus, results obtained are representative of this limited number of participants. All participants were identified as being the mothers of ASD students.

Six structured, open-ended questions (refer Appendix) were used to guide the direction of the focus groups and keep the conversation moving forward (OMNI, ND). However, the questioning, time given to a subject and movement of the conversation were

directed very heavily by participants and their desire to discuss issues relevant to the subject being discussed.

The focus group sessions were taped and later transcribed. The data was analysed using qualitative methods. Following transcription, the data was coded using a constant comparative approach.

Results

The results of this research are very dynamic and there are several themes that emerged as prominent in affecting parental ability to engage in a positive manner with schools. These themes are; parent experiences, teachers responsiveness, communication within school, modifications for students with ASD and family stress. These themes and their affects on parent – school engagement will be further unpacked.

Parent Experiences

Through the focus group interviews, it was found that the transition from primary to high school is an overwhelming adjustment for both the student and the parents. This appears to be due to the different structure and varied routine of a high school setting. These changes create additional communicative barriers between teachers and parents, and additionally teachers and students.

Person 8: High school was an eye opener for me... I feel my child's fear. He's gone from one teacher, one classroom, to lots of kids, lots of faces, lots of bullying.

Person 7: Primary school was a breeze. When you get to high school there are a lot more barriers and there are a lot more extreme incidents or behaviours.

Of the ten parents involved in the focus groups, two parents had actively changed their child's high school settings due to their unhappiness with teacher and administration responsiveness to their concerns and perceived barriers affecting communication between parents and school staff. They identified these barriers as teacher attitude and prejudices against students with disabilities and an unwillingness to improve communication. In addition, a further three parents expressed a desire to change their children's high school setting, however feared the results at other high schools would be the same, if not worse, thus negatively impacting on their children's levels of self esteem.

Person 1: *I'm told I send my kids to one of the better schools. This makes me want to bang my head against a brick wall.*

Of the four remaining participants, three expressed significant amounts of dissatisfaction with their schools. These participants expressed that they felt like 'We are doing their (case managers) job for them.' The parents expressed their continual efforts to assist schools appropriately cater for and respond to their child with nil recognition and nil effect.

Person 1: *I'm sick of bringing up these topics because I'm going to get the label of being a pushy mum and all of the associations that come with this. I have talked to the school so many times.*

Additionally, through reliving experiences, parents identify bullying as an issue that strongly highlights the need for increased and more consistent communication between home and school.

Person 9: *Kids at school have taken his lunch... he's also been bashed and I didn't know about it until I gave him a cuddle and he singed in pain.*

Person 4: *My son was accused of an incident, however he had bruises all over him and no one mentioned this...the principal wouldn't believe us.*

Teacher Responsiveness

It was an overwhelming finding across the course of the focus groups to find that all parents felt communicative barriers between family and school resulted from lack of responsiveness from the special education staff. All families had been assigned a case manager to support their children within the high school environment. In all schools, it was strongly suggested that parent communication be made via the channel of this case manager, rather than seeking out individual mainstream teachers or administration staff. Parents expressed a common perception that the case manager and/or Head of Special Education Services (HoSES) were the central figures in hindering and preventing effective collaboration between home and school with comments such as 'The support staff simply are not doing their job.'

All parents suggested that teacher responsiveness was paramount to either building and maintaining effective communication or hindering it. Out of ten, nine parents expressed frustration at the level of case manager responsiveness that they experienced. They felt that not only were case managers difficult to establish initial contact with, but also when they

presented concerns regarding their children (academically and behaviourally), these concerns went without any response.

Person 10: It would be good to hear from the case manager, because this doesn't happen at all.

Person 1: On five separate occasions that I'm aware of, bullies had trapped my son in a closet and claimed "they'd trapped the beast." This happened five times before teachers contacted me.....Feedback (from teachers), there is none!

Person 9: They wouldn't pay attention until you got to a stage where you kind of lost it yourself. I knew I was being aggressive but I didn't want to be.

Person 5: Everyday my son gets sent home due to bullying from other students targeting his hearing sensitivities, we keep reporting this stuff, however nothing gets looked into.

Additionally, it was expressed that case managers communicated reactively with parents. That is, the support staff would initiate communication only in response to negative student behaviour or academic shortcomings. It is through these reactive discussions that parents are finding out about previous events concerning their child. This lack of responsiveness from parents presents as a significant frustration for parents.

Person 1: I'm not being told about incidents and detentions. When I find out weeks later, I think 'Hang on! That's a classic Aspie problem. Why's he being reprimanded for that?'

Parents strongly felt that this lack of staff responsiveness occurred due to the lack of willingness and individual attitudes of case managers and their line manager (HoSES). The perceived negative attitudes of case managers toward families and their child with ASD strongly influenced the parent's confidence and ability in engaging with the school.

Person 3: I ring up and I hear 'sigh' and I know she's thinking 'Oh, not her again!'... I got to the stage where I was reluctant to ring because I hated hearing that sigh.....I don't want to hear that sigh ever again!

The majority of parents had encountered numerous negative interactions with case managers. This often resulted in a change of case managers, which never improved communication between home and school. This has resulted in parents viewing case

managers as irrelevant and disposable. Parents have found that in order to gain suitable feedback in an appropriate timeframe, they need to bypass the case manager.

Person 4: *There's no point mucking around with the case manager, you go straight to the top. I will give the case manager one chance, and five days later I'll be asking 'why's nothing happening?' I will give them one chance to fix the problem and if they don't fix it the first time, they're not going to, so I go straight to the top.*

Person 1: *I have FINALLY got some feedback: through basically sitting there and having a tantrum in front of the HoSES.*

Only one participant in the group expressed a positive relationship between herself and the school. She attributed this to the effective facilitation of communication by her case manager. Parents additionally expressed that a lack of communication presented a barrier to them participating in informed decision making.

Person 3: *He hasn't been able to do computer at school because there's a lot of theory so they don't allow him to do it. He's very musical, but he's not allowed to do music because there's theory involved. I haven't participated in the decision to take him out of these classes. I didn't even know.*

Communication within School

It emerged through the focus groups that parents were largely dissatisfied with the present communication system related to special education programs within school. It was discussed that there was not an effective method for distributing information from the child's case managers to the mainstream teaching staff.

Person 7: *My child has six teachers, and none of them knew he had a disability.*

Person 1: *My child had a situation where Special Education staff had not communicated to teachers that he has Aspergers.....he was given an assignment, misinterpreted it and failed. I felt like I failed.*

The parents ascertained this problem stems from the lack of responsiveness of case managers and support staff. There was a consensus among parents that mainstream academic staff supported their children appropriately according to their knowledge. Parents felt the limited communication within a school setting was the responsibility of case managers. This lack of communication within schools is requiring parents to meander from the suggested communication pathway between 'home and case manager.' A majority of parents make

additional phone calls and meeting times to meet with mainstream staff to ensure their child is being catered for appropriately.

Person 10: My biggest difficulty is that the support staff; case managers and the HoSES aren't giving information or providing additional support. The mainstream teachers are understanding but it's up to me to speak with them individually.

Person 1: He (my child's case manager) scolded me when I tried to email his class teachers directly. He said that all communication had to be passed through him.

Person 7: Mainstream teachers have no understanding unless a parent goes in, sits down, and tells them.

Modifications for Students with ASD

Half of the parents involved in the focus group stated that the single most significant barrier impacting on parent engagement with school is the lack of knowledge that case managers and other support personnel have regarding ASD and what this means for their child's learning. Parents felt that SEP teachers often displayed a lack of understanding of ASD to devise modifications to curriculum and behaviour support meaningfully for the child. Not only do parents feel teaching staff lack ASD-specific knowledge, they additionally feel that among SEP teachers, there is no passion for this particular cohort of students.

*Person 2: I believe this is a systemic issue. I think there needs to be more education .
..and more opportunity for teachers to learn about Aspergers.*

Person 4: Education is for all human beings, there is ignorance in what Aspergers involves.

Parent 5: The fact that parents treat children with ASD as though they're intellectually impaired affects parent/ teacher relationships.

The teacher's inability to understand and accommodate the child with ASD has a negative impact on the parent relationship with the school setting. It was found that in situations where teachers displayed an inability to respond appropriately to the child's individual needs, parents would have increased involvement with the school. However, this involvement is fraught with resentment and anxiety as parents are involving themselves in ways they feel they should not have to. If parents feel their child is not being catered for appropriately, their workload, and consequently parental stress is increased thus affecting the nature of the relationship parents have with the school.

Person 8: *He has a learning support teacher available but it feels like I'm doing her work. I believe, I'm doing her job.... he had no idea how to read the timetable so I ended up colour coding a timetable. Now he looks at a colour and knows what subject he has. I had to do all of this stuff!*

Person 10: *If teachers don't do this (scaffold for the child) then we're having to do this at home which is so stressful for the family.*

In the instances where teachers were making modifications for the child, parents felt that teachers had overlooked the child as an individual, and created a 'generic ASD' adjustment without exploring the child's individual needs, challenges and strengths. This further impacted on the child's ability to function in the school environment.

Person 1: *My son had an Art assignment. Teachers constantly kept giving him extra time to complete the assignment however he didn't need extra time. What he needed was help.....the SEP staff should have known this!*

Person 5: *She's bored. Bored out of her brain and this is where behaviour problems kick in. They will not give her more challenging work. I ask for it, but there is no change.*

Person 10: *They gave my child a coloured timetable because that's a typical ASD strategy, but my child hates colour. I had to make it again without the colour.*

It is a concern for parents that inappropriate academic adjustments are contributing to stressful responses and negative behaviours from their children within the school environment. This impacts on the parents' ability to engage with the school successfully, as it places their child in a negative position, and further contributes to parental stress. Out of ten, six parents relayed stories of their experiences with suspension. All six parents said they understood the suspension, however felt that the teachers had not implemented any proactive strategies, or responded to initial escalating behaviour.

Family Stress

Throughout the focus group, a few parents became quite tearful when relaying their personal experiences. They made comment as to 'finally being allowed' to share and openly discuss their experiences with schools. All parents felt that ineffective communication between both settings increased stressful experiences for the child, further increasing stress in the family home.

Person 3: *If nothing functions properly in my child's school environment, they'll come home stressed and this makes it harder for us to look after them there.*

Person 5: *The kids come home.... they're angry. All we can do is be a sounding board and validate what's going on with them.*

It was expressed that the role of the sibling needed to be considered as well.

Person 8: *Even though the learning support teacher is there, they aren't helping. My child's sister would have to assist him get organised.*

Person 5: *Teachers often rely on her brother to take home notes, however this puts her brother under stress.*

Participants relayed that teachers have chosen to use the sibling as a vehicle of communication, sending notes and communication home via this child.

Parents expressed a desire to learn more and up-skill themselves.

Person 9: *It's not just my child. As an adult, I need strategies to get through the day as well.*

They expressed the hope that teachers could provide strategies for them, and that in return, they could assist teachers. There was a desire amongst participants for improved partnerships with the school for this reason.

Discussion

There was an overwhelming sharing of experiences amongst participants that demonstrated parents had to be at 'crisis stage' or of visibly heightened stress for SEP teachers and case managers to respond in a fashion that parents considered responsive. Furthermore, parents felt that teachers only sought parental engagement following persistent disruptive behaviour or student meltdowns. It would appear from this feedback, that teacher communicative style with parents is quite reactive. Reactive communication not only results in decreased knowledge sharing, it results in increased experiences of 'placing blame,' (Strom & Strom, 2002) and inclines toward a deficit based system of support (Drolet, Paquin & Soutyrine, 2007). Thus, this reactive system of communication tends toward negative experiences for the family and child. This demonstrates a strong need for review of practice amongst special education staff. There needs to be consideration as to why teachers are responding reactively, and what measures can be put in place to increase their level of responsiveness.

The most disconcerting finding was that parents felt their students are not being catered for appropriately within the school environment. Parents suggested the primary negative impact on parent – school engagement was a lack of, or inappropriate adjustments being made for their child behaviourally and academically. This is a multi faceted concern. If students are not being supported appropriately, it affects their ability to function without stress and incidents within the school environment. This additionally is impacting on parent and family levels of stress in two ways. Firstly, students are bringing stress home from the school environment. Secondly, lack of teacher directed adjustments results in family having to take on further responsibility for creating and ensuring implementation of adjustments, further requiring their time to be taken away from home duties and increasing their workload. Parents who experience frequent negative encounters due to the schools inability to appropriately cater for their child quickly become fatigued (Macfarlane, 2006). This has negative ramifications on parent and teacher relationships as families start to resent the position they've been put into. It is for these reasons that parents express a strong concern regarding the level of teacher knowledge, experiences and training in assisting students with ASD to access education. It is consistently found in research that appropriate levels of teacher training correlate with effective management of students with ASD (“Foster, 2005,” “Mohay & Reid, 2007,” “Murik, Shuddock, Ashburner, Zivianni, Rodger, 2009,” “Seymour, 2000”).

Furthermore, it is an objective in the Department of Education and Training Strategic Plan 2010 - 2014 to “*manage resources effectively to strengthen service delivery.*” (Queensland Government, ND, p14). This is inclusive of human resources and involves education services to develop and/ or ensure a quality and skilled workforce. To contribute meaningfully toward this objective and the improvement of education to students with ASD, it would be of benefit to gauge the level of disability specific training support teachers in Queensland Special Education Programs possess and have access to. This will ensure further accountability in developing quality curriculum and appropriate adjustments for this cohort of students.

While the design of this research has been effective in gaining rich data surrounding the topic, there are some limitations with the focus group design that does affect the ability for results to be generalised. The small number of participants and the ‘convenience nature’ of focus groups affect generalisation (Stewart, Prem, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). The results of this particular research would have proved to be more significant had a larger sample size been accessed. In considering these limitations, operation of focus groups has been an

effective research strategy. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) maintain that this research format is an effective way to embrace pedagogy, politics and interpretive methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p397). Additionally, focus groups remove the constraints of individual memory and further share the collective thought of a group of participants. This research has been invaluable in collating parent experiences and areas of concern in this defined area of study. There have been some very clear outcomes that provide a solid basis for review of practice within school and policy systems.

Conclusion

Ultimately, parents regard their engagement with school as pivotal in supporting their children behaviourally and socially. Parents were able to identify a significant number of barriers affecting their ability to engage effectively with the school setting. The most significant barriers included teacher attitude, lack of teacher knowledge and training, and lack of responsiveness from SEP teachers. It is seen through parent and child experiences that SEP staff are responding reactively to the families needs, thus supporting a collaborative relationship only when they've identified a stress response from either the caregiver or the child. This is not an effective practice in supporting the student or their families emotionally or behaviourally and generates a negative relationship and experiences (Brookman-Frazer, 2011).

It is an alarming finding from this research to ascertain that appropriate adjustments are not being made to support students with ASD learning behaviourally and academically within the secondary school environment. This hinders the ability for students to achieve most effectively, and additionally increases the caregivers workload. It can therefore be made clear that the most significant conclusion from these results is that further research needs to be undertaken to ascertain the level of disability specific training specialist teaching staff have acquired, or have the opportunity to undertake. Not only will this assist in generating a more supportive and enhanced learning environment for students with ASD, it will contribute to the creation of more informed and capable citizens post school.

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Appendix:

Six Guiding Questions for Focus Group Interviews

1. How important do you feel home/ school relationships are in a high school setting?
Please explain
2. How do you achieve active participation in decision making for your child's education program?
3. Can you identify anything that adds strain to the parent/ teacher relationship?
4. How do you feel your ideas regarding your child's education are valued?
5. As a parent what affects your levels of assertiveness with teachers?
6. Has your child been involved in the schools behaviour management structures (i.e., suspensions, detentions etc)? How do you feel this affects parent-teacher relationships?