

Transition of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders from School to Working Life

*A Qualitative Interview Study from
Educators' Perspective*

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“When a seedling is transplanted from one place to another, the transplantation may be a stimulus or a shock. The careful gardener seeks to minimize shock so that the plant is re-established as (easily) as possible” (Cleave et al., 1982, p.195)

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Abstract

Transition from school to employment is a critical period in the lives of students with disabilities which further affects the quality of their adult lives. For individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders transition is particularly demanding due to numerous challenges associated with the nature of the disorder. For the professionals working with such students transition entails a complex long-term process of preparing the student for the life beyond school with the final aim of inclusive employment. This study seeks to investigate educators' perspective on providing transition from school to employment by looking at three critical aspects: strategies, best practices and barriers. Four educators working in an inclusive mainstream high school were interviewed. The findings indicated that transition to inclusive employment was a challenge due to a combination of barriers arising at different levels: individual barriers associated with the nature of disorder, the barriers connected to the gap in expectation between parents and educators, barriers arising from established transition routines and barriers emerging from the society. Informants predominantly addressed barriers arising from the student (associated with challenges of ASD) by implementing a number of strategies (e.g., assessment, early planning, parental involvement). The most effective application of strategies educators identified as their best practices, whereas absence of some strategies, recognized by literature as essential for transition, turned into barriers.

Key words: Autism Spectrum Disorders, ASD, Transition, Employment

Foreword

This dissertation is my small endeavour to contribute to the inclusion of young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Even though this study focuses on transition, transition is not an aim in itself, it is only a pathway to the desired destination - inclusion in employment. I believe that persons with disabilities need to be included not only when they are children and have a right for inclusive education, but also when they exit schools and set off to their adult lives. I believe that inclusion is a way to embrace and to help everyone live meaningful high quality prosperous lives.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Research Questions

Leaving school is both an exciting and demanding time for individuals with disabilities. It opens up new opportunities, but is also fraught with challenges as young people have to move from an ‘entitlement-driven system’ to numerous ‘eligibility-driven systems’ (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p.16). This is particularly relevant for adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), as employment opportunities have traditionally been limited for them (Hendricks & Wehman, 2012).

This research looks into teachers’ experiences of providing transition from school to employment for their students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). By transition this study understands a transfer from the set of roles of a student to the set of roles of an adult worker. In particular, it focuses on what educators can do to facilitate this transfer and make the employment outcomes of students in the spectrum more satisfying, which so far have been quite discouraging. Only 20-33% of individuals with ASD are employed (Howlin, Goode, Hutton & Rutter, 2004; Wilczynski, Trammel & Clarke, 2013), with little over 6% having full time competitive employment (Chappel & Sommers, 2010; Shattuck et al., 2012). Nevertheless, 61% of the unemployed individuals with ASD have expressed their desire to work (National Autistic Society, 2014).

However, as indicated by previous research, individuals with ASD can be meaningfully included in working life provided that they properly equipped with supports (Wehman et al., 2014). It implies that often full potential of students with autism remains uncovered. Given the heterogeneity of the disorder and multiplicity of aspirations of adolescents with ASD, educators are faced with an uneasy task of delving deeply into multifaceted strengths and needs of each student and tailoring the transition individually. To the best of my knowledge, little research has focused on practices and strategies of providing transition for students with ASD. Most of the existing research is of a descriptive character, giving few recommendations for practice (Lee & Carter, 2012; Wehman, Shall, Carr, Targett, West & Cifu, 2014). As Wehman and colleagues (2014) maintain there is “a desperate need for aggressive research

agenda” to improve the post-school results of individuals with autism (p.8). This present study makes an endeavor to look into experience of Norwegian interviewee-teachers of working with transitioning youth with ASD. Successful strategies and practices discovered in this study can potentially be adopted into other teachers’ toolkits.

This study will seek to answer the main research question:

What are educators’ experiences of providing transition from school to employment for their students with ASD?

By answering the following sub-questions:

What strategies do educators employ to provide a smooth transition from school to employment?

What best practices of providing transition do educators have?

What barriers to successful transition have educators experienced?

By *strategies* this study means plans, methods or adaptations made for achieving an effective transition from school to employment and by *best (positive) practice* an implementation of a strategy that has consistently produced good results.

1.2 What is ASD?

ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) is a developmental disorder which usually appears during the first three years of life and significantly affects three areas (also known as “triad of impairments”): language and communication, social skills and imagination and flexibility of thought (Hewitt, 2005, p.14). Other features typical for individuals with ASD include repetitive movements, resistance to changes, as well as uncommon reactions to sensory experiences (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). These characteristics limit everyday functioning and have an adverse effect on a child’s educational performance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; IDEA, 2004). Intelligence span of individuals in the

spectrum ranges from severe and profound learning difficulties to well-above average intelligence (Jones, 2002). All individuals in the spectrum are affected to a varying degree, each one exhibits unique strengths and needs (Holliman, 2014; Jones, 2002). Depending on differences in behavior, the disorder can be classified into subgroups: high-functioning autism, Asperger syndrome, semantic pragmatic disorder (SPD), atypical autism, pervasive developmental disorder - not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). However, in this work I will use the terms autism and ASD interchangeably referring to the whole spectrum of disorders.

In the field of Special and Inclusive Education the topic of children with ASD is one of rapidly changing (Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman & Anastasiow, 2009). Three decades ago ASD was considered to be a rare disorder, while today it is the most common one: according to Center for Disease Control (2010) as many as 1 in 88 children is affected by it (Holliman, 2014). In the USA there has been a 1,354% increase in the incidence of ASD within two decades (Wehman, 2006). The causes for the increase are not clear, but it may be assumed that a rise in the awareness and widening the diagnosis framework contributed to fewer people “slipping through the net” (Jones, 2002; Wehman, 2006).

With increased prevalence of ASD, extensive research has focused on young children and intervention programs (Kirk, 2009; Hart, Grigal & Weir, 2010; Hillier et al., 2007). While early intervention programs have proven to have positive outcomes for children with ASD, comparatively few intervention and research programs have addressed young adults with ASD (Kirk et al., 2009; Hart et al., 2010; Hillier et al., 2007; Lee & Carter, 2012). In particular, limited research has been conducted on transition of adolescents with ASD from school to working life (Hart et al., 2010). Nevertheless, ASD is a lifelong disorder (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Even though symptoms may slightly ameliorate as individuals with ASD progress into adulthood, they still encounter many challenges and may need supports to tackle them (Wehman et al., 2014).

1.3 Inclusion and Disability

Inclusion has become the “global agenda”: 158 countries have already shown their commitment to inclusive values by signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2014). By inclusion I mean a complex multileveled

phenomenon comprising the level of values, such as belonging and participation, the level of rights, and the level of empirical evidence, as described by Norwich (2005). While many states have admitted the goodness of inclusive values and have granted rights to persons with disabilities, it remains a challenge to achieve a synthesis between all three levels of inclusion.

Behind the present-day rhetoric on inclusion stands a long history of segregation and social oppression. One of the major reasons for the exclusion of disabled population was that they were considered incapable of making contribution to the economy (Barnes, 1997). Disability was viewed as a personal tragedy stemming from individual deficits (The Medical Model). Therefore disabled people needed to be protected and segregated in an array of medical and residential institutions. However, the system of welfare, ‘created to look after the helpless’, only contributed to their social and economic disengagement from the society (Power, Lord & deFranco, 2013, p.6).

The reconceptualization of disability, accompanied by the putting forward of inclusive ideas, was done by the disabled people themselves (Thomas, 2004). In the 70-ies the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) developed the idea that it was society not the impairment that disabled them (The Social Model). They maintained that they wanted and could work if barriers were removed. Disability was claimed to be social oppression and not a medical condition that can be treated or cured (Oliver, 1990). The problem was relocated from individual bodies to the society. Therefore the focus changed from medical interventions to barrier removal.

Although the ideas of UPIAS had a profound impact on the disability movement on the political arena, within academia they encountered criticism for its over-politicization and failure to recognize the causal relationship between impairment and disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; Thomas, 2002). The relational model of disability, originating from the Nordic countries, seems to have found the balance between the two previous models. It makes three key assumptions about disability: 1) it is a person-environment mismatch; 2) it is contextual; 3) it is relative (Goodley, 2011). In other words, it means that disability is a complex interaction of various factors: health, psychological and emotional experiences, physical environment, social, cultural, attitudinal, economic and legal factors. Challenges can arise in

any of the dimensions. It is important to understand when and where it is possible to intervene to tackle these challenges. Removing barriers only partially solves the problem as it creates *formal equality*, but unless extra support is provided, disabled people will not have good outcomes (Shakespeare, 2013).

1.4 Active Citizenship and Employment

Alterations within the concept of disability were accompanied by the emergence of the concept of “active citizenship”, which became one of the buzzwords of today’s disability discourse. Citizenship is associated with having both rights and obligations (Morris, 2005). According to Morris (2005), who is an insider to the issue of disability, active citizenship comprises three essential components: self-determination, participation and contribution. The first two components are related to the rights of a citizen, while the last element of contribution - to the obligations. Self-determination implies making informed choices and decisions about one’s own life and is particularly important for exercising autonomy. The concept of participation goes beyond political participation and also comprises the wider concepts of family and community participation. Contribution entails being a part of country’s economy, living of one’s own earned income and paying taxes. As Blunkett (2003, p.16) asserts “a citizen cannot truly be an equal member of the community if he or she is reduced to a state of permanent dependency on the support of others. If a person is simply reliant on income transfers, he is not genuinely free and enabled to participate”. Employment is a tool for making a contribution, and is hence an inseparable element of active citizenship.

The importance of inclusion of persons with disabilities in working life does not only amount to the economic gain for the society. It is also affects self-identity of persons with disabilities and quality of life they live (Winn & Hay, 2009). Participation in employment has a positive effect on social and psychological well-being of disabled individuals, who are more prone to anxiety and depression disorders compared to their counterparts without disabilities (Winn & Hay, 2009). Employment is a means of integration in the society (Greve, 2009): it gives an opportunity to establish new relationships, as well as the feeling of acceptance, adequacy and meaningfulness (Buli Holmberg, 2004; Winn & Hay, 2009; Wehman, 2006).

1.5 Measures to Facilitate Employment of Persons with Disabilities

The salience of inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment has been underlined in national and international documents. For instance, Article 27 of The United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) stipulates “the right of the people with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labor market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities”.

The European Employment Strategy, which is a framework for the EU countries to analyze and coordinate their policies, also identifies social inclusion as one of the priorities (European Commission, 2014). The overarching aim of the strategy is economic growth as a response to the financial crisis. It can be achieved by increasing labor supply, which also encompasses persons with disabilities. Therefore one of the major considerations of the framework is improving adaptability of enterprises to match the diverse needs of potential employees (European Commission, 2014).

Furthermore, two tangible trends can be observed in European policies regarding integration of disabled individuals in working life: quotas and mainstreaming (Greve, 2009). Quota-system forces employers into hiring a certain number of employees with disabilities. Quota schemes vary from country to country and can be represented in the form of: recommendations, obligations or obligations supported by sanctions. The argument for quota schemes is that they make work accessible. The argument against is that employers tend to hire persons with disabilities closest to the labor market thus neglecting external recruitment. Mainstreaming presupposes involving persons with disabilities into policy-making and centering policies on needs of disabled population, but avoids distinguishing them into a separate group. The concerns raised by the two trends boil seem to down to the “dilemma of difference”: treating persons with disabilities as same at risk of failing to meet their needs, or providing them with necessary resources and supports at the cost of admitting their difference (Norwich, 2005; Terzi, 2010).

1.6 Context of Norway

In Norway there are no quotas obliging employers to hire persons with disabilities. Norwegian policies, on the contrary, are shaped in the framework of mainstreaming; it means that the focus is on barrier removal. Norway has been prioritizing employment of persons with disabilities and increasing funds to address this issue (Tøssebro, 2009). However, no considerable success has been achieved yet. The employment rate among disabled population is 45.3% while among the whole population (including disabled people) the employment rate is 74.8% (Tøssebro, 2009). The employment rate has hardly improved since 2000 when statistics started to be collected (Tøssebro, 2009).

Nevertheless, Norway has been quite effective in inclusion students with disabilities in education. Inclusion is a “basic tenet of the governmental educational policies” (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2010-2011, p.4). Since the reforms conducted in the 90-s aiming at inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream schools, most of the special schools have been closed and every child has the unconditional right to attend neighborhood school and receive special educational assistance if needed. The goal of education is to equip students with knowledge and competence, which will help them to realize their full potential in working life (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2010-2011).

Meanwhile, inclusive education has been identified as a predictor of effective transition into adulthood and employment (Barnes, 1991; Shah, 2007; Wehman et al., 2014). Mainstream schools in contrast to special school do not shield students from the realities of society (Barnes, 1991). Inclusive education develops in students with disabilities skills necessary for adulthood. Non-disabled peers serve as role models and feedback on the behavior of their counterparts with disabilities, thus increasing their social competence. Moreover, mainstream schools give students with disabilities an opportunity to study a broad curriculum with a range of subjects, which are considered to be important for future economic participation (Shah, 2007; Shah, Travers & Arnold, 2004).

Given the encouraging progress Norway made towards inclusion in schools and the employment outcomes of the disabled population which were not as encouraging, I decided to investigate how transition from school to employment is conducted in Norway. I consider

transition to be a critical link between school and employment and I believe that it should ideally function as a pathway from inclusive education to inclusive employment. If one aims at improving employment outcomes, measures need to address the foundation of employment, which is transition.

2 Literature Review

I start this chapter with centering on the phenomenon of transition: I provide the definition of transition and I outline the theoretical framework for the phenomenon, which this research uses as a foundation. I give an outline of transition routines in three different contexts: the UK, the USA and Norway (the choice of the countries was determined by the availability of related research in English). Further, I focus on essential strategies for effective transition for adolescents with special needs in general. I admit the heterogeneity of this population, but some aspects of transition are universal and with a certain level of a modification can be applied to all adolescents regardless of their kind of disability. Then I look into characteristics typical for individuals with ASD and the effect they have on transition to employment. Finally, I highlight some promising elements of a smooth transition for young adults in the spectrum.

The materials for this chapter were collected during the period of seven months: from February 2014 to August 2014. The literature was collected both systematically and unsystematically. The electronic databases PsycInfo and ERIC were searched in February and in July by using the combination of key words “transition”, “employment”, “ASD”/ “autism”. Unfortunately when I conducted the first search, I did not record the number of hits that I received. The second time (July) I had 26 hits. However, I was familiar with most of the articles, except for some recent publications from 2014. I also made some unsystematic research. The articles I obtained had some references which seemed relevant and valuable to my research. The ones that were available to access are used in this work as well.

This chapter makes numerous references to National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) which so far has served as the best source on current transition practices for young adults with disabilities, including ASD (Wehman et al., 2014). NLTS2 is a governmentally-funded 10-year study in the USA. It documented experiences of youth within 12 categories of disabilities as they progressed into adulthood.

2.1 Phenomenon of Transition

2.1.1 What is Transition?

There seems to be a relative agreement among researchers as to what transition to adulthood comprises (Rydzewska, 2012). It typically involves finishing school, starting post-secondary education or getting a job, becoming involved in the community, experiencing appropriate social and personal relationships (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Transition from school to employment is one of the domains of transition into adulthood (Buli Holmberg, 2004).

Wehman (2006) defines transition as “life changes, adjustments, and cumulative experiences that occur in lives of young people as they move from school environments to independent living and work environments” (p.4). Van Gennep (1960 in Firth, Couch & Everiss, 2009) emphasized that the change of settings also leads to a change in the identity of a person.

Meanwhile, European Agency (2002) sees transition in a more holistic way: besides the two important components of “transfer” and “change” they suggest the third important component of “process”, as transition requires significant preparatory work and planning. This research focuses particularly on the component of “process” which aims at making the transfer smoother and changes and outcomes more favorable.

2.1.2 Theoretical Framework

Transition is a complex phenomenon and a field of study (European Agency, 2002). Researchers have worked on the development of a general theoretical framework that could contribute to the common understanding of “transition” (Firth et al., 2009). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory seems to dominate in the current thinking on transitions (Firth et al., 2009; O’Kane, 2007)

The essence of the theory is that each human is seen as a “growing dynamic entity” who develops through reciprocal interaction with the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.21). Environment, from Bronfenbrenner’s perspective, is not limited to a single immediate setting, but is rather “a set of nested structures” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.3). These structures are known as systems and can be depicted as concentric circles with the developing person being at the core.

The innermost circle is *microsystem* which presents “a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a giving setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.23). It can be relationships with parents, friends, teachers, etc. Since development is caused by interaction and relationships, it is seen as advantage for the developing person to be involved in plural microsystems.

The second level *mesosystem* represents relations between microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) contended that mesosystem plays a decisive role in a person’s development as the quality of relations can lead either to new opportunities or to risks. However, successful cooperation between settings requires that they have an effective communication, joint participation and information about each other.

Next two systems *exosystem* and *macrosystem* do not have the developing person as an active participant; nevertheless, they have an influence on him/her. Exosystem refers the settings on the local level, e.g. employment of parents, their network of friends, an older sibling studying at the same school. Macrosystem extends to the level of a particular culture or country and refers to such variables customs, values, and laws. Educational policies in 2 different countries can serve as a vivid example of the impact that macrosystems exert: in Belarus a 10-year old girl with Down’s syndrome has to go to a segregated special school, while in Norway a girl of the same age with the same disorder most likely will be in an inclusive mainstream school.

As person is constantly moving through the ecological space, experiences new settings and undertakes new roles, he/she inevitably goes through *ecological transitions*, which Bronfenbrenner (1979) considered to be both instigators and results of developments. The developmental significance of transitions stems from the fact that they consistently involve a change in roles. Roles have the power to affect how a person is treated, how he/she behaves and eventually even how he/she thinks.

Transitions appear to be challenging and critical to the ones who undergo them; notwithstanding, they are gateways to new opportunities. The quality of relationships between

the person and environment determines the quality of transition. The promising aspects of a high-quality transition are 1) having student in the center of transition process 2) stakeholders (family, teachers, outside agencies) working collaboratively with each other and with the person in transition. Bronfenbrenner (1979) also highlighted that transitions are smoother if a person does not experience it on his/her own, but together with someone. E.g., it would be easier for 2-3 people with Asperger syndrome (AS) to transition to a new employment place than for a single person with AS. The support that people in transition receive from each other helps them to integrate easier in new settings.

2.1.3 Overview of Transition Provision in Different Contexts

Transition of young people with disabilities to adulthood has received considerable attention both in governmental policies and research in recent years (Beyer & Kaehne, 2008; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Wehman, 2006).

The Salamanca Framework for Action (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994) states that

Young people with special educational needs should be helped to make an effective transition from school to adult working life. Schools should assist them to become economically active and provide with the skills needed in everyday life, offering training in skills which respond to the social and communication demands and expectations of adult life (p.34).

Likewise, transition has been in the center of attention of the UK government policies (Department for Education and Science, 2001; Department of Health, 2000). Students with special educational needs (SEN), who have statements, are by legislation provided with a transition plan. The process of devising the plan is rigidly planned: when a child is in year 9, schools hold a meeting with Career Services - Connexions and preferably health services and other agencies. The plan usually focuses on both post-school arrangements and ongoing school provision. The plan is reviewed annually and upon school completion transferred (upon parents' and young person's agreement) to the next educational sector or provision

(DfES, 2001). It might be seen as a positive practice, as it contributes to the continuity of transition.

Students with SEN but without statements might be at a disadvantage compared to their peers with statements. They are not entitled to a Transition Plan. The Code of Practice states that these students should be provided guidance, which “might include the provision of school/college link courses or work placements and should involve the different local agencies concerned” (DfES, 2001, p.133). Statement seems to be a guarantee of access to support in further education or employment.

Similarly to England, in the USA the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates that transition planning for individuals with disabilities should begin by the age of 16. Measurable post-secondary goals are to be included in Individual Education Plan (IEP). The plan is devised by Individualized Education Program Team, which is composed of parents, at least one regular education teacher, at least one special teacher, a representative from local educational agency, an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results and whenever possible the child with a disability (IDEA, 2004). The plans, like transition plans of English students with Statements of SEN, undergo annual revision. Moreover, on the federal level The Workforce Investment Act (1998) requires vocational rehabilitation agencies to reach out for schools and devise Individualized Programs for Employment for students with disabilities (Wilczynsky et al., 2013). Considerable emphasis is put on development of vocational skills during school. It results from the fact that adolescence is considered a critical period for acquiring work experiences, which are prerequisites of post-school employment (Lee & Carter, 2012).

In contrast, Norway, which is considered to be more progressive in terms of inclusive education than many countries, does not have any national guidelines, prescribing how to conduct transition or how to include everyone in working life (Buli-Holmberg, 2004). Even though the government sets the goal of inclusion of people of disabilities in working life (Arbeids- og Sosialdepartemente, 1991-1992), schools and regional agencies are responsible of finding a way how to do it. There are no established routines on how schools and agencies should collaborate. On the positive side, it gives schools and agencies flexibility, on the other

side, the quality of services may vary from county to county depending on how well schools and agencies can organize common work (Buli-Holmberg, 2004). Unlike in England and the USA, there is no obligatory transition plan. However, if it was introduced, it could become a means of coordination of duties between school and agencies (Buli-Holmberg, 2004). Passing the transition plan over to the employer upon school completion, would contribute to the continuity of transition.

2.2 Essential Strategies for High-Quality Transition

Review of the related literature has helped me to deduce that ideally transition should comprise four fundamental stages: assessment, planning, implementation and follow-up. These four stages should cover from 4 to 5 years: 3-4 final years of school education (Chapel & Somers, 2010) and the first year in employment (Buli-Holmberg, 2004).

2.2.1 Assessment as a Foundation for Transition

Assessment serves as a solid basis for transition planning and implementation (Test, Smith & Carter, 2014; Wehman et al., 2014). “No single configuration of transition education will work for every student” (Test et al., p.86). Therefore, assessment is conducted to obtain information about students’ preferences, unique strengths and needs. Moreover, it helps teachers to identify areas that need to be addressed and skills that have to be developed. It is recommended to collect information about the student both formally and informally as multiple perspectives help professionals to get a fuller picture of a student and to be better able to plan transition. If assessment is properly done, educators are better prepared to plan transition and to match available services to the needs of students and support them as they progress into adulthood.

2.2.2 Person-Centered Planning

Person-centered transition planning is widely accepted as a best practice associated with improved life-quality outcomes for students with disabilities (Michaels & Ferrara, 2005). Person-centered planning is a set of individually-oriented approaches to transition, which put a student with disability and their closest people at the forefront of transition, thus

empowering them to assume a central role in shaping the future of the student. Person-centered planning is an “antithesis” to traditional method, in which the ultimate power over futures of youth with disabilities was concentrated in the hands of professionals, responsible for identification of services in accordance with disability labels (Rasheed, Fore & Miller, 2006, p.47). In contrast, person-centered planning marks the shift towards shared ownership and accountability (Michaels & Ferrara, 2005). Moreover, the focus is relocated from individual deficits to strengths and capacities. The idea is to have individuals express their vision of their future and family, professionals and community make common efforts to provide supports for student to achieve his or her goals (Miner, 2014). I assume that values underlying person-centered planning reflect the fundamental change in understanding of the concept of disability, which I described earlier in this work.

Even though the term “person-centered planning” draws attention to planning, it is not restricted to planning (Michaels & Ferrara, 2006). It is rather an ongoing dynamic process, which starts with planning and is followed by implementation, then evaluation and constant changes are introduced as a result of evaluation (Miner, 2014; Rasheed et al., 2006). It is recommended to have a facilitator in transition planning, who is responsible for synchronizing meetings and activities (Miner, 2014, Rasheed et al., 2006). Rasheed and colleagues (2006) outlined five principal steps in person-centered planning: 1) Arranging meetings with the stakeholders; 2) Devising personal profile; 3) Developing vision for future; 4) Working out particular action steps; 5) Facilitating on-going supports and networking. One of the most effective strategies in person-centered planning is ‘circle of support’ (Miner, 2014; Rasheed et al., 2006). Circles of support are designed as a diagram of five concentric circles, with student in its core. The diagram illustrates the relationships at different levels the student is involved in (e.g., family, friends, school, job providers), and identifies the persons who can provide help at each level. I suppose that person-centered planning and the strategy of circles of support in particular can be seen as practical application of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory.

2.2.3 Transition Partnerships and Collaboration

Effective transition “cannot be just paper, meetings and hope” (Wehman et al., 2014, p. 4), it has to be an active functional collaboration between all the stakeholders involved in it (Buli-

Holmberg, 2004; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking & Mack, 2002). The stakeholders include children and parents, schools, educational-psychological services, employment agencies, vocational rehabilitation services, transition services and other community agencies. Partnerships between stakeholders are expected to be “ideal vehicles” in providing transition services (Kaehne & Beyer, 2009, p.112).

Nevertheless, in practice this vision might be hard to implement (Rydzewska, 2009). Since transition occurs at the “intersection” of various agencies it appears to be quite a challenging process in organizational terms (Kaehne & Beyer, 2009, p.117). First, each of the providers has their own goals, dictated by the policies. Harmonizing the goals and transparent division of responsibilities must be “the paramount task” of head-teachers and managers of outside agencies (Kaehne & Beyer, 2009, p.117). It is important that there is information flow between providers and that services are not duplicated (Johnson et al., 2002). Second, some of the agencies pay more attention to delivering the service in a proper way rather than working toward achieving the goals of individuals with disabilities (Kaehne & Beyer, 2009). Third, barriers may be found within schools themselves, as they might be unaware of the services and resources available in their community (Shogren & Palmer, 2012). Moreover, school workers often do not have competence regarding transition, as it is not included in teacher education curriculum (Buli-Holmberg, 2004).

In a nutshell, it is important to develop collaboration routines, which would contribute to seamlessness and coherence of transition. As one of the solutions Buli-Holmberg (2004) suggests having a “responsible group” which would comprise members of different agencies. The group would bear the responsibility for the individual during the three stages of transition, including the follow-up stage.

2.2.4 Family Involvement

Family involvement is recognized as another key factor in positive post-school outcomes and successful transition (Defur, Todd-Allen & Getzel, 2001; Michaels & Ferrara, 2005; Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). From the perspective of person-centered planning, parents and family are seen as “equal or valued partners” in the process of transition

(Michaels & Ferrara, 2005, p.294). However, family involvement is more than just attendance of transition planning meetings; it also presupposes active participation and collaboration. It is crucial that families are given a comprehensive explanation of the available services as early as possible (Miner, 2014).

Some of the parents are willing to take a more active part in the meeting, but they are faced with barriers that they do not know how to overcome. For example, one of the barriers that parents face is bureaucracy: parents want to be involved in planning on personal, but not bureaucratic level (Defur et al., 2001). Another barrier is “we-know-best” attitude of professionals, who may fail to see parents as equals (Defur et al., 2001), especially if parents come from a minority or have a lower socio-economic status (Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004). For successful collaboration during the transition planning it is important that there is mutual trust between parents and professionals and that parents are empowered as equal partners.

The role of parents and family cannot be underestimated for students with ASD. Compared to youth in other disability categories, adolescents with ASD experience most difficulty finding a friend when they are in need of one (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). Therefore families often remain their sole source of support, supervision and companionship (Wagner et al., 2005). Moreover, parents can assume the role of translators and interpreters for their son/daughter with autism, thus helping the team of professionals to discern their child’s interests and needs (Wehman, 2006). In addition, further interventions might be needed at home, which add up to the successful outcomes of transition (Wehman, 2006).

2.2.5 Self-determination and Goal-setting

Efforts to increase students’ participation in transition planning and to improve transition outcomes resulted in emergence of a new area of instruction within Special Education, focusing on enhancing self-determination (Wehman, 2006). Self-determination is defined as “being the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995, p.74 in Michaels & Ferrara, 2005, p.291). Self-determination empowers

individuals with disabilities to become self-advocates, take control over their own lives and make independent choices, which they have traditionally been deprived of (Wehman, 2006).

Research shows that there is positive relationship between increased self-determination and favorable transition outcomes (Michaels & Ferrara, 2005; Wehman, 2006; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Young adults with disabilities who receive training in self-determination are more academically productive, are better at problem-solving and have more satisfactory employment outcomes (Wehman, 2014). For example, research by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997), conducted among 80 students with intellectual disability and learning disabilities, showed that student with higher self-determination were more likely to be employed, worked more hours per week and received higher pay.

Furthermore, transition planning gives young people an opportunity to learn more about themselves and to shape their futures (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). But it also requires their active participation in the meeting with transition team. Poor self-determination skills and limited involvement in one's own future can be traced through attendance and participation in planning meeting. For example, results of NLTS2 show that only 22,6% of students with ASD attend the meetings, 44,7% attend but participate very little or not at all, while only 3% of students with ASD act as leaders in the transition planning (Shogren & Plotner, 2012).

2.2.6 Follow-up

Tight follow-up is an essential feature of an effective transition (Buli-Holmberg, 2004). As mentioned above, different agencies can be involved in providing supports for transition. The agencies, as a rule, function in accordance with their own regulations. Therefore, it is important that coordination routines are worked out between agencies and it is determined who is accountable for following the student up when he/ she goes out into employment.

2.3 Challenges that ASD Poses to Transition

Individuals with ASD besides facing the normative challenges associated with transition, face additional challenges associated with the nature of the disorder (Test, Smith & Carter, 2014).

For youth in the spectrum transition is a particularly “tumultuous period” due to deficits in social communication and interaction (Wehman et al., 2014, p.2). They experience difficulties understanding social behavior, fail to observe others personal space, dress inappropriately, talk too much or too little, rely too much on their supervisors (Mahwood & Howlin, 1999). These characteristics considerably limit the scope of vocational activities for individuals with ASD as employers of transition age youth tend to pay attention to social skills of their potential employers (Lee & Carter, 2012). In addition, job hunting process and maintaining relationships with supervisors and coworkers require at least some level of social skills (Lee & Carter, 2012).

Furthermore, behavior of individuals in the spectrum is characterized restrictive repetitive patterns, insistence on sameness and strict observance of routines (APA, 2013). A slightest change can inflict extreme distress for them (APA, 2013). Transition is associated with ubiquitous contextual and social role changes (Taylor & Mailick, 2014). Moreover, transition is characterized by a decrease in imposed structure on students. While for some youth it can be deliberating, for individuals with autism, on the contrary, it is particularly demanding (Taylor & Mailick, 2014). Due to the multitude of changes and loss of structure, individuals in the spectrum are at the risk of developing anxiety disorder during the transition period (Test et al., 2014).

Adolescents with ASD, compared to youth with other disabilities, report lower levels of self-determination and personal autonomy. The results of NLTS2 show that only 22.9% of students with ASD reported having high personal autonomy; this percentage is substantially lower than among youth with other disability categories (Wagner et al., 2007). Overall, they feel less confident about making decisions independently and have to rely on their families (Wehman et al., 2014). Moreover, they find it is hard for them to understand the whole notion of life-planning (Fullerton & Coyne, 1999). It is a challenge for them to maintain perspective and insight (Wehman, 2006) as well as to have a subjective sense of time (Fullerton & Coyne, 1999), which is needed for the ability to plan one’s future. In addition, when they set goals for

future, they may be focused on one narrow area. They often need help exploring alternatives and broadening their thinking, as well as breaking the main goal (e.g., obtaining supported employment) into a sequence of achievable steps (Fullerton & Coyne, 1999).

2.4 Employment Landscape for Youth with ASD

Challenging characteristics and behaviors are often the reason for individuals with ASD to be considered unsuitable for employment (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Indeed, research has proven that young adults ASD are less likely to retain their jobs for behavioral reasons rather than for the inability to cope with tasks (Westbrook et al., 2013). Moreover, findings of the research conducted by Shattuck and colleagues (2012), based on the large-scale data of NLST2, identified that youth with ASD have lower rates of employment compared to their peers with intellectual disability, speech/language impairments and learning disabilities (Shattuck et al., 2012). They are at an over 50% risk of remaining completely disengaged from employment or other post-school activities in the first two years after school exit (Shattuck et al., 2012). The landscape of employment opportunities for youth in the spectrum is further aggravated by the fact that if they do not join the workforce shortly after school exit, there is a 70% chance of their not being gainfully employed throughout life (Rebuck, in Holmes, 2007).

The range of available employment options for individuals with ASD includes: sheltered workshops, supported employment and competitive employment. Sheltered workshops are vocational and non-vocational programs only for people with disabilities in segregated settings (Wehman, 2006). Supported employment, on the contrary, is real paid employment in community-based settings with a range of supports offered on-site (Wehman, 2006, Wilczynski et al., 2013). Competitive employment, like supported employment, involves work in community-based settings, but without any additional support provided and individuals with disabilities are paid at the same wage rate as individuals without disabilities.

Sheltered employment causes concerns as it does not encourage social inclusion (Greve, 2009). Furthermore, payment there is comparatively low, which puts financial stability of employees at risk. Sheltered workshops can only be justified if they serve as a transition point to supported or competitive employment. However, there is limited evidence on this point.

Supported employment, on the contrary, has proven to be a pathway to inclusion and competitive employment. Sadly, only 6 to 10% of the population with ASD is competitively employed (Wilczynski et al., 2013).

The research has shown that there is a positive relationship between the type of employment and the quality of life of individuals with ASD: those involved in a community-based employment reported that the quality of their lives improved in a meaningful way in the course of a 5-year time span (Garcia-Villamizar, 2002). The results of NLTS-2 show that among students with ASD who have employment as their post-secondary goal: only 22.9% of young people in the spectrum aimed at competitive employment, 38.7% - at supported employment, and almost the same number of 38.8% at sheltered employment (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). Since the overarching goal of transition is achieving a good quality of life, it can be concluded that more students need to aim at inclusive employment. It can be done by working on improvement of self-determination skills of youth with ASD, which will help them to differentiate segregated employment from inclusive employment (Wehman, 2006).

2.5 Transition Strategies for Individuals with ASD

2.5.1 Improving High School Curriculum: Developing Skills, Addressing Strengths and Setting High Expectations

Despite the above-mentioned deficits of youth in the spectrum, they possess a number of strengths. As mentioned by Wehman (2006, p.538) in ASD “dramatic strengths [...] coexist with dramatic weaknesses”. The challenge of providing transition-related instruction for students with ASD is in finding the right balance between addressing the needs and strengths.

Given that the major deficits of individuals in the spectrum are lack of social skills and maladaptive behaviors, interventions addressing these needs are essential for effective transition (Westbrook et al., 2013). Leaving these deficits unattended may result in increased stress exposure, anxiety and depression (Westbrook et al., 2013). Moreover, social skills are key to finding, retaining and progressing within a career (Lee & Carter, 2012). The difficult task, which remains under-researched, is teaching social skills that are related to work (Lee & Carter, 2012). Different social skills may be valued in different career paths. Therefore it is

preferable to identify the skills required in the aspired business and teach them, preferably within the employment setting.

As for the strengths of individuals in the spectrum, they may possess a “tremendous academic and functional potential” (Wehman et al., 2014, p.7). For example, according to the results of NLTS-2 considerably large number of students with autism - 62% reported themselves as possessing very good computer skills (Wagner et al., 2007). The same study showed that students with autism earned more credits than their peers with other disabilities (Wagner et al., 2007). The exceptionally high grade point average of students with ASD and exceptionally low levels of employment indicate that potential of students in the spectrum remains unrealized (Wehman et al., 2014). Wehman and colleagues (2014) insist that academic coursework does not suffer at the expense of other non-academic activities.

The area that seems to be agreed upon is setting high expectations for youth in the spectrum (Test et al., 2014; Wehman et al., 2014). This relates both to professionals and parents. For example, research by Chiang and colleagues (in Test et al., 2014) found that students with ASD whose parents believed that they can enroll in post-secondary education were 3.7 more likely to succeed than the ones not supported by their parents. American Project SEARCH is another proof that students with ASD can keep up with the high expectations (Shall et al., 2012). Project has helped young adults with ASD obtain competitive employment in the result of completion of series of internships with in-site supports. Finding the right environment that matches students’ needs and strengths seems to be one of the keys to success.

2.5.2 ‘Rigor Relevance Relationships’ Framework for Transition

Test and colleagues (2014) suggest a framework for transition of students with ASD based on 3 key components: rigor, relevance and relationships. I will further refer to this framework as the 3-R framework. It addresses the specific needs typical for students with autism, which no other framework has done before. The essence of the approach is that a student with ASD should be provided with rigorous learning opportunities, learning should be relevant to student’s future and relationships with school and community should be promoted.

Rigorous learning opportunities imply access to high-quality instruction, broad curriculum and individualized supports and accommodations. To provide high-quality instruction educators have to be dedicated professionals who have knowledge about the curriculum, nature of the disorder and strategies that help to meet the needs of students with ASD. Regarding broad curriculum, the importance of which this work has already mentioned, for many students it means access to the aspired career path. As students progress in their studies and move towards final stage of school education curriculum becomes more complex, therefore extra supports and accommodations may be particularly needed.

In the category relevance the 3-R framework emphasizes three aspects: career-related skills, self-determination skills and recreation and leisure. Given the poor employment outcomes of students with ASD, it is imperative that while still in high-school, they acquire career-related skills and knowledge (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Test et al., 2014). Examples of career-related activities include field trips to various businesses, career assessment and counseling, vocational courses and job-shadowing programs. An example of a good practice is combining preparatory experiences with actual participating in a job during summer holidays. As for leisure and recreation activities, there are replete opportunities offered by schools and communities. However, students with ASD demonstrate limited participation in these activities. Sweden and colleagues (in Test et al., 2014) suggested a strategy of “opportunity mapping”, which helps students to identify available activities and single out the ones relevant to their future goals. The significance of self-determination skills has already been discussed in this work. Test and colleagues (2014) once again recommend student participation in planning meetings as a means to improving self-determination skills.

The final component of the 3-R framework - relationships stands for building up valued relationships with family, peers, community and formal service providers. Since this work has already focused on family involvement and collaboration between all the stakeholders, including formal service providers, I will highlight only relationships with peers and community. Relationships with peers can positively affect learning; they can give sense of meaningfulness and belonging. However, taking into account the social deficits of individuals with ASD, it can be particularly strenuous for them to develop strong enduring relationships with peers. Therefore specific interventions promoting social connections might be needed.

With regard to community involvement, it is a promising element of a comprehensive transition. As underlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), involvement in each new microsystem opens new opportunities. Likewise, communities can have an extensive range of programs, supports and opportunities which formal services might not be aware of. For instance, chambers of commerce can direct to businesses that are hiring and civic and religious organizations can offer recreational activities. Similarly, to the strategy of "opportunity mapping" within schools, community resource mapping can be used to identify available services within community.

3 Methodology

“I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?”

(Spradley, 1979, p.34 in Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.124).

This chapter seeks to explain my reasoning behind the choice of research method and design in relation to my topic. The part on data collecting procedures describes the data collection tools, the sample of this study and the process of gaining access to the school. Further data analysis procedures are explained. Moreover, this chapter covers the issues of validity, reliability and ethics of this study.

3.1 Research Paradigm

This research is carried out within interpretivist paradigm. This perspective was chosen as matches the objectives of my research. The key purpose of interpretivist research is catching multiple perspectives of a phenomenon as “lived, felt and undergone” and understanding these perspectives (Robson, 2011, p.24). Similarly, I chose to focus on studying educators’ individual experiences of providing transition and their emphatic understanding of the phenomenon of transition. In interpretivist research direct communication with the participants is needed (Cohen & Manion, 1994). In my study I am the tool of data collection who interacts with the participants as well as a social actor who interprets the data. I did not choose positivism as I did not aim at producing laws through measurements or establishing correlations between variables in large-scale data, my purpose was rather to study the phenomenon of transition in-depth from the perspective of the meanings that teachers attach to it.

3.2 Research Method and Design

Interpretivism is largely associated with qualitative research. Qualitative research was considered to be appropriate for this study as it is “sensitive to how participants interpret their social world” (Bryman, 2004, p.23) and this research is interested in educators’ perspectives –

their interpretations of the social world. Furthermore, in qualitative research the phenomenon under study is interpreted in terms of the meanings people attach to it and is studied in the settings natural to the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The natural settings also helped me to understand better the professional environment of the participants. Open-ended qualitative information, which I aimed for in this study, is believed to help to capture directly the views and experiences of participants (Punch, 1998). Moreover, this study intended to hear the voices of educators through empowering them to share their stories and experiences, which is typical for qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

Within qualitative method I have chosen qualitative interview design (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale & Brinkmann (2009, p. 2) accessibly explain the term interview through the meaning of the constituent parts of the word: inter view - “an inter-change of views” between people communicating on a topic of common interest. Such an exchange of viewpoints results in knowledge production (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews are typically seen as a “flexible and adaptable way” of obtaining qualitative data, especially when the focus is on people’s views, perceptions and understandings (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Robson, 2011, p.280). Since I was interested in studying teacher’s perspective on providing transition for ASD, it seemed feasible to talk to teachers about it. Qualitative interview design was chosen as it offered me an opportunity to obtain in-depth information and gave me “space for spontaneity”: in interviews ambiguous answers can be clarified, underlying motives can be investigated and conversation can be led to more complex issues (Cohen, Manion & Marrison, 2007, p.368; Robson, 2011).

There are both strengths and weaknesses associated with the present type of study. The major strength is that it is an in-depth study; it can present multiple realities and show many subtleties of human mind and behavior (Robson, 2011). Moreover, as Hammersley maintains, “qualitative data are reliable because they document the data from the point of view of the people studied ... rather than presenting it from the point of view of researcher” (Hammersley 1992, p.45 in Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p.2). However, there is still risk of subjectivity as the researcher is the main instrument of data collection (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Robson, 2011). Another weakness of this study in particular and qualitative research in general is lack of generalizability (Small, 2009). Especially this is true in my case of studying transition in Norway, when there are no universal guidelines on transition for schools to follow. However,

the priority for my research was not producing an exhaustive study that can be generalized to the whole population, but rather hearing teacher's voice and exploration of some successful practices that can potentially be useful for other educators.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

3.3.1 Sampling and Informants

In my research I used purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling refers to selecting the informants that are of interest to the researcher and meet their requirements in a study project (Robson, 2011). Likewise, my aim was to handpick "knowledgeable people" (Cohen et al., 2007, p.115) who could purposefully inform about the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2007). All my participants met the following criteria: work in mainstream high schools and have experienced the phenomenon of transition with students with ASD. Since the primary aim was studying transition, I considered educators working with any aspect of Autism Spectrum Disorder, including Asperger Syndrome. Within purposive sampling I had to opt for convenience strategy, i.e. choosing participants based on their availability (Robson, 2011). I am aware that convenience sampling is considered to be one of the "least satisfactory" sampling methods, which can lead to misleading findings (Robson, 2011, p.275). But taking into account the fact that I was an international student in a foreign country, who was facing endless barriers getting access to informants, I did not really have the choice.

It has proven to be exceedingly difficult to find the informants. Being an outsider to the system, I had to face numerous refusals from organizations, agencies and schools, which was despairing especially with the tight time frames given for this research. I was redirected from one person/ agency to another without any tangible result. Many people I contacted were involved in research on ASD, but did not know particular educators working with students with ASD in transition from school to adulthood. On a positive note, there were those who encouraged me and approved of the choice of topic, which they considered to be very important. The possible reasons for unwillingness to participate in the study could be a lack of examples of successful transition outcomes as well as apprehension to be interviewed not in the mother tongue and inability to express themselves correctly.

It was my professor and program convener who helped to gain access to a school. She established the initial contact with the special needs coordinator (SENCO) of a high school, who was her former colleague. The SENCO appeared to be the gatekeeper to the research. She got in touch with the teachers at her school who had worked with students with ASD upon their agreement scheduled the interviews.

My sample consisted of three teachers and one teaching assistant. The initial plan was to interview only teachers, but the SENCO advised me to also interview one teaching assistant who was very knowledgeable and had extensive experience of working with students with ASD in transition. The fact that my informants were from the same school had certain advantages (the disadvantages are discussed in validity and reliability section). As providing transition is a common goal of one institution and requires joined efforts of all educators working with the student, having the informants from the same setting helped me to deeper understand the context and ethos of the school. Moreover, my primary contact the SENCO of the school ensured that my informants were experienced professionals who matched my criteria.

3.3.2 Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a data collection tools for this study. Semi-structured interviews presuppose having a guide with checklist of topics and readymade questions arranged in an acceptable order but the wording or order of the questions can be changed according to the flow of the conversation (Gray, 2009). For me as a novice researcher having a pre-planned guide helped to enhance my confidence. Nevertheless, I also knew that I would be able to ask unplanned follow-up questions in case some interesting responses should emerge. I did not consider observations as a possible data collecting tool as transition is a lengthy manifold process which cannot be grasped in the time span of several hours spent on the research site. However, I did contemplate about studying the documents in addition to interviews. My reasoning behind rejection of this method was that teachers might be talking about their experiences with students they worked with several years ago (and it proved right) and there would be too many barriers to obtaining these documents.

Interview guide was developed thematically and was based on the research questions of the study. Research questions were translated into interview questions. One research question could correspond to several interview questions, which were also formed in simpler less

academic language. Also, while designing the interview guide, I tried to take into account the dynamic aspect to make sure that the interview would have the flow. Interview guide included the outline of themes that I wanted to cover as well as suggested questions under each theme. However, I did not restrict myself to following the guide unconditionally. I rather tried to keep the conversation flowing and used the questions that fitted logically, sometimes paraphrasing them, though making sure the meaning remains the same. I was not worried about covering the topics in the order I had in the interview guide, but my key aim was rather to have all the themes covered.

Pilot interview was conducted with the SENCO of the school a week before the first interview. She made sure that all the questions were relevant and corresponded to the duties and competences of the informants. Moreover, she found that one of the questioned was not formed clear enough and therefore it was paraphrased. The pilot interview was a learning experience in terms of dynamics and timing, with its help I realized that if the interview does not have the right dynamics it may take too much time, which the informants may not have. In this terms I was more prepared for the first interview. All in all, pilot interview added up to confidence, which, being a novice researcher, I really needed.

For this study I have conducted 4 semi-structured interviews, each of them lasted for a little less than half an hour. With the permission of the informants all interviews were fully recorded on my laptop computer. Interviews were done at school at the time convenient for the participants in order to minimize disruption of their busy working schedule. I tried to get prepared for the interviews by reading relevant literature on this research method. However, as pointed out by Robson (2011) you cannot obtain interview skills simply by reading about it. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) call interview a “craft”, but for interview to be a craft there has to be a skilled craftsman. The first challenge interviewer faces with is establishing rapport with the interviewee. Interviewees are likely to get a distorted image of researchers-outsiders which affects their willingness to communicate (Zinn, 1979). In these terms, I had two advantages: first, I was introduced to informants by the SENCO, who as I observed was very loved and respected by her colleagues; second, I had a teaching assistant accompanying me in all the interviews, her first language was English, and she was with me to help to translate if need be. I believe that her presence played a crucial role in “breaking the ice” between the informants and me.

My lesson learned is that interviews are very demanding and require one's full concentration: one has to digest what interviewee says, but at the same time think of what question to ask next. As my practice showed simple following of the guide is not an option. Interviewer has to be flexible and quick-minded. In my interviews I occasionally got the feeling that I needed to put them "on pause" for a few minutes and think. Before conducting interviews I planned that I would be taking notes in the process, but I realized that it would distract the informants and positioning myself in the shoes of the interviewee I knew that I would attempt to peak at the notes. Therefore, I wrote down my reflections after the interviews ended. Another challenge I faced in the course of the interviews is something that I called "the dilemma of silences". Silence may frighten the interviewer, but on the hand, the interviewee needs to time to think too, and it has to be a craft to recognize when the interviewee is thinking and when they are waiting for the next question. I attempted to let these silences happen and not to fill them in with the words right away, but there were moments when I was on the edge of asking next question, and a fraction of a second before that participant would continue speaking and giving valuable information. Furthermore, I experienced first-hand how lengthy and time-consuming the process of working with interviews can be. Transcription of one interview, which lasted about half an hour, required from four to five hours.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

First, I read each transcript carefully several times. Already at that point I had initial ideas of what I considered interesting and important and why. At that stage I also started making memos - jotting down ideas and views in a notebook and on post-it notes. I used this technique throughout the whole data analysis. Memos proved to be useful in discussing the findings. The next key procedure was coding. Coding implies identifying segments of text that 'exemplify the same theoretical or descriptive idea' (Gibbs, 2007, p.38 in Robson, 2011, p.474). However, coding is not limited to putting labels next to the pieces of text, but has the purpose of bringing the parts together so that they can be reviewed together, which will generate further thinking (Richards, 2005).

I analyzed my data in three levels. At the first level - I decided to attach codes to the large chunks of data corresponding to strategies, best practices and barriers. In practice it was done

by highlighting them in different colors. However, I could not help doing a more detailed coding simultaneously by putting labels against the data. At the second level I united the codes into themes: I did it by cutting the transcripts in accordance with the codes and grouping them together on a large sheet of paper, the initial categories of strategies, best practice and barriers were observed at this stage too. Some bits of text contained more than one code and then I had to rewrite it in the corresponding group. At the third level I compared all the four sheets with themes and codes to see the emerging patterns.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are both crucial characteristics of a high quality research. Validity typically refers to the truthfulness of research and accurateness of presenting information about the phenomenon under study (Silverman, 2005). Reliability represents stability and consistency “with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (Hammersley, 1992, p. 67 in Silverman, 2005, p.210).

Positivists often criticize qualitative research in terms of validity and reliability which cannot be attended to in the same way as in quantitative tradition (Shenton, 2004). Qualitative research, in contrast to quantitative research, does not have established tools for measuring validity and reliability (Robson, 2011). If in quantitative tradition replication of the study by an independent researcher and achievement of the same results is the evidence of validity, in qualitative research the same approach does not seem to be workable as phenomena are tightly connected to the contexts and times (Guba, 1981). Unbiased mirroring of objects is not plausible in qualitative research as phenomena are studied from the perspective of meanings that people attach to them, and numerous realities exist in the minds of people (Guba, 1981; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) underline that difficulties with affirming validity may not be connected with flaws of qualitative research, but conversely may represent its “extraordinary power to picture and question the complexity of the social world investigated” (p.253).

Validity of this study will be discussed through validity framework developed by Maxwell (1992). The framework comprises five validity categories through which a qualitative

research is judged: descriptive validity, interpretative validity, theoretical validity, generalizability and evaluative validity. Discussing each of these categories, I will also outline the techniques that this research used to ascertain these types of validity. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) emphasize that validity “permeates the entire research process” (p.248), therefore there is a variety of techniques used in the course of the entire research process.

Descriptive validity

By descriptive validity Maxwell (1992) means factually accurate presentation of the data. To ensure descriptive validity I carefully transcribed audio-recorded interviews. I constantly used the ‘play back’ option, which helped me not to miss any words. Maxwell (1992) also observes that a transcript might be descriptively invalid if it fails to include important features of speech, such as, for example pitch or intonation. Educational background in linguistics helped me to be attentive to such non-verbal elements of speech. While transcribing, I made notes of pauses (with their possible meaning, e.g., recollecting, hesitating), I noted down emotional aspects of the interviews (e.g., when informants sighed, laughed), I marked the words that informants particularly stressed out. After each interview I wrote down my immediate reflections so that I would not forget them.

Interpretative validity

Interpretative validity stands for being able to capture informants’ perspective, what informants actually *mean*, their ‘intention, cognition, affect, belief, evaluation’ (Maxwell, 1992, p.288). To ensure that I correctly understood the perspective of informants, in the course of the interviews I used interpreting questions as suggested by Kvale & Brinkmann (2009). The interpreting questions involved questions with simple rephrasing or questions beginning “Do you mean that”, “Is it correct that”.

Moreover, locating myself on the outsider side of outsider - insider continuum (Mercer, 2007), I see the advantage of my being an outsider, a so-called “a man without history” (Schultz, 1964 cited in Mercer, 2007). Having no experience of working either with students in transition or with students with ASD, I was more open to the informants’ perspectives than I would have been if the research had concerned context I had first-hand experience with. Still, as mentioned by Robson (2011) it is impossible to eliminate bias in a research involving

people. My strategy was to be aware of the bias and to constantly reflect on my research as it developed (Laverty, 2003; Watt, 2007).

Theoretical validity

Theoretical validity concerns the theory used in the study and its relevance to the phenomenon under study (Maxwell, 1992). Maxwell (1992) underlines the salience of using theory which was recognized by the academic community. Similarly, Creswell (2007) maintains new research is granted solidity if it based on previous studies. In these terms, theoretical validity of this study is represented by comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, chosen as theoretical framework for this research, was previously used by other researchers studying transition (e.g., Buli-Holmberg, 2004; Firth et al., 2009; O'Kane, 2007). Robson (2011), however, underlines that staying in the realms of one theory and not considering alternative understandings poses a threat to validity. In this present study I used previous research as a solid foundation; notwithstanding, I was open to the data not conforming to the literature review, which probably allowed the study to reach some new findings.

Generalizability

By generalizability Maxwell (1992) refers to the extent with which the theory resulting from the study can be applied to other persons and settings. Maxwell (1992) also makes a distinction between external and internal generalizability. Internal generalizability stands for drawing inferences within the setting under study, while external generalizability entails drawing inferences beyond this setting. External generalizability is often problematic for qualitative studies (Maxwell, 1992; Robson, 2011). Likewise, the present research did not aim at external generalizability. In contrast to random sampling, which assures that participants are representative of larger population (Shenton, 2004), the present research had purposive sampling with the aim of 'maximizing the range of information uncovered (Guba, 1981). Furthermore, the small number of informants does not allow external generalizability either. However, it can be assumed that this study might qualify for transferability as described by Guba (1981). I provided "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973 in Guba, 1981, p.81) - detailed account of the informants and context under study. On condition that there is a contexts similar to the context under study and fits its "thick descriptions", knowledge produced in this study might be transferred to that similar context.

Evaluative validity

Evaluative validity, according to Maxwell (1992), judges the validity of evaluations made by researchers. To ascertain evaluative validity I had regular debriefing sessions with the supervisor, program convener and program colleagues, which helped to me to cross-check my evaluations. Moreover, I used the strategy, mentioned above - reflectivity and minding the bias (Laverty, 2003; Watt, 2007).

Reliability

Audit trail, which “a methodologically self-critical account of how the research was done”, (Seale, 1999, p. 468) assures the reliability of the present study. The whole Chapter 3 presents a detailed account of philosophical and methodological standpoints of this study, the reasoning behind the choice of sample and data collection tools and intricate descriptions of procedures of collecting and analyzing the data.

3.6 Ethics

In general, the research did not seem to cause any serious ethical problems. Nevertheless, there were issues that I had to take into consideration as “an interview enquiry is a moral enterprise” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.62).

Before conducting the research I obtained permission from Norwegian Social Science Data Services. I had to present a detailed account of the study including the information letter, which were to be approved. Already on site I obtained informed consent from the participants. Informed consent implies giving information about the aim of the research and key features of the design, as well as information about benefits and risks from participation in the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I orally gave participants information about my study and myself, then I let them read the information letter, I explained who would have access to the information and for how long and that neither their name or the name of the school would appear in the study. I asked them to think if they want to take part in the study and ask me questions if they should hesitate about something. I also informed them about their right to withdraw at any time. To make informants feel more comfortable I assured them that for me

there were no good or bad answers and any frank answer would help me to understand the phenomenon under study better.

Furthermore, I had to be careful at the interview situation. Interviews may have personal consequences for the participants: they may be stressful and may cause changes in self-understanding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). My interview guide appeared to be quite extensive and at the pilot interview I felt that by the end of the day the interviewee was getting tired so I had to tentatively round it up. Even though I wanted to ask more questions, well-being of the interviewee was the priority.

Regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of the information, I had to ensure that I record, process and store information in a way that will avoid any disclosure and that I do not mention any real names. All the recordings were stored only on my computer which is kept locked in my room and nobody except for me has access to it. The recordings will have been deleted by December 2014.

4 Findings and Discussion

In this chapter I present and discuss empirical findings of the present study. My key aim was to investigate educators' experiences of providing transition from school to working life for their students with ASD, which I attempted to do by searching for answers to the following questions:

What strategies do educators employ to provide a smooth transition from school to employment?

What best practices of providing transition do educators have?

What barriers to successful transition have educators experienced?

These research questions established a framework for data analysis. To remind the reader by strategies I mean methods, plans or adaptations made for achieving a particular goal, which in case of this work is effective transition from school to inclusive employment. While by best (positive) practice I mean an implementation of a strategy which has consistently produced good results. Furthermore, I would like to remind that high-quality transition is a long process, as suggested in literature review; it ideally takes from 3 to 4 years (Chapel & Somers, 2010). In the context of the USA or England policies dictate that transition should start at least three years before school exit (DfER, 2001; IDEA, 2004). In Norway there are no such regulations which oblige schools to have a transition plan for each student. Therefore, prior to conducting interviews it was impossible for me to determine when transition actually starts in Norway. In addition, I understood that practices vary throughout the country. Since the period of education in the given high school is usually three years I asked the informants to talk about their overall experiences with transitioning students with ASD, not limiting it, for example, to the last year of education. It resulted in a wide spectrum of information I received from the informants.

The chapter starts with introducing the reader to some descriptive data regarding informants, the school and transition routines. The descriptive part is followed by the analytical part, where I present the results of my analysis based on the main themes: strategies, best practices and barriers. However, best practices will be presented among strategies, since the category of

strategies is wider and it encompasses best practices as well. To further navigate the reader through this chapter, within most of the themes I have introduced subheadings.

This chapter also provides numerous examples in the form direct quotations from the interviews. To follow the ethical guidelines all the participants are called informants and for the sake of convenience referred to as informant 1 (I1), informant 2 (I2), informant 3 (I3) and informant 4 (I4). I3 answered mostly in Norwegian. To maintain consistency of the work I translated I3's answers into English.

4.1 Descriptive Data

Data presented here was gained exclusively from the informants and is based on their experience and knowledge. The informants were three teachers and one teaching assistant of an inclusive mainstream high school, located outside of Oslo. The range of teaching experience varied from five to seventeen years, with all of them working in the given school for at least five years. One of the informants also had the experience of working for Pedagogical Psychological Services (PPT - Pedagogisk Psykologisk Tjeneste), and another one worked at a hospital prior to becoming a special teacher. The subjects taught by the informants were IT, Norwegian, History, and Mathematics.

The school where the informants work is an inclusive mainstream high school that generally offered three years of education in 2 different specializations: vocational (yrkesfag) and theoretical (studiespecialisering). While studiespecialisering comprised only theoretical classes, yrkesfag also involved taking internship at various businesses. All students with ASD that the informants talked about attended yrkesfag. As noticed by I1 studiespecialisering was *“a difficult way to do it”, “it is kind of hard for regular students to go through it, in this case [case of a student with special needs] it was almost impossible to make it happen”*.

As the time approached school exit and the school knew that the student wanted to go out into employment, the school contacted PPOT - Pedagogical Psychological Follow-up Services (Pedagogisk Psykologisk Oppfølgings Tjeneste). PPOT cooperated tightly with NAV - Norwegian Labor and Welfare Organization (Nye arbeids- og velferdsetaten). PPOT (often

shortened by informants to ‘OT’) functioned as a connecting link between school and employment.

I3: Then we can get help if we feel that the student does not want to go to school anymore, what do we do? Then we contact OT and PPT who are also involved, then it's also NAV, so it becomes a big mechanism.

4.2 Analytical Data

4.2.1 Assessment and Early Planning Strategies at the Basis of Transition

Assessment: 'We don't have to re-invent the wheel'

At the core of assessment lay collaboration between the secondary and the high school. The high school received documents regarding the new student, which served as a basic assessment. For professionals it meant not carrying out assessment from scratch, but having a platform to start from. I3 positively talked about this kind of cooperation between schools.

I3: We do not have to re-invent the wheel, we can continue where they were, develop it further. [...] Then we see what the student had had before he came here, then we have a platform we can work from.

Areas that school professionals were particularly interested in were academic and social skills:

I3: There are many things that we see when the student comes to us, where they are socially and where they are in terms of the school subjects.

Moreover, before academic year started each teacher received a written assessment of the student:

I1: ... *I get one page with the diagnosis with what is his strong sides, what's his not so strong sides, different methods that he is learning well from [...] so I have something to work on during the year trying to find out what suits the person best.*

The Planning Process of Transition: Initial Meetings with the Key Stakeholders and Issues Raised

The first meeting happened before the school started. The stakeholders present at the meeting were the transitioning *student* and his/her *parent(s)*, *teacher (representative from the secondary school)*, *the head of the department (avdelningsleder)* at the high school the student was transferring to, *Pedagogical Psychological Services (PPT - Pedagogisk-psykologisk tjeneste)* and the *responsible group* which is formed by the municipality (kommune) only in case the student had a severe disability. Among the issues raised at the meeting were reasons the student applied to this school, the expectations for this school, and student's thoughts about future. PPT made a decision if the student needed Individual Education Plan (IEP). From this range of activities it can be deduced that the meeting carried out both assessing and planning functions. The meeting was repeated shortly after the beginning of academic year to see how the start has been. The meetings roughly took place twice a year. From all informants only I1 (who was the contact teacher of the student) described being present at this kind of meetings. Nevertheless, I already knew these transition arrangements as the SENCO has described the same routines at our pilot interview.

The Planning Process of Transition: Meetings with Teachers

I2 (not a contact teacher) described having an initial meeting with the student, his mother, his teacher from secondary school and the SENCO. The aim was to find out about student's experiences during secondary school and make plans for studies at high school. However, planning was centered on developing competencies needed then, it did not concern future of the student.

I2: *We talk about how to manage school and about each subject and about what he thought about his school situation. We did not talk about the situation three years forward.*

The obtained information regarding the meetings made me conclude that several meetings are conducted at different levels. The first one involved outside agencies and concerned student's overall future at school and after school, while the second one was for planning in a particular subject with a particular teacher. The SENCO seemed to be the crucial link in connecting two meetings.

4.2.2 Inclusion - Prerequisite for Successful Transition

All informants brought into focus the aspect of inclusion as a crucial component of education. Different strategies have been applied to ensure that students with ASD were included.

One of the most effective practices brought up by I2, was that the student with ASD was transferring into the new school together with his classmates from secondary school. He was put in the same class with the people he knew well and got along with.

I2: But the good thing was that this student came in a class with friends he had known since first class. So he had 4 or 5 students who know him. And they were used to him and could work with him. And they also know about his Asperger for 10 years before they came to our school. I think it was safe for him to know. The school made a class for him with students from his last school who worked well with him and he liked to be with.

Moreover to was to raise awareness on ASD among school staff and students an expert in the disorder was invited to come and talk at the school:

I2: ...she came to our school and told all the staff about Asperger. And she knows this particular student because she was his support contact. [...] And she told the teacher in his class about him and about Asperger. So we get a lot of information and that was very important to make this for him a safe school start. And it was very important for him to know that we know and he also wanted in the first meeting that we inform his classmates about him and Asperger. He wanted us to know about this. And be safe that we know.

Moreover, students with ASD had access to the same broad curriculum as their peers. There was, however, a possibility for students to get an IEP in subject(s) that were challenging for them. None of the students of my informants had an IEP in their subject.

I3: Some can manage without adaptations. Many are intellectually smart, but we have adaptations which concern social competences. They can get IEP in social competencies. For example, to train to shop in canteen on their own, to participate in group work and such things.

I1 emphasized how important it was that the student was treated in the same way as his peers, that he was not singled out as special and had to complete the same tasks as everyone in the class.

I1: It is quite important with all the students to include them as regular students in the class as well. So they do all the same assignments, they are supposed to deliver their homework at the same time and they should also be able to present and communicate with other persons as well. So I try not to make them a special case more like regular students.

4.2.3 Strategy of Developing Skills Necessary for Adulthood

Daily independence skills

Both I3 and I4 who had the experience of working with more challenging students indicated that they devoted much attention to improving students daily independence skills. Their aim was to master skills by doing certain daily activities.

I3: ...activities as how to make food, hygiene, everything that has to do with the social side and the day to day. And take them out to shop, transport, how to get to and from work, take and teach them how to take the bus or the train and to give them the tools they need to be able to go to and from work.

I4 provided an example of a successful practice of shopping at the canteen when the student mastered the skill and could shop independently.

I4: And to teach him how to go and pick things from the canteen if he wanted to buy something. That I had to give money. He did go on his own in the end. We went with him first and I said you pick something here first and then you take money and you pay at the till. Next time we go and he takes some money and takes the money and he pays. So these are simple routines we did with him.

Self-determination skills

Informants did not really discuss improvement of self-determination skills in their students. Only I1 brought up the activities that he did with the student to increase his self-determination.

I1: During January, February and March before the time limit for applying for internships or more schools taking different kinds of companies and resources to be able to tell them about all the different possibilities and try to focus on them, do different interviews or meetings and conversations with the students, ask the what is their purpose and what they would want to do after they finish here.

While I2, on the contrary, said in her subjects students with ASD expected her to be the decision-maker for them.

I2: when I talk about Norwegian and History they want me to take their choices for them, what do you want me to do? What shall I do?

Social Skills

As for social skills, all informants stressed that it was the area that needed to be addressed in students with ASD.

I3: They do not like being with her peers, it is difficult. They would rather be with us - adults. To get them to have all right social relationship with all, some get very irritated. One has to train social competences through interaction. This is what we want to have as a goal.

Informants worked on improvement of social skills of the students through group work with their classmates. I2 pointed out that her students liked working independently, but he would accept group work too, provided that they agreed upon it beforehand.

I2: He wanted to work alone. But we also talked about that he had to work in groups. Also. And he accepted that. But we made plans that this time you had to work alone and this time you have to work in groups. Usually it went well I think. He needed to know all this in advance, how things were to be.

I1 considered his most effective practice with a transitioning student with AS - the task of preparing and delivering presentations. I1 believed that presentations helped his student to increase his social competence as he learned to talk in front of his classmates and answer their questions. Moreover, the task matched student's interests as presentations were about IT products that fascinated him. This task also helped to create a positive image of the student among the peers as the student could surprise his peers with his profound knowledge IT products.

I1: I think a presentation was probably the best. It was a bit insecure but when he was able to talk to students about something he really knew he was able to present very good presentations about the products much thorough then any others and he was able to show his competence in the area quite to a good degree that would surprise other students as well. So that is probably one of the very good things that we did.

4.2.4 Internships – Strategy for Obtainment of Career-related Experiences and Skills

All students from vocational specialization had a possibility to undergo internships with different businesses and enterprises. The examples of places where students had their internship places varied from kindergartens to farms, shopping centers to car repair shops.

Usually one day a week, sometimes two days a week students would go out into the businesses to get their working experiences.

During the internship the students were closely followed up. The contact teacher visited them once a month and also had meetings with the employer. Moreover, personal assistant always accompanied the student to the business.

Internship as a pathway to future employment

I3 gave an example of a good practice when a student was doing his internship in a kindergarten and afterwards got his employment there. The key to the success of the student was given simple tasks that he could handle.

I3: First the student got internship place one day a week, then two days a week and the student was very satisfied because he got simple task with the children: he would dress them, set the table, play with them outside, he would, so these were simple tasks he did easily when he was alone with the children. Otherwise he could not be alone with the children. But when he was together with the adults, it went well.

Seeing the potential in students: the positive practice of employment on school site

Another example of a good practice was when the student was employed by the school as a part-time caretaker. Two participants talked of the case of a student when during the last year student was provided with an individual program: he was studying only mathematics, but he was also employed by the school as a caretaker with an actual salary. The interviewee described it as ‘*we were lucky there*’, which also means that the student did a good job as a caretaker.

I3: It was a special arrangement for him. It is not that everybody gets the same. [...]. So we try to see potential in students. We needed an extra caretaker. So we were lucky there.

This particular student after school was employed (supported employment) by postal services and was very satisfied with his job.

I2: The first student who I had for 3 years has work in postal services. He delivers post. [...] I think it's supported employment. He is with another man and delivers post. He was happy with that.

Internship is not always a success

I3 described a case when her student lost his internship place because of truancy. I3's efforts to save his place through talking to the employer, the student and his parents did not help.

I3: But it did not go well at the car repair shop because the student played truant.

Each internship place equals numerous efforts of school staff

It is purely the efforts of school staff that helped a student to get an internship place. Informants underlined that it was not easy to get student an internship place.

I3: What I did was to contact different enterprises so that they got a job [...] and that was not easy.

Even though the main responsibility was on the contact teacher, the school staff tries to find internship places 'all together':

I3: We ask do you know anyone who could take a student. We have a student assistant who has a horse, so we got a student to be in the stables one day a week. We are doing a good job asking people around.

Financial constraint - barrier to internship practice

Two of the interviewees mentioned “arbeidshuset”, which was an adult vocational rehabilitation center. It used to be a good option for internship. Transport arrangements were made by school. However, fees were introduced for students to have their internships there. As a result school had to stop this practice as it did not have finances to sponsor students.

I4: So it has been an economical setback for this school. Because it was a very good offer for the student to be able to go out once a week and we followed them out, we drove them out to this place, they would go there for a day and then we would take them back to school. So it was sad that the school had to pay in the end...

It resulted in a new challenge for educators - finding new businesses for internship.

4.2.5 Strategy of Parental Involvement

I considered referring to this section as ‘family involvement’ to maintain consistency with my literature reviewer. However, in cases of my 4 informants family involvement was always limited to parents. Therefore, this section has the title ‘parental involvement’.

All the participants said that they had a good tight communication with parents through personal meetings, phone calls and emails.

I1: Well we both talking on the phone, I had meetings with them and also sent mail so they were good at sending mails to me how everything is, the situation at home and everything so I was kind of informed all the way. Every week I sent a letter to them what has been good what needs more work with and so on, so I think the communication was quite good.

In the words of I1 it could also be observed that parents assumed the leading role at transition planning meetings.

I1: Well he was asked different questions and he could state his opinion but it was more like the parents talking.

Moreover, it was admitted that student's educational progress could partly be attributed to parents' efforts. They paid much attention to ensure that their son managed with the studies.

I1: I know his parents used a lot of time just to make sure that he focused on the things that he needed like he did the assignments to some sort of levels, he reached at least the minimum level of approval.

4.2.6 Future in Sheltered Workshop vs Unrealistic Expectations?

Most of the teachers considered sheltered workshop (vernet bedrift) as a good option for future employment.

I2: For those kind of people it's very good. [...] Because they look special, they behave in a special way, they are noticed. [...] It's easier for them to be together with someone like them and they feel that they mastered the job that they have to do. And it's more social for them as well.. Because they have social activities that include them all.

Interviewees centered on what was best for the student, and in their view students with disabilities could benefit more from being in a sheltered place.

I3: I think that the most important is to get a job and earn money. And many of these young people don't have the ability to handle a regular job. Many go and have a routine job and they cope with it, and they are safe employers.

The only disadvantage about sheltered places was mentioned I3. She said that after sheltered employment it can be difficult to move to inclusive employment, still, she saw it as the best option.

It can be difficult to come out again. But if we are realistic, they will not function in a regular job.

Interviewees did not associate employment in a sheltered workshop with earning little money as students with a diagnosis also receive money from NAV.

I3: *They are not paid much, but they also get money from NAV.*

I4: *But that how the system in Norway works. They would not be in a situation when they do not earn enough to cover their expenses.*

4.2.7 Barriers to Successful Transition, i.e. Inclusive Employment

I would like to remind the reader that in this work I see meaningful inclusion into employment as the key goal of transition. Hence, ideally transition is a link connecting inclusive education and inclusive employment.

Barriers to successful transition mentioned by the informants can be split into four categories: barriers connected to 1) the nature of the disorder; 2) expectation gap between parents and educators; 3) existing transition arrangements; 4) society and lack of real inclusion.

Barriers Arising from the Nature of the Disorder

Interviewees saw the challenges associated with diagnosis as a barrier to inclusive employment:

I1: *it can be hard to get a job when you have a diagnosis like that.*

Challenges connected to the social aspect were regarded as one of the key barriers:

I4: *The social side is a problem. It's communication. He does not communicate very well, very little language and he can speak but he is very selective to who he speaks to. Working in a company can be difficult if he has a communication problem.*

Moreover, students could be demanding in some other aspects, and they would function if the situation did not unfold the way they would expect it to:

I2: Because if he had some teacher who he felt did not know enough about Asperger or something a conflict happen and it was big challenge for him to go to class.

I2: Because if he felt that people did not like him, it does not matter what we did in classroom, the relationships to the person were more important for him.

One of the teachers pointed out that she saw student's inability to work independently as a key barrier to his being employed competitively.

I3: The challenge is that he could work independently without anyone watching him.

Situation could be further aggravated if a student had a comorbid disorder. I1 provided an example of his student having additional psychological problems, whereas I4's student had stomach problems. These issues sometimes prevented the students from functioning well in classroom setting and could presumably cause problems in employment settings.

I1: He had some psychological problems as well. He needed to take care of his own problems before he could go further on.

I4: ...often had pains in the stomach and had to go out, so he made these noises because he had problems and then he would do this. And then we knew that he wanted to go out.

Another interesting point brought up by I3 is that students did not have the motivation to try and work in competitive employment:

I3: but they do not have enough motivation to go that kind of place.

Barriers Connected to the Expectation Gap between Parents and Educators

Even though informants talked positively about tight cooperation with parents and parental active involvement in their child's transition process, I4 brought up the issue of gap in expectations between parents and educators, which she saw as a barrier to successful transition. While parents had high expectations for their child, the educators could not agree with them. The quality of home assignments did not match with the knowledge the student demonstrated in class. Educators suspected that parents were doing home tasks on behalf of their son. Professionals wanted to address basic skills in student, which in their view the student would benefit from most. But the parents insisted that he should focus as much on academic aspect as his peers. I4 believed they would have made better progress if they had not had parents as a barrier.

I4: It was not easy because they saw for their son more. They believed that he could do more. That he was more intelligent than we could see. So we had different opinions.

I4: So the parents I think had more expectations for him but we could not see from what they came with. Work that he has done at home to what we saw in the classroom were two different things. But we didn't know who was doing the work at home. [...] We saw another side to the student. We thought that he needed to learn more social activities.

But it was probably the most difficult student because of the parents. Had we be allowed to do more with the student, more on the social side, more simple tasks on a lower level than what the class had. Parents wanted him to be on the same level. [...]. I don't think he understood everything, but we wanted to have different ways of working with him on a lower level, we would have come further with him.

Barriers Arising from the Established Transition Arrangements: 'If we could follow up a little further...'

As soon as students left school, the school no longer carried any responsibility for them. Other agencies stepped in and took on responsibility. I3 saw it as a barrier. She believed that she knew her students very well and she could be of great assistance to them when they go out into the working life.

I4: *Because teachers and like I3 that has extra education knows these students and diagnosis very well. And can be a great assistance to a new workplace for example.*

Barriers Arising from the Society and Lack of Real Inclusion

The informants observed that society did not quite accept people who did not fit into the ‘norms of the majority’:

I2: *Because they look special, they behave in a special way, they are noticed.*

I3: *I wish the society was more open to all kinds of young people no matter if you sit in a wheelchair or if you have Asperger or Autism. Our society is not there yet. That is what I want to claim.*

Moreover, employers do not seem to be eager to employ people who cannot work independently:

I3: *It’s not easy to employ a person who has to have supervisor or advisor with them.*

I1 confirmed that companies were reluctant to accept students with special needs and he thought that if only they (school professionals) could know which businesses their students were going to, they could give a better preparation for a particular job:

I1: *In an ideal world we should be able to have these special students and place them in different companies or be able to have a clear view of which way they are going afterwards. That seems to be kind of hard to find a company that can accept them or offer them an internship. [...] that he was kind of prepared at least during the year so he knew where the next level going and the next situation or work should be. But that seems to be hard to get acceptance from the companies.*

4.3 Discussion

The findings of this study showed that successful transition to inclusive employment is a challenge. The informants of this study, who worked in an inclusive high school and provided inclusive education, considered sheltered (segregated) employment as a ‘realistic’ option for future. As it is clear from the findings of this study, the informants identified four groups barriers to successful transition and consequently inclusive employment: 1) barriers arising from the student and associated with nature of disorder; 2) barriers connected to the expectation gap between parents and educators; 3) barriers arising from established transition arrangements; 4) barriers arising from the society and lack of real inclusion. Moreover, data analysis helped to identify one more barrier – the expectations of educators. However, I want to highlight that this barrier is a result of my deductions and I feel very tentative about it. The barrier of educators’ expectations along with the barrier of expectation gap will be discussed in the same section devoted to expectations. Literature review identifies high expectations as a strategy for transition. However, absence of this strategy turned into a barrier. The same pattern will be further highlighted with the strategy of transition partnerships and collaboration which turned into the barrier of existing transition arrangements.

I am going to discuss each of the barriers separately. As for strategies and best practices, they will be discussed under barriers as their key purpose is eventually to reduce certain barriers to successful transition to inclusive employment. Such an arrangement will make it visible which barriers the strategies are targeted at. Therefore, the reader should be prepared that under some categories of barriers neither strategies nor best practices will be mentioned as school educators cannot/ do not address these barriers. Furthermore, I would like to clarify to the reader that I have realized these framework (barriers-strategies-best practices) after I have analyzed and re-analyzed the data. My initial reasoning was that educators would implement strategies for transition and in the course of implementation they would face barriers. However, it appeared that strategies were adopted to tackle barriers.

4.3.1 Barriers Arising from the Challenges Associated with the Disorder and Ways to Tackle Them

As identified by the informants, key challenges of youth with ASD, which served as barriers to inclusive employment, were lack of *social skills and autonomy skills*. It goes in line with what is said in literature on ASD (e.g., APA, 2013; Hewitt, 2005; Wagner et al., 2005).

Employers, in their turn, want to have employees with at least a reasonable level of these skills (Lee & Carter, 2012). It might be one of the reasons that the level of employability of individuals with ASD is low.

Limitations on the individual level educators could address. As findings indicate, informants employed strategies directed at improvement of these skills. Interestingly, the *best practice* introduced by I1 - *presentations* was never mentioned as a transition strategy in the related literature on transition in general or on transition of students with ASD in particular. Although most probably information on this technique is available in more general literature on teaching. Notwithstanding, it was a finding that this method works particularly well for transitioning students in the spectrum and performs more than learning function, as it also improves social skills. It also seems very important that presentations helped classmates to get a better image of the student with ASD. Presentations in this case seem to be good example of a teaching strategy that addresses strengths, interests and needs of a student.

Even though development of self-determination skills determination achieved much attention in discourse on transitions (Michaels & Ferrara, 2005; Wehman, 2006; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997), in the given school this area of skills appeared to be under-addressed. I3, for example, said that her student did not have enough motivation to go out into competitive employment. Self-determination skills are crucial for students to distinguish between sheltered and inclusive employment and aim at the latter (Wehman, 2006). My interview guide purposefully included a separate question related to self-determination, while at the interviews I also explained in an accessible way what was meant by it, as I assumed that informants might not be familiar with the term, although use it in practice. However, it was only I1 talked about activities he did with his student to empower him to become a primary decision-maker in his life

The informants of this study did not adopt the stance that transition was a particularly demanding time for individuals with ASD. The literature, in contrast, underlines the tumultuousness of the period of transition for youth in the spectrum due to numerous simultaneous changes in life (e.g., Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Wehman et al., 2014), while for them sameness, predictability and structure are crucial (APA, 2013). However, they did talk about strategies that help make the process of transition smoother, e.g., such as *early*

assessment and planning, collaboration with parents, obtaining work-related experiences. It might possibly be explained by the fact that informants were used to working with transitioning students and it was their day-to-day reality. Moreover, the informants were working with students at grassroots level, while most probably such strategies as early assessment and planning were developed at the higher level of school administration.

As for person-centered planning, which literature highlights as one of the most effective transition-related strategies (e.g., Michaels & Ferrara, 2006; Miner, 2014; Rasheed et al., 2006; Wehman, 2006), it was implemented only to a certain degree. Although students with ASD and his/her parent(s) are participants of the meetings, no clear vision for future with achievable steps to reach it was developed at these meetings. It can possibly be explained by the existing collaboration arrangements between the school and agencies, which I am going to discuss further in chapter.

Talking of the strategy of *obtaining work-related experiences and skills*, I would like to discuss some positive practices which were discovered in the course of this study. The first positive practice involved student with ASD having his internship in a kindergarten. This case exemplifies that persons with ASD might not be able to do all tasks, but if the needs are taken into account and extra supports are made, they can function well even in such environments as a kindergarten. Another case worth attention was when school employed its student with ASD with an actual payment as a school caretaker. Such inclusive internship employment was followed by successful supported employment in the postal services. It can be assumed that this successful inclusive internship gave student not only work-skills and experiences, but also confidence to go out into inclusive employment. Moreover, it is a great example that a school can practice inclusion not only in educational terms, but also in terms of employment.

Interestingly, all informants raised the theme of *inclusion* in their responses, even though no question in the interview guide concerned inclusion directly. It might be a proof that the school had inclusive ethos. But none of the informants directly associated inclusion with being a strategy for improvement of skills or for soothing transition. It seems that either educators practiced inclusion without being fully aware of its goodness in many different aspects, or possibly they understood it, but did not manage to express it in words. Inclusive education, in its turn, might have had a positive impact on the skills of students with ASD as

well as on their experience of transition. As suggested by Shah (2007), students with special needs benefit from being in an inclusive school as they all the time have role-models of their non-disabled peers, who as well feedback on their behavior. I believe in these terms being in an inclusive high school was a significant advantage for the improvement of social skills of students in the spectrum. Moreover, in the given school transitioning students with ASD were used to being exposed to the realities of society, as informants pointed out that they tried not to make students with ASD a special case, but tried to treat them as regular students, gave them the same tasks and same deadlines. This factor may also have had an impact on transition outcomes. A positive practice contributing both to inclusion as well as to smooth transition was discovered in course of this study. It involved placing students with ASD in the same classes with the people they knew well from the previous school and were on good terms with. It is noteworthy that this practice goes in tune with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1978) which contends that transitions go smoother if experienced not alone, but together with someone.

4.3.2 Barriers Connected to Expectations?

I4 saw parental expectations, which in her view were too high, as a barrier to successful transition. Previous research, however, identified high expectations from both parents and professionals as predictor for successful transition (Test et al., 2014; Wehman et al., 2014). It can be questioned if the mismatch in expectation of parents and educators relies only on the high expectations of the parents.

Furthermore, three out four informants of this study expressed positive attitudes towards employment in sheltered workshops, with none of them associating sheltered employment with isolation or segregation. They believed that such expectations were realistic and students with ASD would benefit more from being in a sheltered place. The only disadvantage was mentioned by I3, who said that it could be hard to come out of a sheltered place. Meanwhile, related literature gives justification to sheltered places only in case they serve as a pathway to inclusive employment (Greve, 2009). Moreover, project SEARCH, conducted in the USA, proved that individuals in the spectrum can live up to high expectations of being employed competitively provided that they are equipped with relevant working experiences and the job environment matches their strengths and needs (Shall et al., 2012). Given, the mismatch in

expectations between parents and educators and educators' positiveness as regards to sheltered employment, it can be assumed that educators' expectations might not have been high enough either. Such expectations might have been a barrier to inclusive employment.

4.3.3 Barriers Arising from Established Transition Arrangements

The section of the findings chapter devoted to barriers arising from the existing transition arrangements points out only one barrier - that educators cannot follow-up on their students once they leave school. Even though this issue already puts under question continuity of transition services, it is still only a tip of an iceberg. A possible explanation to this problem may lie in established collaboration routines between the school and outside agencies. As explained in descriptive data, outside agencies responsible for the employment of the student with ASD (PP OT and NAV) step in the process of transition quite late: school professionals have to contact the agencies when they see that the student is approaching school exit and wants to go out into employment. Explained in another way, it looks like the student is not transferring from school to employment, but rather from school to the outside agencies and from there to employment. These arrangements do not seem to contribute to coherence and 'seamlessness' of transition, which according to the literature, should be based on active functional collaboration between school and outside agencies (Buli-Holmberg, 2004; Johnson et al., 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009). These routines may possibly stem from the fact in Norway there are no national guidelines on transition. Absence of national guidelines can possibly be connected to the fact that Norway is quite a small country with relatively few students with special needs and special teachers. Moreover, by not laying down guidelines, the government decentralizes the power and gives schools and agencies flexibility to develop the practices that work out best for them (Buli-Holmberg, 2004). Nevertheless, the quality of transition services is at risk as it depends on schools and agencies can build their collaboration. Such transition routines vary from the established arrangements in England and the USA. In both contexts transition, as prescribed by national policies (DfER, 2001; IDEA, 2004), starts up to 4 years before school exit. It is clearly marked by a transition planning meeting and the development of a transition plan. In England career services participate in transition process from the very first meeting. Similarly, in the USA The Workforce Investment Act (1998) obliges vocational rehabilitation agencies to reach out for schools.

For the school in this research study the established arrangements implied that school professionals had to do a lot of work on their own regarding preparation of students with ASD for employment. Such provision also explains why the school did not develop a vision for students' future. It seems hard to develop a vision knowing that agencies, who actually determine it, come in the process two to three years later. I saw it as a problem that they (educators) did not know what future to prepare their students for. Provided that there was clear vision, educators would be able to prepare the students better (Michaels & Ferrara, 2006; Miner, 2014; Rasheed et al., 2006). Even the practice of internship, which is indubitably a positive experience, helping students to acquire work related-skills and experiences and develop relationships in the community, could be more effective if it was one of the steps targeted at reaching the vision for future. As evident from responses of the informants though, internship places were obtained on a 'convenience' basis. It is only my assumption that it would be possible to make internships more related to future employment if outside agencies involved in transition process earlier and assisted in internship places search. Informants also mentioned the positive practice of cooperation with a vocational rehabilitation center for adults (Arbeidshuset), which had to be ceased due to introduced fees. Arbeidshuset still poses the question related to inclusion and segregation, as an institution of this kind still seems to be on segregation side of the continuum.

4.3.4 Barriers Emerging from the Society and Lack of Inclusion

The findings regarding barriers emerging from the society indicate that even in a country as prosperous and inclusive as Norway persons with disabilities face difficulties and can be left behind and excluded. While significant efforts have been directed to moving towards inclusion at schools, with employment situation seems to be slightly different. To remind the reader, in Norway there are no employment quotas, which oblige employers to hire persons with disabilities. Norway, instead, preferred the strategy of mainstreaming, which avoids separating persons with disabilities into a special group, but includes them into policy-making, so that policies can match the needs of the disabled population (Greve, 2009). In simpler words it means treating disabled people as same, but putting accent on barrier removal. However, just by removing barriers it is not possible to create an ideal world where

everybody is equal and flourishes. Simple barrier removal can lead to the dangerous situation of ‘formal equality’, when disabled people have the same rights, but do not have positive outcomes (Shakespeare, 2013). Therefore for some persons additional supports can be crucial to live high quality lives (Shakespeare, 2013). Some people need to be enabled to be an active citizen and to go out into employment.

Norway has the advantage of highly developed welfare system. However, as findings show, even welfare system, if mistreated, can also be a barrier to inclusive employment. While in many contexts sheltered employment is associated with earning little and poverty, it is not the case in Norway, where, as mentioned by I4 individuals with disabilities ‘*would not be in a situation when they do not earn enough to cover their expenses*’. Such reasoning could be one of the possible explanations for educators’ being positive about employment in sheltered workshops.

Drawing a line under the barriers emerging from the society (environment), I would like to point out that this group of barriers is probably hardest to tackle on the individual level of a school educator. However, despite some re-emerging segregation patterns (being positive about sheltered employment, internship in Arbeidshuset), the school was investing a lot of effort to promote solidarity and inclusion in the community: starting from forming inclusive values in their students through inclusive education to reaching out to the adult community members - employers and co-workers, who had a chance to take a ‘special’ student for a limited period of internship and increase their confidence in such students: as they can be a great asset provided that their needs are met through additional supports.

4.3.5 Transition Provided for Student with ASD from School to Working Life

Having discussed each of the barriers separately, I would like to draw a line across all the barriers. To depict the complexity of barriers and of the phenomenon of transition I decided to show it through Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (Figure 1). The figure shows that barriers arise at different levels. While it easy to assume that the challenges of transition lie in nature of the disorder, it is actually a result of interaction of the challenges associated with the disorder with numerous environmental barriers. I would also like to highlight that this

interaction does not have to be direct, which is clearly shown in the examples of barriers at the level of exosystem and macrosystem.

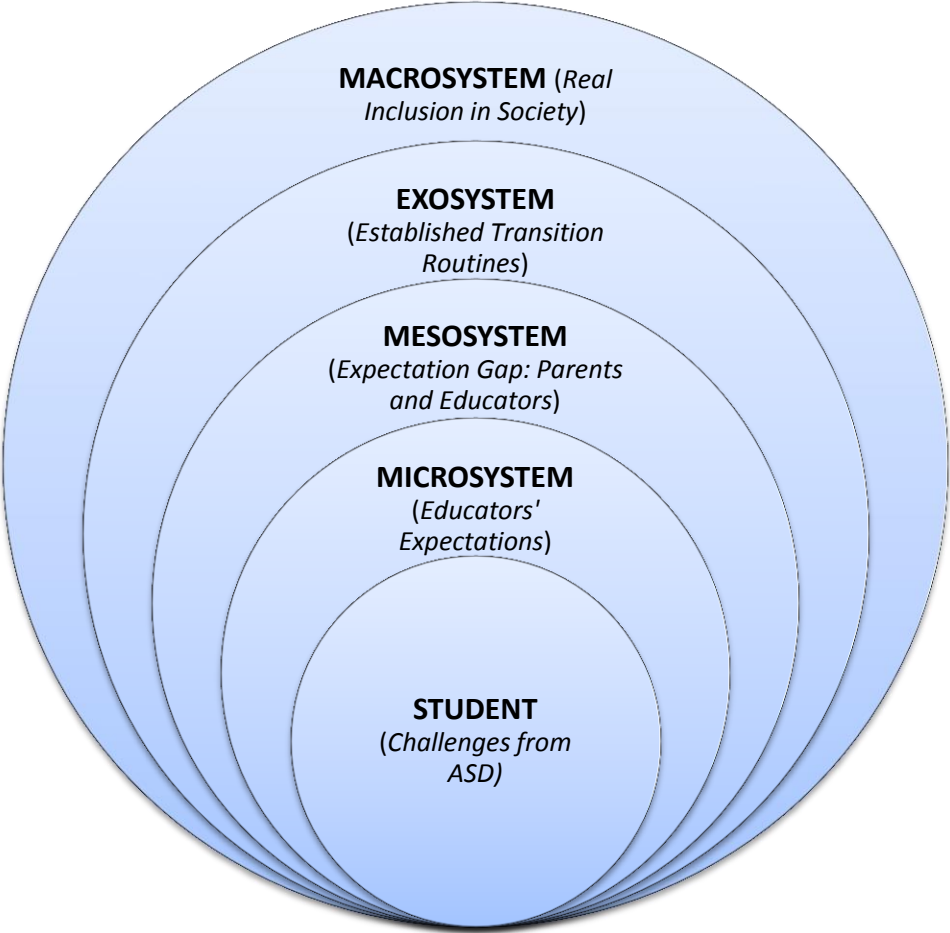


Figure 1 Barriers in Transition from School to Employment

Table 1, in which I compiled the findings regarding barriers, strategies and best practices, demonstrates which transition barriers are addressed by school educators. The findings indicate that educators predominantly aim at eliminating individual barriers associated with the nature of disorder. Even though analysis also helped me to arrive at the conclusion that two of the strategies implemented by educators (internships and inclusive education) indirectly impact the society as well. Still, it seems that the most significant barriers are environmental, which can be left unaddressed and which may also require long-term investments (e.g., lack of real inclusion in the society). However, it has to be admitted that these findings reflect only the perspective of educators. The table might as well look different provided that other stakeholders' perspectives were added. Nevertheless, I would like to

remind the reader that the perspective of outside career agencies if present would concern only the later stage of transition.

<i>Q1: Barriers</i>	<i>Q2: Strategies</i>	<i>Q3: Best Practices</i>
Individual (arising from ASD)	Assessment and early planning	
	Development of skills	Presentations
	Internships: obtaining of work-related experiences and skills	1) Employment of student by the school; 2) Successful internships when students received supports in accordance with the needs;
	Inclusive education	Transition experienced not on one's own, but together with people one knows and feels comfortable with
Expectations of educators		
Gap in expectations of parents and educators		
Existing transition arrangements		
Society and Inclusion	↓	↓

Table 1 Transition Provided from School to Employment

5 Conclusion

5.1 Limitations

The limitation of this research is that it shows only the perspective of educators. It can be assumed that if more perspectives were added, the results would differ. However, behind such design of the project I had several reasons. First, being a teacher myself, I was interested in educators' perspective. From my personal experience I know that educators' voice can be left unheard and I wanted this research to be a platform for educators' perspectives. Second, while planning this study, I assumed that it would be challenging to find informants. Given the constraints of language barrier and short period of time given for this research, it seemed plausible to have teachers as informants as they would be able to speak English. Moreover, research planned this way seemed less complicated from the ethical point of view as I had to obtain consent only from the educators themselves. However, the fact that I had only educators as my informants is associated with some advantages as well. Since in high school transitioning students work with many teachers (not like, for example, in primary school) transition is a joined effort of all educators. This study allowed me to obtain variation in educators' experiences and strategies.

Another limitation might be connected to the literature review. As I decided on the topic of this research already in February I immersed myself into readings on autism and transition then. At that point I was not familiar with the concepts of systematic or unsystematic literature review, although I did use both of them. My aim then was to learn as much as possible and to collect as much information as I could. In July when I started the actual literature review for this study and I did data basis search anew and I saw that I was familiar with most of the publications, except for the most recent ones. However, I still used the valuable information I had discovered in the course of 'unofficial' literature review period. International literature, regarding mainly the context of England and the USA, served as basis for my literature review, which might not be directly connected to the context of Norway. However, little research was conducted in Norway on the topic of transition from school to employment. Moreover, such an 'international' literature review allowed me to discuss the findings regarding Norwegian context from the global perspective.

Furthermore, the limitation of this research can be seen in not observing the same structure throughout the whole work, by saying that I mean the same structure of literature review, findings and discussion. However, it is also a proof that my research was developing. I set out with the mindset that educators would use strategies for transition and in the course of implementation of these strategies they would face barriers. However, the findings show that each of the strategies was targeted at some barriers. Moreover, the literature review took the perspective of having the main focus on the strategies, while the results have the main focus on the barriers. It was also a finding of this study that some strategies are so crucial that their absence turns into a barrier.

5.2 Further Research

For further research I would recommend conducting a case study that would incorporate perspective of all stakeholders in the process of transition: the transitioning student himself/herself, parents, educators, representatives of outside agencies and employers at the internship place. Such an approach could possibly lead to giving a more holistic understanding of transition provision.

5.3 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate transition from school to employment as transition is a critical period in the lives of youth with ASD further affecting the quality of their lives. The results indicated that transition from school to inclusive employment is a challenging process due to the combination of several barriers arising at different levels. While individual barriers received considerable attention, environmental barriers which previous research has identified as significant in effective transition, remained mainly unaddressed. Informants predominantly addressed barriers arising from the student (associated with challenges of ASD) by implementing a number of strategies, for example, improvement of skills necessary for adulthood, obtainment of work-related experiences and skills. The most effective application

of strategies educators identified as their best practices, whereas absence of some strategies, recognized by literature as essential for transition, turned into barriers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS

NORWEGIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SERVICES



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Kari-Anne B. Næss
Institutt for spesialpedagogikk Universitetet i Oslo
Postboks 1140 Blindern
0318 OSLO

Vår dato: 28.08.2014

Vår ref: 39296 / 3 / KH

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 14.07.2014. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

39296	<i>Transition of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders from School to Working Life</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	<i>Universitetet i Oslo, ved institusjonens øverste leder</i>
Daglig ansvarlig	<i>Kari-Anne B. Næss</i>
Student	<i>Natallia Presniakova</i>

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger er meldepliktig i henhold til personopplysningsloven § 31. Behandlingen tilfredsstiller kravene i personopplysningsloven.

Personvernombudets vurdering forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html>. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 31.12.2014, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Katrine Utaaker Segadal

Kjersti Haugstvedt

Kontaktperson: Juni Skjold Lexau tlf: 55 58 36 01

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Avdelingskontorene / District Offices

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Appendix 2

Request for participation in research project

“Transition of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders from School to Working Life”

Background and Purpose

This research is a Master’s project at the University of Oslo. Its purpose is to study the phenomenon of transition from teachers’ perspective. The study will look into how interviewee-teachers in Norway provide transition from school to employment for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in urban mainstream schools. The research will look into positive experiences of teachers, as well as into barriers that teachers faced when providing transition.

The sample is selected purposefully so that the participants have knowledge about phenomenon under study and are able to inform about it. Therefore the teachers-interviews selected for the study should meet the following criteria: work in mainstream high schools and have experienced the phenomenon of transition with students with ASD.

What does participation in the project imply?

The data will be collected only through one-to-one interviews with teachers. The interviews will last about an hour each. The questions will concern teachers’ experiences in providing transition from school to working life for students with ASD and will focus on best practices, strategies employed to smoothen transition, and barriers that teachers encounter when providing transition. The interviews will be audio recorded and the interviewer may take some notes as well.

What will happen to the information about you?

All personal data will be treated confidentially. Only the Master’s student and the supervisor (if requested) will have access to the data. Moreover, to ensure confidentiality list of names will be stored separately from other data. In publications the participants will not be identifiable.

The project will be completed by December 2014. By project completion the data will be made anonymous.

Voluntary participation

It is voluntary to participate in the project, and you can at any time choose to withdraw your consent without stating any reason. If you decide to withdraw, all your personal data will be made anonymous.

If you would like to participate or if you have any questions concerning the project, please

contact student Natallia Presniakova: tel. 94728695, email n.presniakova@yahoo.se
or supervisor Kari-Anne Bottegaard Næss: tel: 22859163, email k.a.b.nass@uio.no

The study has been notified to the Data Protection Official for Research, Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

Consent for participation in the study

I have received information about the project and am willing to participate

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix 3

Interview guide

- What is your educational background?
- How long have you been teaching in Special Education?
- What is your experience of teaching students with ASD?
- What is your experience of working in transition from school to work?

- Can you tell me about your experience of working with students with ASD in transition?
- **Can you give me a more detailed description of how transition is provided? Do you have examples for this?**

Assessment and Planning:

- How early/ how many years prior to school exit do you start working on transition?
- Do you do any assessment prior planning the transition? If yes, what kind of information are you interested in when assessing the student? How do you get it?
- Do you have any transition planning meetings? Can you tell me more about them? Who attends the transition planning meeting? Students themselves? Parents? Agencies?
- Is there a transition plan to follow? If yes, what kind of information is included in transition plan?
- Who sets the goals for transition? What are the goals based on? Can you give me an example of the employment goals of your students (if you can remember)?
- What would you think to be the strengths of students with ASD as potential employees? Which aspects do you think should be addressed in students with ASD to make them more employable?

Implementation:

- What are the transition activities devised for the student with ASD? Do they differ much from the transition activities for other students/ students with other disabilities? Who is responsible for conducting these activities? Are parents/family involved? Community? Classmates?
- Do you adapt the curriculum for students with ASD?
- Which skills in your students with ASD do you focus on?

- Do you work on improving self-determination skills of your students? By self-determination I mean..... How?
- Do the students do any internships? How many per year?

Follow-up:

- Is there a system of following-up on the students once they exit school?

Best practice:

- Please describe example/examples of **good practice** of working with students with ASD in transition.

Barriers:

- What **barriers** do you face working with students with ASD in the process of transition? How do you try to tackle them? Who do you seek help from? Colleagues? Outside agencies?

- Do you have something to add about the topic of transition of students with ASD from school to employment? Or something you would like to say related to the topic?