CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF RESULTS

In this chapter I will consider the findings relevant for each research question and attempt an evaluation of these.

Research question one

What criteria are used at the appropriate age to decide who does or does not learn MFL?

The criteria for making this decision have been expounded in chapter five. These appeared to show little if any justification for a high-functioning pupil on the autistic spectrum to be excluded or withdrawn from foreign language learning classes. Any such exclusion would appear, on the contrary, to be totally against the spirit of the recent legislation regarding inclusion of almost all pupils. It would therefore be tempting to make an assumption that these legal guidelines are being followed across Scotland for pupils in this group.

This research, however, would suggest that this is not always the case (see figure one, chapter five). Responses from those in group two indicated that for some there was a problem with senior management, who perhaps need to revise their attitude that any pupil with special educational needs had enough to contend with, just in accessing the curriculum and coping with English. Another in this group stated that teaching staff lacked qualification and confidence to teach MFL, thus acting as a deterrent to the amount (and quality) taught. A further potential contributor of information in this group informed me by telephone that, quite simply, they did not offer MFL to their pupils. These comments, from those in CD units similar to the case study MCDU (where a modern language is taught to all pupils up to S4) would suggest that the quality and quantity of MFL offered to the researched group is patchy and variable. This needs to be addressed, if pupils are to receive their due entitlement. The attitude of some in school management needs to be challenged and the underlying prejudices perhaps exposed. Is it through genuine concern for these

pupils that a MFL may not be offered, or is it administratively convenient to omit it – a subject perceived by some as difficult, where motivation for boys particularly may be poor and where shortage of qualified staff is an issue? Whether it is in any way justifiable, also, to lump together a hotchpotch of pupils, who may have special educational needs in accessing the curriculum, as a homogeneous group with insurmountable barriers as far as MFL learning is concerned, seems extremely dubious. There seems to be quite a strong case for arguing that in this subject these pupils may actually be further disabled and disadvantaged by their communication disorder label, as this exposes them to the tendency of some in management to herd together all such pupils "who have enough to cope with already". Unfortunately, there are still some in schools who know little about communication disorders, and are even less able to discriminate, from behind their desks, between the high and low functioning ends of the autistic spectrum. There is a danger, too, that disorders of language and communication, such as dyslexia and Asperger syndrome, are seen as siblings rather than distant cousins, where similarities are only skin deep, and differences deep and fundamental. In learning a modern language, the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening are utilised, and in practising these, social skills are used. The researched group have adequate (or above) ability in the first four of these at basic MFL level, but a deficit in the fifth, particularly obvious in a big mainstream class. In contrast, those with dyslexia often have adequate social skills, but deficits in some or all of the other areas.

This lumping together is the result of ignorance on the part of some decision-makers, largely due to the invisible nature of these impairments – and indeed of many of these individuals in secondary schools until very recently. Units and resourced bases for communication disordered pupils did not exist in Scottish secondary schools ten (or twenty, or thirty) years ago, although the disorders did exist, and their particular needs were not recognised or addressed. The MFL is a subject historically offered at secondary level, and as long as these pupils were cognitively able and behaviourally only odd and biddable, they remained unrecognised and unconditional members of MFL classes. Ironically, nowadays, in our enthusiasm to diagnose and help them and their families, we may have contributed to them being denied a foreign language.

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Greater awareness of communication disorders of the type possessed by the group researched may lead to specific consideration of them as a recognisable entity – with particular strengths and weaknesses – in future reports. They are an increasingly identified and identifiable group. They must be able to access whatever is implemented in MFL teaching in schools, following the recommendations of the Action Group. They must not be marginalised as far as the foreign language is concerned. It is most certainly their right, and it is right that, like other young people in Scotland, they are always given the opportunity to learn an MFL.

Research question two

What barriers to learning do communication disordered pupils of the high functioning autistic or Asperger type present in the modern language classroom?

The principal focus of this research has been to look at the barriers to learning which communication disordered pupils may face when learning a MFL in secondary school, whether in a CDU, resource base or mainstream class.

On reviewing the literature, reports, case study and data drawn from the questionnaires and interviews, it becomes apparent how complex it is to sift out autistic or Asperger-specific barriers, and furthermore ones which relate significantly only to learning a foreign language. Additionally, the co-existence of dyslexic difficulties in some pupils, which was identified as a barrier by all three groups involved, and inappropriate behaviour of any kind, may cloud the barriers issue also. However, the importance of dyslexia as an additional barrier in pupils on the autistic spectrum, the subject of research question five, will be considered not here, but later in this chapter when that research question is discussed.

It may be important before focussing on autism-specific barriers to note that these CD pupils are intelligent individuals who by the age of twelve may well have absorbed public and family opinions about foreign languages. A variable, which was not particularly considered in this research, was the extent to which they, like others

of their age, bring to the learning of a MFL "baggage" already acquired about the usefulness and difficulty of this subject. At least one of these direct and honest young people has shared with me on day one, how much his older brother loathed French. The mainstream Scottish public could perhaps protest at being labelled monoglot little Scotlanders, but the reality is still a certain complacency in the adult population, (including professional people, acquaintances and family members known to the researcher). There also remains a lack of real will to promote MFL certification or a useful working knowledge of a foreign language as a "must have" for any school leaver as it is in so many countries world-wide. This undercurrent of public indifference has an insidious effect on all pupils, including those who are the focus of this research. Additionally, the majority of these pupils are not only highly IT literate but many spend their leisure time accessing the English-speaking world of the internet from the comfort of their bedrooms, and so are very aware of the widespread use of English.

All three groups covered in the research mentioned lack of motivation, interest or concentration as an obvious barrier in learning a MFL. Whilst it would be possible to analyse and split these up further, it would be beyond the remit of this paper. Perhaps it is sufficient to say that before a CD pupil even reaches the MFL classroom, he will have some preconceptions about it as a subject, and will bring his strengths and weaknesses, as well as likes and dislikes, to this as any other subject, and as any other pupil.

However, a lack of concentration could possibly emanate from difficulties resulting from an autistic spectrum disorder. A barrier mentioned by all groups was pace, that is, working at a slower pace than their peers in a mainstream class. Their common challenge with pace relates to their frequent lack of concentration, particularly at the beginning of a lesson. Pace as a barrier would have been mentioned for the case study group in other subjects where pupils are mainstreamed, but the majority of the MCDU pupils are taught the MFL in a small group in the CDU. The significance of this is that pace in MFL lessons is not an issue for this particular group, as it is adapted moment to moment, day to day. However, it is easy to see how pace

becomes a major issue in mainstream MFL classes. Pupils need to listen consistently to the teachers' instructions, probably delivered at native speaker's speed. If a pupil's concentration slips, understanding also goes. The classroom becomes an alien and confusing place, and their pace may indeed be reduced to that of the proverbial escargot. Pace in the mainstream class can be relentless, as activities switch from teacher to tape, from book to worksheet, from listening to speaking. Pace is perhaps the single biggest barrier for CD pupils across all mainstream subjects. In order to cope with it in the MFL lesson, it appears to be a big advantage to possess a high cognitive level, little difficulty with transitions, considerable self-control and a good degree of self-organisation (all discussed below). Unless this range of potential barriers is sympathetically addressed in the MFL class, it may be a problematic subject for a few.

One of these factors mentioned above, cognitive ability, does appear to be the source of a barrier to learning. Lower cognitive ability, moderate learning difficulties or below, is often present in those individuals most impaired by autism, and they will require the greatest differentiation of pace and content so that they may access the curriculum. All groups involved mentioned obvious barriers for pupils of a lower cognitive level. At the time of writing, severely impaired autistic pupils were not being included in mainstream MFL classes and this group would be likely to continue to benefit more from other areas of an appropriate curriculum. However, although low cognitive ability is a significant barrier for many with autism, it is present in many individuals without communication disorders, and cannot therefore be considered an autism specific barrier.

Another factor contributing to the problem of pace in mainstream classes, and one that is rooted in autism, is a difficulty with transitions. The pupil may find it difficult in the morning to switch from home life to school, from physical education to French, from listening to reading, from arriving in class to getting organised and equipment out. This is one manifestation of inflexibility, which in one form or another is one of the core autistic impairments. Some pupils I have observed show the behaviour described above. Others I have seen show it by refusing to start work

until some ritual takes place, for example, exchanging greetings and discussing the day, date and weather – and woe betide an unsuspecting teacher covering absence. Yet others keep their need for ritualistic behaviour quite private, metamorphosing at break-time from a seemingly "together" young man to a hooded automaton pacing up and down in the playground twirling his fingers, alone with his thoughts. Moments like these are reminders that even high-functioning individuals have to address their core autistic impairments in social interaction and communication, and their need for routine, but resolve this problem in their own individual ways.

From daily observation, formal and informal, over three years in the CDU, I believe that the researched group have more in common than the core autistic triad. All show clusters of abilities, which include language in its widest sense. This is concrete, not abstract, language, and means they have the ability to memorise vocabulary and phrases, and amass encyclopaedic knowledge of facts. They are often highly skilled in mathematical calculation and information technology or other pockets of specialised ability. They also have a direct and unstintingly honest approach to life and take observance of rules once established very seriously, to the point of becoming the classroom vigilante in this respect. Most have some level of organisational challenge and poor (most likely gross) motor skills. Many of these intelligent individuals become all too aware as they enter their teens how socially gauche they are, compared with their peer group, and this causes many sadness and frustration, which can lead to depression. This in turn leads to self-perpetuating solitariness, and an adult life as a loner – the type of person western society regards with considerable suspicion. However, more than a few will be quite content with such a state of affairs and be happy with their own company and occupations. Schneider (1999) notes that people with autism "come across if not from outer space at least as a different species" (p. 99). In his case at least this does not mean he feels inferior. On the contrary he expresses his affinity with the view of Shakespeare's Puck when he says, "Lord, what fools these earthlings be!" (p. 99).

Unfortunately we and they have to acknowledge that although they will be freer to live and develop as they choose after their schooldays, in a large secondary school

they are expected (rightly or wrongly) to conform, along with their peers, and to progress in academic work towards subject certification in S4 and beyond. This means that the difficulties these pupils have with another common Asperger trait, a lack of personal organisational skills, has to be addressed by support and subject teachers. Tasks for them need to be time-planned, support given for some to note down homework correctly and plan or supervise it being carried out, and checks made that it can be handed in on time. In consultation with a parent and support staff, this pupil may require a daily checklist for bringing in and taking home kit, equipment, diary, money and forms. Support staff or other caring individuals in school can make the critical difference to the many pupils for whom organisation is a major and quite debilitating issue and by appropriate support can reduce this barrier to progression, achievement and, most importantly, good relations with their mainstream subject teachers.

Disorganisation and difficulties with transitions are therefore significant contributors to these pupils' problem with mainstream classroom pace, leading almost inevitably to anxiety and stress, which are extremely disabling for them. From observation of pupils in the MCDU in unit and mainstream settings, there seems to be an equation that: a problem with transitions plus disorganisation plus lack of pace equals stress. Put in the context of a modern language class: John arrives in the French class first period on a Monday morning; he spends time rummaging in his schoolbag for a piece of homework and his jotter, neither of which can he find. In his pre-occupation with the contents of his schoolbag (which is over full because of his dirty PE kit and a papier-maché mask he took home on Friday, but forgot to remove) John has missed the teacher's instructions to the class and so has no idea where they are. John may close down at this point and refuse to work. John may get into a lot of trouble. A support teacher, or even a caring peer group member, could help John with this issue, and this might make all the difference (as would written instructions on the board). However, for some members of this group, there may be an eruption into inappropriate behaviour, which was noted by two groups as being a barrier to accessing a MFL. It is not currently a barrier in the MCDU group observed for this research, although it has been in a previous mix of pupils in this unit. The build-up of

stress seems to be the trigger for inappropriate behaviour in high-functioning autistic pupils who, because of the invisible nature of their impairment, are often the object of high expectations and little sympathetic support. The continuing lack of awareness of autistic spectrum disorders amongst teachers, who in many cases have to cope with stressed-out youngsters with little support, brings about a cycle of confrontation and punishment, without tackling the root of the problem.

Another situation, which can turn confrontational, arises from these pupils' desire to see routine, conformity and rules kept. When there is an infringement of these, for example, a test tube is dropped in a Science class and shatters noisily on the floor, our pupil John may over-react and insist that the offending pupil is brought to book, when it is not at all appropriate for him to be involved in discipline matters. Some pupils are hyper-sensitive to touch or noise. One over-reacted quite violently when another pupil's recipe sheet touched him on the back whilst they were gathered round the Home Economics teacher watching a demonstration.

Such unfortunate peer group interactions can lead to their classmates being quite wary of them and less likely to look out for them in tricky situations. There is also the problem of teasing and bullying, which most often will happen going along corridors between classes, or in the playground (those who are largely unsupported). Every school is committed to stamping this out where the management is aware of it, but there may be instances where the pupil is insufficiently articulate to seek help for himself or herself. Teasing is distracting and unsettling for the pupil and almost certainly could be a temporary barrier to learning. However, as this affects many children without autism it will not be discussed further here.

A point for modern languages teachers to bear in mind, however, is that their classroom may be an easier environment in terms of noise and movement with fewer flash points for the researched group than the classroom where this is the norm (home economics, science and technical). But the verbally interactive nature of a MFL relies on most pupils' wish to speak aloud, to work with others in pairs and groups, which will not be the case for some in the researched group. Others, whose

social communication is flawed, may try to dominate the air space in volume and quantity of content. For many, a monologue delivered to the teacher is not a problem, but working with a classmate or two definitely may be. On the positive side, most are age-inappropriately unselfconscious about trying to copy a correct foreign accent and will give it their very best effort possibly unaware that one or two in the class may be sniggering at them.

The benefits of this group persevering are clear. Those with poor social interaction and communication benefit from the social skills practised in this subject and any resistance to speaking which some show may lessen as they become more familiar with the MFL. Those whose speech in English is in some way odd, seem to normalise at least to some extent. Many of these pupils appear to enjoy drama classes, where they adopt a different persona, so interaction in a foreign language may be a similar experience for them. Articulate writers with autism such as Donna Williams (1992) confirm this to be the case for some.

So although unusual social interaction and communication are at the heart of autistic spectrum disorders and certainly create barriers to learning a MFL, sensitive handling of the necessary social interaction in a language class can contribute usefully to the nascent development of this group's people skills. A softly-softly approach will be more effective than confrontation. They need as much support as possible to keep up with the class activities, although on the academic side they may have no problem and can do very well.

In the case study of the MCDU (see chapter four) I interviewed "Jean", the MFL teacher of a high-functioning autistic girl, "Barbara". It was apparent from our talk that Barbara not only copes well in her class but also positively excels, despite continuing to show many traits of the autistic spectrum. This girl is very intelligent and has learnt to disguise her anxieties by adopting quite an expressionless facial mask. She is most ill at ease in the last few minutes of the class when everyone is packing up and chatting, or if she has to join the class late for whatever reason. At these times she becomes flustered, appears vulnerable and can speak inappropriately.

However, her undisputed strengths (of which language in its widest sense is one) have helped her overcome autistic impairments, which are still potentially barriers to progress. She has learnt strategies that help her get by, which she almost certainly will. She shines like a beacon of hope for those who doubt a successful outcome for many in this group in adult life, and she demonstrates that autistic barriers to learning can be tamed, when all else is favourable.

Research question three
Do teachers feel that additional resources and learning support remove these barriers?

This question led to an investigation of whether the kind of barriers the researched group face can be reduced by the appropriate and judicial use of resources and learning support. Research question two considered what these barriers are, and concluded they are two-fold. First, there are the barriers which autistic impairments may give rise to – problems with social interaction and communication, pace, transitions, routine, sensory overload and organisation. Secondly, there are barriers that may or may not exist alongside autism – dyslexia, low cognitive level, inappropriate behaviour and public opinion on the MFL. It is perhaps absurdly optimistic to speak of removing any of these barriers completely, even temporarily. Rather, one should consider the extent to which they can be reduced for that individual, at that time, in the MFL classes of that school. It is too glib to put the young people researched into neat packages as if they all met the same barriers when accessing the curriculum and were not, as is the case, highly individual human beings.

In Figures 2 and 3 in chapter 5, teachers were asked to fill in questionnaire two regarding what strategies were used to reduce barriers arising for these pupils. They were also asked where these strategies were used – unit or mainstream, or both. The results showed that some were used in one or other location, and some in both locations, indicating a flexible response to needs. Figure 3 gathered data on whether these strategies seemed successful, which directly addresses this research question. It

would appear from the data that the support teachers' response to the barriers arising generally had a significant effect on the pupils' ability to keep on task, complete homework and remain in control of stress. Most of the researched pupils were receiving their MFL lessons in mainstream, and the majority did have some support and access to a support for learning base. This served as a quiet environment to catch up on work and provide whatever individualised support was required. Some were being taught in an autism-specific unit, such as the MCDU, where the whole learning experience is geared towards the needs of this group and providing them with as stress free an environment as is possible. However, the provision of all these resources across Scotland is patchy and in areas of low population the expense of dedicated autism units could not be justified. In order to provide some support for classroom and principal teachers of MFL across Scotland, some guidelines need to be produced for handling and maximising the opportunities for these young people in the MFL classroom. To fulfil this need, I have summarised some of my findings and drafted some guidelines with learner characteristics and their effect on learning the MFL with strategies to support them. (See Epilogue.)

The core of modern language teaching and learning in secondary school (whether mainstream or unit) is a focus on social interaction and communication with others, which is the key deficit for high functioning people on the autistic spectrum. This subject benefits them not only for its academic rigour but also as a direct strategy working on their impairment. As this is intrinsic in the subject, it was not specifically mentioned in figures 2 or 3. Opportunities naturally occur in this subject for information gathering and giving, which many find challenging, although the adoption of a persona when speaking the foreign language may allow enough de-personalisation to make the pupil feel comfortable with this. Encouragement from a support teacher where this is possible to keep the pupil on task, or to form a trio when doing paired work may make all the difference. The support teacher can also provide assistance with organisational matters (for example, homework), which if kept up to date and completed fully to the right time scale will remove a potential barrier to achievement. The support teacher also has an invaluable role as a diplomat and advocate, acting and speaking on the pupil's behalf in liaison with subject

teachers, particularly regarding completion of tasks, homework and inappropriate behaviour. Where there is access regularly to a support base of any kind, strategies can be further individualised, which is most likely to be the key to a successful outcome. In the MCDU the visiting speech and language therapist on her weekly visits has had the opportunity to teach relaxation techniques to our group. This may be useful to them when the pace of a class gets too fast, the peer group seem too alien, or sensory input gets too overwhelming. Through this research investigation, I have unfortunately discovered that there are still a number of high-functioning autistic pupils learning a MFL in Scottish schools where there are little or no resources targeted at addressing their needs.

Those pupils who have additional dyslexic difficulties will rely even more on assistance from the subject or support teacher to reduce barriers to learning. Help may range from using a personal laptop in class, to support teacher assistance with spelling or scribing all or part of the time. Extra time in a base for work on literacy will be invaluable for many and in the MCDU this approach is reaping benefit and may result in a more sustainable good outcome. In the MFL the current thinking from literature and practice is that a multi-sensory approach (McColl & Crombie, 2000, and Swansea education authority) and reduced content works best. This will be discussed further in the review of research question five.

The multi-sensory approach is thought to be beneficial to a group of learners wider than just those with dyslexia, and certainly not harmful to any. The researched group in the MCDU enjoy board games, both commercial (such as the French version of Monopoly) and ones invented by themselves. In the unit we are also able to work cross curricularly, by combining French with Art or Home economics in one classroom. The pupils have enjoyed making citron pressé and croque monsieur, and collecting leaves to make a "c'est l'automne" collage. Appropriate plastic toys and puppets have been used effectively within these groups. The growth of ICT in the MFL classroom is hugely popular with communication disordered pupils who may well much prefer interacting with a relatively predictable and faceless partner. It provides lots of fun activities to do for painless consolidation of points already

covered. As more materials suitable for this group are produced this very valuable channel for learning will increase in importance. The availability of access to the Internet and possibilities for e-mailing correspondents in countries where the target language is spoken will provide endless opportunities for language development and cultural awareness, and this group will be excited by this challenge.

The interest this group have in ICT can also be used effectively simply as a motivator to complete a task, with the promise of ten minutes on the computer at the end of the class. Realistically, bribes and promises may sometimes be needed with this group, and they need to be selected carefully to be useful (which computers are). It would not, however, be much of a motivator to promise this pupil he can pack up early and chat with his neighbour because he may not feel like chatting. In a situation where there is a unit or base well resourced with computers, pupils can be encouraged to increase their ICT skills in a MFL context, away from the noisy classroom or playground, which some pupils find difficult.

The use of ICT highlights a crucial aspect for improving the learning experience of these communication-disordered pupils. This is not just to address the barriers their impairments may give rise to, but also to utilise their undoubted individual strengths, pockets of particular ability and areas of interest (or obsession). The promise of the computer can improve pace and get a task completed. Those who are the drama queens can be encouraged to act out the waiter's part round the café table. The fascination of many with transport and names of stations can mean that this chapter in the book, which many others find dull, is extended to include and teach many loosely associated points. The teacher, who can discover their particular interest and incorporate it into MFL teaching, giving the pupil an individualised plan through the year's programme may find many barriers are reduced.

Clearly most subject teachers are unlikely to have the time to make up such a specific plan, and it may fall to a support for learning teacher to attempt this. Where there is a dedicated autism base, the pupil's particular interests may quickly become apparent, as the numbers of pupils worked with will be small. The pupils who have the highest

cognitive level will probably be sufficiently captivated with academic work not to require individualisation and seem to survive and thrive regardless.

It seems most important in considering the extent to which barriers can be reduced for this group of pupils that the young person is evaluated individually and that few (if any) blanket statements or pronouncements are made. Some awareness of the characteristics of autistic spectrum disorders and the effect on learning is required for teachers who will work closely with them so that they can gain at least some understanding of how they can tackle their barriers sympathetically and utilise their strong areas. A bank of strategies to help could be made available to interested parties. Those who may support these young people in classes such as the MFL class need to be aware, flexible, diplomatic, practical and caring, but don't need advanced knowledge of the target language as these pupils will be good learners once focused. They may need to have a rapid response to any situation which may arise, but be alert to the fact that there may be a trigger specific to that pupil, that day in that class. They also have a huge responsibility to empower the pupil to find what works for him so that he can revisit that strategy when a similar situation arises the following week or indeed ten years later. The ultimate hope has to be that good techniques for each individual will be learnt during their schooldays, which can help reduce barriers that arise in later life. If that can be the case, then these – like wider life strategies – must be pursued with conviction, for their sakes.

Research question four

What do teachers, parents and pupils feel are the advantages and disadvantages for communication disordered pupils in learning a second language following the 5-14 guidelines?

In the three preceding research questions I have considered pupils' rights to learn a MFL, the possible barriers their impairment may produce when learning one and the ways in which these barriers can be reduced. It seems from the data collected likely that there are no insurmountable obstacles in any of these areas, which cannot be tackled by appropriate strategies and sympathetic, aware handling to facilitate the learning of a MFL. However, there is also the question of how beneficial do teachers, pupils and their parents actually perceive a MFL to be. With new arrangements imminent for the delivery of a five hundred hour MFL entitlement, across a more flexible age range and the increased expectation of a wider cognitive range being included in mainstream, this may be a relevant question to consider.

I asked group two teachers (covering thirty five CD pupils) in mainstream and units or bases whether they agreed that on balance learning a MFL seemed beneficial to the group researched. No one disagreed with this and two felt strongly that it was a good thing. Three expressed the opinion that it could be either extremely beneficial, particularly if the pupils had a high cognitive level, or a complete waste of time, especially for those with associated attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a low cognitive level or severe dyslexic difficulties. This would suggest that the individual pupil's strengths and challenges might determine how useful the MFL is. One principal teacher of a CDU suggested it was beneficial not only for the language content learnt but also for the broadening of the pupils' awareness of other peoples and cultures and this seems to me from observation in the MCDU a valid outcome, along with some academic achievement. Communication disordered pupils often do not have wide experience of travelling abroad, for varying reasons, including inappropriate social behaviour acting as a deterrent and (in one case known to me) a last minute refusal to board a plane bound for a Balearic island with his family. Most will have picked up impressions and prejudices from film, television and the Internet

and it seems important to build on this. Now and even more in the future young people need awareness and some understanding of our European neighbours who play an influential role in many aspects of daily life including food and drink, politics, holidays, television programmes, films and clothes – in other words, almost everything in peace and war.

In order to delve rather deeper into perceptions about the MFL experience for these pupils, I devised a questionnaire for the group three MCDU parents. I requested that the questions should be discussed with their children and believe that this was done by most. Eleven out of twelve possible returned the questionnaire.

The first question was straightforward, producing the response that ten of these parents felt the MFL (French) was a useful subject to be studied between S1 and S4. One parent said perhaps. It was good to have this vote of confidence, as the majority of these pupils had not studied a language in primary school. Four had come from a primary CDU, two from language units, two from special schools, the rest from mainstream primary schools.

The next question considered the reasons that it might be beneficial. The reason most picked was that it gave the pupils experience of learning another language, which is perhaps a surprisingly academic reason. However it does sit comfortably with the high aspirations many of our parents have for their youngsters, who come from families where high achievement has been noted in the past or present (particularly in the sciences). A few of our pupils would have been precocious readers, many have quite erudite speech and all, as mentioned previously, have pockets of considerable ability.

The second choice of parents was because it could be useful to know a foreign language when travelling as a tourist to a French speaking country. In spite of relatively few of them travelling as yet to such a country, it shows a positive approach to what might happen in the future and would probably be the first choice for many parents and children.

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The third choices of equal importance were to have an understanding of another culture and people and to be able to communicate with others in a French-speaking country, perhaps via the Internet. This seems indicative of the desire of the parents and pupils to widen their horizons and reach out to the wider world and to foster increased knowledge of distant cultures and races.

The lowest grading was given to the idea that certification in a MFL could be useful for their further education or employment prospects. This was clearly felt to be less important, a few adding that their son was looking to a career in computing or science. Despite this reason being given low priority, employers and colleges regard MFL certification as a useful and relevant qualification to have.

The parents were next asked how they rated French in terms of the level of difficulty. It was interesting that all who replied, including parents of dyslexic pupils, rated it as the same level of difficulty as other non-practical subjects. As all except one of the MCDU pupils is average or above in language skill this may not be a surprising response, but a different answer might have been expected from the dyslexic pupils' parents. Perhaps the small teaching groups for MFL in the MCDU facilitate the learning for these pupils.

The parents were also asked if they would encourage their children to continue learning any foreign language after S4. The responses were evenly weighted between enthusiasm and apathy, although it was perhaps unfair to ask such a question to parents of twelve-year-olds. Whether the six young people who will be encouraged by their parents to continue with a foreign language later on will agree with that, remains to be seen.

An interesting part of the questionnaire asked parents to select ten subjects from a list of fourteen, and to rank them in importance for their child's future prospects and needs (see figure 4 chapter 5), the subjects "staircase". All except social/community skills are academic subjects. The results of this mini-survey provides some useful insight into what pupils and their parents think they need most from school and may

necessitate some reconsideration of current priorities. I will comment only on the top six subject areas selected as choices become less clear at the lower level.

Mathematics and English were seen as the most critically important subjects – choices that would be made by many parents and children without a communication disorder. With one exception, all of the MCDU pupils will sit a Standard Grade in Mathematics, and many have been quickly mainstreamed, sometimes into the top set. As we have four out of five teachers in the MCDU qualified to teach English (the researcher excepted), pupils are not mainstreamed into English until S2. This may have influenced the voting tipping the scales in favour of English as top choice.

The third ranking subject was computing. Parents and pupils seem to understand how significant this will be in their future (as for others) and perhaps especially for our group, with their flawed or gauche social skills. When seeking employment, this group are likely to be ill-suited to sales and personnel jobs where good people skills are essential. However, they could be well suited to a backroom job as a technician, programmer, engineer or academic (sciences). One of the MCDU group hopes to be a designer of computer games. In the MCDU, ICT is used as a motivator for those reluctant to complete a task and all are extremely proficient and interested in it. It could be these machines make more sense to them than the confusing world of humans.

The fourth choice was Social and Community skills, which is not taught as an academic subject, but an area clearly vital for their future. It is incorporated into their programme partly through the services of a speech and language therapist, who spends a day in the MCDU weekly. She assesses and works with the pupils individually and in cross-age groups where the appropriate use of social skills is emphasised and practised. Additionally, a number of short teaching and practising outings take place to local shops and cafes. The MCDU also has a number of adult befrienders who take part in weekly social outings to bowling, cinema, skating, climbing wall and other activities. These trips are very well supported by the pupils, who spend much of their leisure time at home alone in their bedrooms by choice and

it provides some social activity with their peer group, which helps develop social skills.

The fact that social and community skills have been rated fourth in importance gives one food for thought that perhaps it should have a more prominent fixed place in all CD pupils' timetable. This clearly would be desirable, and appears to be what parents and youngsters want, but how it can be achieved where mainstream integration is the priority is harder to see, owing to a lack of available time. It is certainly true that in the MCDU the yearly planned Individualised Education Programme is weighted towards targets in personal and social development (PSD), and that as pupils progress up the school their Numeracy and Language targets become straightforward, whilst their PSD targets remain complex and not always achieved. It would perhaps make sense to make more time for social skills practice, but it would ultimately be at the expense of something else.

The fifth choice, Science, is a predictable one and would probably feature third in many mainstream pupils' list. It is a subject all our boys seem to enjoy studying as it often deals with the activities of inanimate substances and objects with little that is abstract or figurative (which they find puzzling). Our MCDU pupils are now being integrated sooner into mainstream science classes with the result they are now interested and competent enough in tests to be allowed to choose single sciences at Standard Grade.

The sixth choice for these parents and pupils is the modern language (in this case French). The case for the usefulness of the MFL has been given throughout this paper, but it is nonetheless interesting to note that it is valued in the curriculum to this extent, above social subjects, technical, home economics, music and others. One has to wonder whether it can maintain such perceived value when the new time allocation of the MFL comes into widespread effect.

From the responses of teachers, parents and pupils to this research question, it would appear then that most of those questioned were positive about the benefits of learning

a MFL for many CD pupils. However, one of the possible shortcomings of this research is that it was unable to track down many of this group of pupils (and their MFL teachers) who are unsupported in mainstream schools, where classroom and principal teachers are having to deal with issues as they occur and manage as best they can. This is still happening today, in areas where there are few resources or units for this group. Some education departments approached for information appeared to believe that tracking down such pupils in their area was too much trouble. This research must therefore make the point that those who responded to my questionnaires were already interested parties who inevitably lack objectivity. It would be invalid to claim that all teachers who work with CD pupils will have such a positive view and almost certainly classroom teachers with little or no awareness of autistic spectrum disorders would find many of this group challenging to handle in a large class.

However, given these limitations, there did appear to be some consensus among the group of teachers, parents and pupils identified for this research that a modern language is a worthwhile subject to study, with a quantifiable usefulness for their future. It does indeed seem to deserve inclusion among the subjects studied at secondary level if it gives practice in social skills, stretches them academically and increases their awareness of others' culture, and helps their overall development into the young European adults they will soon become.

Research question five
What is the experience of learning a second language for communication disordered pupils with additional dyslexia?

From the research carried out, it would appear likely that dyslexic difficulties additional to an autistic spectrum disorder make learning a MFL more challenging. However, if the findings of this survey of sixty-six high-functioning autistic individuals are fairly typical (and the survey number is too small to ensure reliability), this double whammy does not affect the majority of such pupils. In this study one in seven were affected by both (see chapter five, table 1). There is also a possibility that a few people may have been given this joint diagnosis incorrectly as a

result of their obvious severe language difficulties when younger. The poor communication skills and withdrawal into self these can cause, could mimic the outward presentation of a high-functioning autistic child. There does remain a relatively small number who do definitely appear to have dyslexic difficulties as well as autism. Reid, an author and researcher on dyslexia believes that an autistic child's dyslexia is at the very least highly individualised (by e-mail 2001), and may be, according to another authority (Knox, 2001) distinguishable from the dyslexia non-autistic individuals may have. An exploration of these subtler points regarding dyslexia are interesting, but beyond the remit of this paper.

The difficulties faced by dyslexics in learning a MFL have been well documented by Crombie & McColl (2000) and I have drawn data from their work for comparisons between the two impairments when compiling table 2, chapter five. In discussion with Hilary McColl, I was encouraged to go beyond comparisons and draw up a grid, similar to theirs, of learner characteristics, the effect on learning the MFL and useful strategies to target such barriers to learning found in high-functioning communication disordered pupils in secondary schools. This grid, which may be of some use to MFL teachers in mainstream classes, can be found in the Epilogue.

Only a few of the barriers arising from the impairments of the two groups are common to both, as I have stated elsewhere in this paper. Where they overlap, they seem perhaps to arise for different reasons. For example, if a dyslexic pupil does not respond to a question in the target language it is likely to be because of his difficulty in processing the sounds to make sense, and to recall from his short-term memory what it might mean (that is, he can't). The autistic pupil in the same situation may not answer because he is preoccupied with some other issue important to him, which may not be obvious to anyone else (that is, he could answer, but won't).

Despite these fundamental differences, the strategies increasingly recommended for dyslexic pupils, using a multi-sensory approach, will do the CD pupil no harm and indeed might catch his interest to such an extent that he is more readily drawn into the work of the class. The CD pupil also can have a problem with mainstream class

pace (for different reasons again) and with organisation (see findings for research question two) so simple explicit instructions, for example, will help him too. If these are written up on the board as well, it will help him get started on the task set when he becomes focused and allow him to keep up with the class work. The pupils who are thought to have a co-morbidity of these impairments do seem more affected by the dyslexia than the autism when in the MFL classroom, from observation in the MCDU. It may be that this will generally be the case, although I have no objective evidence of it. Our pupils who have dyslexic difficulties seem to cope better with transitions and changes to routine than some others and have less impaired social skills than those with "purer" autism. However, there seems little beyond this, which makes them into a homogeneous group as their listening and processing skills vary considerably. As no conclusion about a typical autistic and dyslexic pupil can be drawn, it might be an interesting area for future research.

From the investigation I have carried out considering the barriers to learning of high-functioning autistic and dyslexic pupils, with reference to learning a MFL, I would tentatively suggest that these two communication impairments are more dissimilar than alike. I would also put forward an opinion that these two impairments are to an extent complementary, each representing deficits and strengths in different areas of the brain. Dyslexic people typically have impaired phonological processing, short-term memory, auditory discrimination and poor writing and spelling skills – all left hemisphere activities. They often excel in practical and creative activities, which are right hemisphere based, and have good motor skills. High-functioning individuals with autism, on the other hand, usually have good general language ability (concrete, not abstract) from an early age, often are precocious readers, and can amass encyclopaedic factual knowledge and enjoy logical reasoning – all left hemisphere. Many, conversely, lack imaginative creativity or deft motor skills and spatial awareness. These thoughts are based on daily observation of around twelve pupils over a three-year period and therefore may not be generally applicable. It is also clearly an over simplistic picture, as other parts of the brain (for example, the cerebellum) have a significant influence in our development, and additionally there is

the nature versus nurture argument. However, it may be useful to bear in mind that these are possibly very distinct impairments.

If this were indeed to be the case, the significance might be to alert those concerned with their education and welfare of the need to distinguish them as very different disorders of communication. Pupils who have Asperger syndrome or a semantic-pragmatic disorder on the autistic spectrum are for convenience often grouped as one and the same, but dyslexia really cannot be lumped into this group too. There needs to be further awareness raising of these and associated issues, perhaps through more research. This might then lead to a more individualised approach to language and communication disorders, and a de-blurring of the boundary between the two. This would lead to barriers to learning a MFL being more clearly distinguished, and appropriate strategies being developed to maximise the potential achievement in this subject for both groups.