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How did autistic children, and their parents, experience school transition during the Covid-19 pandemic?

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Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the start of the academic year in September 2020 was a unique time for those transitioning to a new school. This study aimed to explore the experiences of parents who supported autistic children making a range of different school transitions in 2020. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13 parents of autistic children in the UK, and data were analyzed with reflexive thematic analysis. For some parents, the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted on aspects of school transitions. However, other parents expressed the view that these same circumstances created opportunities to approach the school transition in a unique, improved manner. This article sheds light on the heterogeneity of experiences and perceptions of parents of autistic children, and highlights the need to examine the impact of Covid-19 on school transitions, including practices that it may be advantageous to retain.

Key words: autism, school transition, Covid-19, reflexive thematic analysis, qualitative research

Covid-19 was first identified in the UK in January 2020 (DHSC, 2020). Case numbers rose rapidly, and on 23 March 2020 the country entered lockdown. On this date, a Government stay-at-home warning was issued, and it was announced that face-to-face teaching would be suspended across the UK for an

unspecified length of time (DfE, 2020). Where possible, children with parents classified as key workers and vulnerable children were offered a school place during this time (UK Parliament Committees, 2022). Vulnerable children are defined as children with social workers or with an education, health and care plan (EHCP), which is put together by professionals in education, health and social care, outlining a child's educational, health and social needs and the support that they require to meet those needs (gov.uk., n.d.). However, this was not mandatory, and most children remained at home for the duration of this period: only 11% of vulnerable children attended school between 23 March and May of 2020 (National Audit Office, 2021). Lockdown continued, for many, until the start of the new school year (2020–2021).

Research has indicated that lockdown was a time of significant challenge for many autistic children and their families. Although autistic children are generally found to suffer from increased general anxiety compared to their non-autistic peers (Costello et al., 2005), studies have found that autistic children experienced higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms during lockdown, compared to children with other special educational needs and disabilities (SENds; Toseeb & Asbury, forthcoming). Although the anxiety of children with other SENds decreased when schools reopened, this finding was not replicated for autistic children, whose anxiety remained high. The authors attribute this finding to 'an abrupt change of routine and widespread uncertainty' during the early days of the pandemic.

For some autistic children, the transition from in-person schooling to distance learning was not the only school transition that they experienced in 2020. Many children not only experienced the sudden closure of their schools, but also a transition to a new school when the new academic year began in September 2020. Transitioning between schools is a key rite of passage (Pratt & George, 2005). In the UK, children usually transition from primary to secondary school when they are 11 years old, and often again from secondary school to further education when they are 16 years old, but may transition between schools at other timepoints in their education for a variety of reasons: for example, as an alternative to a permanent school exclusion (Abdelnoor, 2007) or a family move to a new school catchment area (Alderson, 1996). For some children and their immediate families, they can be a time of significant stress (Tissot & Evans, 2006).

It is well known that many autistic children find school transitions distressing. Transitions can be an unpredictable and confusing time as children

adjust to a new normal, and can therefore be traumatic for some (Earles et al., 1998). Evidence for why some autistic children experience significant difficulty when transitioning between schools is beginning to emerge. For one, researchers have linked the preference for sameness and consistent routines, as described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5* (DSM-5; APA, 2013), to an increase in stress around times of school transition for autistic children. Children's routines are significantly affected by moving from one school to another (Tobin et al., 2012). For example, school transition may be accompanied by changes to transport arrangements, which can be a source of significant anxiety for autistic children (Nuske et al., 2019).

Much of the evidence base so far has examined the struggles that autistic children experience in transitioning from mainstream primary to mainstream secondary schools. The research has indicated that moving from a small, familiar primary school to a large, unfamiliar secondary school with older children, more complex social hierarchies, and more advanced learning is a difficult experience for many children (Peters & Brooks, 2016), and a source of concern for parents (Makin et al., 2017). In this transition, children experience a significant alteration to the school day routine to which they have become accustomed. For example, in primary school, children receive their teaching from a single teacher, often remaining in the same classroom all day, a model which mainstream secondary schools do not follow (Mandy et al., 2016). In most UK secondary schools, children are expected to change between classrooms and teachers almost every hour. These frequent, small transitions are known as horizontal transitions, and research reports that these can be particularly challenging for autistic children (Adreon & Stella, 2001). The many changes to a child's day-to-day routine that accompany school transition are therefore one of the factors that make this a difficult and stressful time for autistic children.

Moreover, this transition in particular is associated with a different and often intensified sensory experience that may be a further challenge for autistic children. Further to this, some autistic people experience distress due to an abundance of sensory stimuli, whether this be auditory, visual or tactile (Marco et al., 2011). Secondary schools are usually much larger than primary schools, and can be noisy and frenetic environments (Nuske et al., 2019), which autistic children can find particularly challenging (Tobin et al., 2012). The increased size and busyness of their new schools may make it difficult for autistic children to settle (Dillon & Underwood, 2012).

Although research has been conducted on the experiences of children transitioning between schools, several gaps in the literature remain. For one, the Covid-19 pandemic represents a truly unique time for school transitions, which is worthy of exploration. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced schools to drastically alter the way in which children are introduced to their new schooling environment. Resumption of face-to-face teaching after many months of Covid-19 lockdown is a significant disruption to the routines that autistic individuals and their families may have assumed during lockdown. Research has indicated that autistic adults were concerned about resuming their 'normal' routines once precautionary measures were lifted (University of Ghent, 2020). Given that autistic children often struggle with changes to their day-to-day lives, it seems logical that some may struggle to adjust to a return to a more 'normal' life after having already had to adjust to life in lockdown.

Furthermore, children transitioning to a new school would traditionally expect the opportunity to visit their new school, engage in activities with their new classmates, and speak with school staff (TES, 2021). Events known as transition or induction days are organized to support children in preparing to start a new school, and often address topics such as dealing with change, mental well-being, and concerns about changing schools (Donkin, 2014). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many schools in the UK were unable to offer this support.

In addition, as discussed above, much of the research so far has focused on transitions between primary and secondary school. Children may transition between schools at any time in their education, and for a wide variety of reasons.

Finally, there is a scarcity of research available on the experiences of autistic children and their families (Richter et al., 2019). This is of concern, as the limited research thus far has indicated that autistic children and their parents often have very distinct experiences and concerns related to school transitions compared to non-autistic children and their families. For example, autistic children may experience anxiety about forming new friendships or forming relationships with teachers, and their parents often express concerns about the need for consistent and detailed communication, and for teaching staff to be adequately prepared to support their child in school (Stoner et al., 2007; Tso & Strnadová, 2017; Stack et al., 2021). Additionally, the focus of such research is often on the reported experiences of transitioning, exploring how children coped with transitions, or

the impact of transitioning on academic or social outcomes (Stack et al., 2021). Studies investigating factors that act as facilitators and barriers to successful school transition are much scarcer. This is an important distinction: while qualitative studies that focus on the stories of transition are valuable, investigation of the factors that make a transition easier or harder is also crucial. Understanding these factors can lead to increased understanding of the challenges that autistic children face in navigating a change in school, and of practices that can facilitate a process which may be difficult for some autistic children and their families.

The current study set out to explore the barriers and facilitators that autistic children and their families encountered when transitioning between educational settings in September 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Parents were interviewed about their experiences. In particular, the study was designed to seek out parental experiences of:

1. barriers, or difficulties, which hampered the experience of school transition;
2. facilitators, or supportive factors, which improved the ease of transition.

Method

Ethics

The study was approved by the Education Ethics Committee at the University of York (Reference: 20/05). Parents provided informed consent.

Parents

The study participants were parents of an autistic child, who experienced a school transition in September 2020. These parents were part of a wider study on the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on children with SENDs and their families, who had given permission to be re-contacted for future research (see Toseeb et al., 2020, for full details of the wider sample). Parents were contacted by email and informed about the purpose of this study. In total, 66 parents were contacted. Thirteen parents who responded to the email invitation were contacted to arrange an appropriate time and date for the interview. Parents were subsequently emailed an information sheet and consent form and were asked to return the signed consent form by email before the online interview.

There were 13 mothers who took part in the online interviews. They were parents of 12 boys and one girl. The children were aged between seven and 16 years and experienced a range of transitions. Full details are provided in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: : Demographic characteristics of parents' children

Parent pseudonym	Child's gender	Child's age	School transitioned from	School transitioned to
Alex	Female	16	Mainstream secondary	SEN secondary
Lesley	Male	7	Mainstream primary	Mainstream primary
Sam	Male	10	Mainstream primary	SEN primary
Ally	Male	10	SEN primary	SEN primary
Pat	Male	11	Mainstream primary	Mainstream secondary
Drew	Male	11	Mainstream primary	Mainstream secondary
Jordan	Male	11	Mainstream primary	SEN secondary
Morgan	Male	11	SEN primary	SEN secondary
Jessie	Male	12	Mainstream primary	Mainstream secondary
Robin	Male	14	SEN secondary	SEN secondary
Cameron	Male	14	Mainstream secondary	SEN secondary
Riley	Male	16	SEN college	Mainstream college
Charlie	Male	18	Mainstream college	SEN college

Note: SEN: special educational needs.

Procedure

Parents were interviewed about their experiences of supporting autistic children through a school transition. Parents are uniquely placed to comment on the experiences of their autistic children during a school transition and have a viewpoint that their children cannot share, since parents are often more familiar with school policies and the logistics involved in changing from one school to another (Rogers, 2007). Parents of autistic children often act as advocates and crucial supporters through the transition process (Dillon & Underwood, 2012). Researchers have argued that parents, as experts through experience, have a unique insight into transition that must be acknowledged, and suggestions which must be incorporated into this process if it is to improve (Stoner et al., 2007). Previous research has investigated the parental experience of supporting their autistic children through school transitions and has identified the benefits of acknowledging these lived experiences and using them to inform school practices (Tobin et al., 2012).

In total, 13 interviews were conducted on Zoom by a member of the research team (the first or second author). The interviewer's video camera was on throughout all interviews so that the parent carers could see the interviewer. Parent carers were advised that they could choose whether to have their cameras on or off. Only one parent carer chose to keep their camera off during the interview. At the beginning of the Zoom call, parent carers provided verbal

consent for the call to be recorded using Zoom's inbuilt call recording feature which enables both audio and video recording. Following the interview, the video recording was immediately deleted by the interviewers, and only the audio recording was retained for transcription and analysis.

Although Zoom offers an automatic transcription, this was trialed and was found to be inaccurate. The audio recordings from each interview were therefore manually transcribed by the interviewers. Naturalistic transcription was used with the aim of maintaining the original, unfiltered manner of the speech. Interview excerpts presented in this article have therefore not been subject to grammar correction.

Interview protocol

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of investigation, and the interview schedule was formulated and agreed upon by the research team, one of whom is a parent of an autistic child (see Appendix A). Semi-structured interviews were deemed most appropriate and fitting to the aims of the research, which were to seek out parents' thoughts, feelings and stories of supporting their child through a school transition. The open-ended responses that could be sought using a semi-structured schedule allows for participants to freely share their own experiences, on which they are an expert (Horton et al., 2004). The schedule was designed to elicit information from parents about their experiences, and their perceptions of their child's experiences, of transitioning from one educational setting to another. The interview included general questioning about the experience of transition, and aspects of the transition that had been positive or challenging, as well as prompting about specific aspects of the transition, such as any changes to school transport or changes to learning experiences.

Coding and analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to analyze interview data. This method was chosen as it is well suited to the analysis of people's experiences and perceptions of those experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2020). RTA is a method of identifying and analyzing themes, which are defined as a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data relevant to the research question, within a data set (Byrne, 2021). The use of this method to interpret data is understood to be an individualistic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Any themes that are identified are assumed to be a product of a combination of the researcher's assumptions approaching the analysis, the researcher's skills and knowledge, and the data themselves.

As is consistent with the methodology described by Braun and Clarke (2006), each transcript was read through several times in its entirety by the first author, with the intention of the researcher becoming fully immersed in the data. Initial observations were noted and referred to throughout the analysis.

Following familiarization with the data, each interview transcript was coded. This process involved identifying features of the data that were identified as being relevant to the research question, such as instances where parents made mention of aspects of transition that were unique to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Patterns that were identified from the data were noted and were attributed a code. The research team then held discussions to decide how best to cluster the codes into themes before extracts relevant to each theme were collated.

Finally, proposed themes were reviewed to ensure they were relevant to the research question and that they accurately reflected the data, and to decide whether they should be merged or divided to best answer the research question. The final agreed themes were then defined and named appropriately.

Results

Four themes were identified in the data. These were ‘Back to school’, ‘Preparing for transition’, ‘Class bubbles’ and ‘Absence of horizontal transitions’.

Back to school

Some parents spoke of their child’s feelings about transitioning between schools. For example, Jessie mentioned that their child had struggled to transition to ‘*the volume of homework and getting into a routine of doing the homework*’. One of the parents, Sam, mentioned that their child ‘*struggled ... with school being a 20 minute drive away, it’s meant we’ve had to shift everything forward so we need to get him up sooner*’. However, the major issue that was identified was not the impact of the transition between schools, but rather the transition from Covid lockdown to schooling again.

One parent, whose child transitioned from one SEND primary school to another, commented that school closure due to the pandemic had positively impacted their child’s motivation to return to school, and that this was a facilitating factor during the transition. This parent, Ally, mentioned that missing school, and being excited to return, appeared to mitigate anxiety about transitioning:

'He was so desperate to be back with his class that he kind of wasn't thinking about anything that could go wrong ... we didn't really have those nerves that you would normally have, it was just desperation to be back.'

(Ally)

Ally attributed this excitement to their child's '*longing for routine again*'. However, only Ally spoke about their child's eagerness to return to school. In contrast, several parents reported that instead of reducing their child's anxieties, Covid-19 precautions increased worries about their new school, or about leaving the house in general. Sam spoke about the experience of supporting their child in a transition between a mainstream and a SEND primary school, and described how their child struggled with nerves about the end of isolation: '*[he] was very, very nervous when lockdown ended about leaving the house, having been in for so long, and he's still quite nervous when we go out.*' This was echoed by several parents, who mentioned that their child had found it difficult to go out and resume normal activities once the Government stay-at-home mandate was lifted. Jessie was one of several parents who remarked that their child had been happy in isolation, and was reluctant to go back to school as a result: '*It's made him comfortable in being at home, and it's very easy for somebody like [name] to slip into wanting to be at home.*'

Lesley, whose child transitioned between two mainstream primary schools, also spoke about their child's difficulty in resuming school post-lockdown. Lesley highlighted the sensory experience of being in a classroom environment after isolation as a particular difficulty for their child:

'And actually I think for him, going back into a classroom with 30 kids and suddenly having continual noise was actually quite hard for him. It took him a long time to ... I think get back into that again.'

The above suggests a variety of experiences at the individual level. While one parent reported that their child was eager to return to school after prolonged isolation, several parents disclosed that their children experienced anxiety about resuming school. Many parents explained that their children had become used to being at home and found it challenging to adjust to being able to go out again, which led to nerves around the resumption of schooling.

Preparing for transition

During the Covid-19 pandemic, normal transition activities, such as induction days, meeting with school staff, and opportunities to socialize with new peers,

were no longer possible for many children. This was reflected in the responses from some parents in the current study, where a common topic of discussion was the importance and benefits of adequate preparation for the transition.

Several parents highlighted their child's need to be carefully informed about their new school and changes to their routine. Drew, whose child transitioned from a mainstream primary school to a mainstream secondary school, remarked that:

'I just had to make the best and sort of go through things with him "well this could happen that could happen" ... I literally had to cover every single thing just so that I was safe and he want [sic] gonna have a meltdown.'

(Drew)

A minority of parents reported that they had been able to visit their child's new school: these parents were all positive about their experience of being able to take their child to see the new school ahead of the transition. Some parents, like Charlie, described how their child had been able to visit their new college before lockdown began:

'at the end of the day [name] was lucky and he got his transition day in before it happened, I think if he hadn't ... had that I think I would have been struggling a lot.'

This sentiment was echoed by Sam, who spoke positively about their child having been able to interact with their new school environment before transitioning from a mainstream to a SEN primary:

'I think having an assessment week definitely helped [name]. Because he'd already been in the environment before. Had he not have had that, I think it would have been a whole different kettle of fish, because it would have been completely unfamiliar to him.'

(Sam)

However, such opportunities were not universally available. Parents reported that the absence of some of the usual methods of introducing children to their new school had a negative impact on their children's experience. Cameron, for example, attributed a level of anxiety that their child experienced to being unable to see the new school ahead of the transition:

'I think that anxiety built up because he didn't know quite what to expect because there wasn't a lot of time to go and transition and visit, I think he needed that.'

Pat, whose child transitioned from a mainstream primary to a mainstream secondary school, appeared to share this outlook:

'He was gonna attend different parts of different days on multiple occasions, none of that happened ... that was quite difficult, he was very very anxious over the summer about transition such to the point that he stopped eating ... I think Covid definitely impacted in that he wasn't able to go through the sessions that were planned.'

Although pre-transition visits to new schools were not always possible, many schools took steps in order to familiarize children with their new school. The majority of parents reported that their child's new school made attempts to provide preparatory materials and some prepared video tours of the facilities, or supplementary information packs. Once again, parents' opinions on the usefulness of such provisions were varied.

Some parents reported that these materials were useful in preparing their child for their new environment:

'They did do a transition video ... they told them about their first day, they told them about their school journal, they told them about their homework about their lessons... that reduced a lot of the anxieties that he was feeling.'

(Jessie)

However, other parents reported that they felt that the lack of in-person transition days was challenging, and that the virtual transition experience was 'harder' than being able to have a 'normal transition':

'Yeah, they did a video tour as well, as normally you would get to have a walk around and have a look at the facilities that they've got, all of that's obviously been stopped, nobody's allowed in the premises apart from the teachers and pupils. That was harder.'

(Sam)

All parents spoke about the importance of adequate preparation in a transition. Parents who had been able to take their child to visit the new school spoke positively about this, and commented that without in-person visitation, the transition may have been more challenging for their child. Some parents spoke about the negative impact that being unable to make this visit had had on their child, to which they attributed increased levels of anxiety.

With reference to the alternative measures that were adopted, some parents spoke of virtual transitions, which included transition videos and supplementary written materials. Parents appeared to be divided on the usefulness of these provisions, with some remarking that these had been effective in reducing their child's anxiety, while others commented that in-person tours would have been preferable.

Class bubbles

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most schools made significant changes to their day-to-day functioning at the start of the autumn 2020 term. Operational guidance released by the UK Government outlines the precautionary measures that state schools have implemented (DfE, 2021). These include, among others, measures such as keeping children in consistent groups – or 'bubbles' – that should not mix, and staggered start times.

Interestingly, some parents reported that precautionary measures put in place due to Covid-19 had been helpful to their child. For example, some parents described how not having to participate in whole-school assemblies or be in large crowds meant that their child could avoid scenarios that would have made them anxious:

'They've got staggered starts so it's so he doesn't see older children erm same for lunch time and play time he's just with his year group and they don't have assemblies so all those sort of things are things that he was scared about that haven't needed to be faced really.'

(Pat)

Several parents also described their fears about when Covid-19 precautions such as social distancing and class 'bubbles' are lifted:

'I have to say my big fear now is if social distancing rules are relaxed and y'know we are all vaccinated and Covid goes away erm and

secondary school goes back to what it was [sic] then my son might not be able to attend, y'know I think many of the things have broken down barriers for y'know children with disability or whatever, certainly removed a lot of a lot of the stressors.'

(Pat)

'They keep him within a smaller bubble ... he's actually in contact with a lot less people, which for him, I think, is ... is really helpful anyway. So ... in some ways, um, the effects of Covid are quite helpful to an autistic child, I think.'

(Jordan)

However, the sentiment that Covid-19 restrictions on in-school movement had been positive for their children was not shared by all parents. Some parents reported that being forced to stay within a 'bubble' and not interact with other children in different classes was challenging for their child, who would have appreciated the opportunity to engage with other students more closely:

'I think he'd be a lot happier, he loves mixing with other children ... there are kids he knows there who are in different classes to him who were at the primary school with him but I get the feeling they're obviously not allowed to mix so I think he'd run up to someone and just give them a hug ... I think he probably misses that aspect of school.'

(Morgan)

Another parent commented that they thought their child would have been able to adjust to their new school better had they been able to socialize with a friend who they knew from before the transition:

'I think she might have settled in a bit better because she actually knows somebody, the friend that she went to mainstream school with actually went to this school ... I think if [name] had been able to see her because she's in a different bubble it might have gone easier on her because they were really close ... in some aspects it was harder because of the fact that she couldn't see that friend.'

(Alex)

To summarize, parents in the present study described the ways in which Covid-19 precautions had manifested in their child's school day: for example, staggered start times, or the elimination of whole-school assemblies. Parents described the impact that this had on their child's experience of the transition. Precautionary measures were described as both a barrier and a facilitator for school transitions, and the effects varied between children.

Absence of horizontal transitions

In addition to enforcing social distancing through staggered start times and reduced whole-school contact, some schools had adopted alternative methods of structuring the school day in order to reduce the need for children to travel between classrooms, with children remaining in the same classroom throughout the school day. Two parents commented on this, noting that this appeared to have been helpful for children who had transitioned from primary to secondary school:

'It's the teachers that move around rather than the children so it's not so different to the way it was at primary school ... I do think it's a bonus that he's not having to move around to different classes, I think that's helped more with the ... settling in.'

(Jessie)

'Because of Covid ... the children at secondary ... stay in the classroom the whole time ... so it it's almost like a primary model that he's working with at the moment which has made it a lot easier for him than it would have been I think.'

(Pat)

Although only two parents mentioned that the absence of horizontal transitions during the school day had been helpful, both parents expressed the view that retention of a primary school model had helped their child in the transition, and had been successful in reducing anxiety about moving within their new school between classes.

Discussion

Summary of main findings

The research highlights a number of parent-reported facilitators and barriers to school transition in September 2020. The factors discussed during

interviews were consistent, regardless of the age of the child being supported during a transition, or the types of schools being transitioned from or to. However, there was diversity in parental opinion on whether these factors were facilitatory or acted as a barrier to their child's transition.

For example, one parent reported that the lockdowns and subsequent school closures had been positive for their child's transition, while several other parents reported the opposite effect. Similarly, all parents were in agreement that pre-transition preparation was important for their child, and spoke about the provision of online transition preparation materials. However, while these were appreciated by some, others mentioned finding these methods an insufficient substitute for pre-transition visits. Some parents remarked that video tours of the school were insufficient for their children, and that in-person visits would have improved the transition for their child. Finally, social distancing measures such as implementation of class bubbles and a lack of horizontal transitions throughout the school day were reported to be facilitatory and reduced their child's anxiety about transitioning to a new school. Other parents reported this as a barrier to their child being able to settle into their new environment.

When one considers prior research with autistic individuals and their families, these findings appear consistent with findings about autism and school transitions. For example, it is perhaps unsurprising that some children were reluctant to leave the comfort of their homes and return to school after long periods of isolation. This could be because the home environment is far more predictable, which is attractive to many autistic people (Goris et al., 2020). Further to this, transitioning from being under a strict stay-at-home order to being able to travel to school reflects a significant change to routine. It is well documented that many autistic individuals struggle to adapt to such transitions (Jolliffe, 1992), and this fact may underpin the difficulty reported by several of the parents in this study. Additionally, the return of '*continual noise*', as mentioned by Lesley, is likely to be of concern for many autistic children; an increase in auditory sensory input may be challenging, especially as environmental noise has been much decreased during the Covid-19 lockdown (Dümen & Şaher, 2020).

In addition, the reports of the negative impact of missing pre-transition visits also closely align with commonly reported findings from other studies. Researchers have consistently found that autistic children's transitions between schools are facilitated by the opportunity to visit their new school pre-transition (Stack et al., 2021). Peters and Brooks (2016) surveyed parents of autistic children who

were changing schools, and found that parents judged the transition to be ‘easier’ when they had been able to visit the new school with their child.

Furthermore, it seems logical that the social distancing measures, such as class bubbles and the lack of horizontal transitions, were reportedly positive. This may be due to these precautions enabling the avoidance of factors that have been associated with anxiety for autistic children. Such measures may have decreased the level of noise and enabled these children to navigate their new schools without having to maneuver among the increased population of larger schools, which autistic children often find daunting (Makin et al., 2017; Dillon & Underwood, 2012). Other studies have also observed the benefits of ‘the increased simplicity of Covid-safe schools, for example, breacktimes with smaller groups, fewer big events, reduced school traffic and one-way systems around schools’ (Oliver et al., 2021). These findings, combined with those reported here, suggest that some autistic children would benefit from the retention of social distancing measures. The Council for Disabled Children (2021), in research with over 600 children with SEND in the UK, came to a similar conclusion, reporting that some children who returned to school enjoyed ‘smaller class sizes, more one to one time with teachers and quieter communal areas’, and that these should be retained where possible for those who benefited.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings here have implications for policy on school transitions. For one, they highlight the importance of pre-transition preparation for autistic children: even when physical visits to a new school are not possible, parents reported the benefit of having preparatory materials such as videos and maps to help introduce their child to their new school. Secondly, policy makers should consider retaining some of the changes to the structure of the school day which have been implemented as a result of the pandemic. Parents of autistic children remarked on the benefits of reduced social contact and the retention of a primary-school model wherein children remained in the same classroom and with consistent support. This may also benefit other children in the first year of secondary school.

Recommendations for future research

Further investigation is required to explore each of the facilitators and barriers discussed in the interviews here in more detail. A study involving autistic children directly would be particularly beneficial. Any such investigation would benefit from a continuation of the use of qualitative, in-depth approaches, as such methodology allows researchers to meaningfully

benefit from stakeholders in the autism community who are experts by experience.

Strengths and limitations

This work is not representative of the experiences of all parents of autistic children who have undergone a school transition, and this was not the aim of the study. The aim of this study was to provide an in-depth insight into what a group of parents, and their autistic children, believed to be barriers and facilitators to school transition during Covid-19.

A reflexive approach was adopted throughout the analysis, and consultations with the research team took place so that the primary researcher could present themes and demonstrate how decisions in the coding process were made. This was done to remain attentive to subjectivity in the analytic process.

Conclusion

This study was the first to investigate parental perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to successful transitions for autistic children during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings from this study provide an insight into the perceptions of parents supporting an autistic child through a unique time for school transitions. Speaking to parents directly elicited insights into the heterogeneity of experiences and attitudes of autistic children and their families. Almost all factors identified here as beneficial for some children proved a hindrance to others. For example, some Covid-19 precautionary measures, particularly those related to enforcing social distancing, appeared to be positive for many parents' children, but were detrimental to others. Additionally, the pre-transition restrictions that parents described, such as lockdowns and being unable to visit their child's new school, were described as facilitators to successful transition by some, and as barriers by others.

The variety of responses and opinions on the same themes reinforces several things that parents and autism community stakeholders had already made clear: for one, that autistic children require a unique, child-centred approach to transitions, and understanding of the individual child is essential (Fortuna, 2014; Stoner et al., 2007). Secondly, this study highlights the benefits of qualitative research involving families of autistic individuals. By seeking out parental experiences and attempting to understand the importance that parents attribute to certain aspects of transitions, a deeper understanding of the process of transitioning between schools is gained.

Of particular interest is the fact that although there was variety in parental accounts of facilitators and barriers to transition, there was no clear divisiveness based on the type of school being transitioned from or to, or the age of the child transitioning. Although each child's experience is evidently unique, most interviewees touched on the same broad themes, as explored above. This suggests that regardless of the educational environment being transitioned from or into, parents of autistic children attributed significance to a limited number of factors during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the heterogeneity of perspectives and preferences reported here is supportive of a child-centred approach to school transitions and emphasizes the importance of engaging with the autism community to inform policy and practice.

Note

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose. Anonymised interview transcript data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon request.

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APPENDIX A

SCHOOL TRANSITIONS DURING COVID-19

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in our study. We are interviewing parents to find out how their child's experience of moving to a new school or college has been affected by COVID19. The interview should last no more than 45 minutes and you are free to withdraw at any time. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. Please can you tell me a bit about how things are going for your child [NAME] in their new school at the moment?
 - a What do they like or dislike about it?*
 - b How well would you say they have settled in?*
 - c What are the new arrangements for school drop-off and pick up (e.g. school transport if they use it) and how is that working out?*
2. How do you think your child [NAME] feels about their new school compared to their old school?
 - a When did they last see their old teachers and how did coronavirus and lockdown affect their relationships with their teachers?*
 - b Are they missing any particular teachers or Teaching Assistants?*
 - c How have they coped with the change in routine and the change in environment?*
 - d How are they coping with the learning in their new school?*
 - e Has this move to a new school altered your child's behaviour in any way? Please can you tell me a little more about that.*
3. How have your child's [NAME] friendships been affected by coronavirus and by the move to a new school?
 - a Can you tell me a bit about your child's [NAME] friendships at their new school?*
 - b Who are their friends?*

- c What do they tell you about their friends?*
 - d What do they say about the other children in their class?*
 - e Does your child [NAME] still have contact with their old friends, and how do you think they feel about this? How can you tell (e.g. from what they say or from what they do)?*
4. Please describe the support that you and your child [NAME] received to prepare for the transition?
- a What do you think about the quality of the support your family received?*
 - b Did the support come more from the old school or from the new school? Please can you tell me a little more about that?*
 - c What role did your child's teacher or TA from their previous school play in supporting their transition?*
 - d How do you think the support you were offered was affected by the COVID pandemic?*
 - e What additional support would have been helpful to you or your child in making their transition smooth?*
5. In what ways do you think coronavirus has affected your child's experience of moving to, and settling into, a new school? Please explain your answer.
- a How has their learning been affected by being in lockdown before the move?*
 - b How has their behaviour been affected by being in lockdown before the move?*
 - c How have their relationships been affected by being in lockdown before the move?*
 - d Has your child been asked to self-isolate since starting their new school? If so, what has been the effect of that on them?*
6. How has home-school communication been?
- a Have you had a parents evening yet? How did your child's teacher say they were settling in?*
 - b What kind of communication have you had from your child's teacher and/or school (other than a parent's evening)?*
 - c How helpful has the SENDCo at the new school been?*
 - d To what extent does the new school value your input as a parent?*
 - e How does home-school communication compare to their old school?*

7. Thinking about the days before your child [NAME] started their new school, can you describe their behaviour and any thoughts they shared with you about the move.
8. Thinking about their very first day at their new school – please can you describe what happened before and after school?
9. Thinking about the return to school, after half term, please can you describe how your child [NAME] felt about going back, and how that compared to their first day in September?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your child's [NAME] experience of moving school during the coronavirus pandemic?

Thank you so much for your time and for your thoughtful answers. They will really help us to build our understanding of school transition for children with Special Educational Needs, especially during a pandemic. If you would like to see a transcript of this interview please email me on the address used to set up this interview within two weeks.

That's all of my questions. Is there anything you would like to ask me before we finish?