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Book Section:

Hebron, J (2017) The Transition from Primary to Secondary School for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. In: Little, C, (ed.) Supporting Social Inclusion for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Insights from Research and Practice. Routledge, pp. 84-99. ISBN: 978-1138189966.

© 2017, Routledge. This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Supporting Social Inclusion for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Insights from Research and Practice on 20 February 2017, available online: <http://www.routledge.com/9781138189973>

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The Transition from Primary to Secondary School for Students with Autism Spectrum Conditions

Introduction

The move from primary to secondary school represents a significant ecological shift in the lives of all young people. While it often involves heightened anxiety, it can also be a time of excitement and keen anticipation at the prospect of entering into a more ‘grown-up’ world and preparing for adult life. Nevertheless, young people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) may be particularly at risk at this time because the key challenges of transition are similar to some of the difficulties encountered in those with autism. The inclusion of students with ASD remains a significant concern for educators, with poor social (e.g. difficulties in forming friendships and bullying) and academic (e.g. lower attainment) outcomes often reported. As a result, satisfaction with school and the ability to feel a valued part of its community may be severely compromised.

The transition from primary to secondary school (henceforth referred to as ‘transition’ in this chapter) has the potential to be a critical point in the education of young people with ASD, and yet research in this area remains relatively scarce. This chapter explores transition of young people with ASD by first giving an overview of relevant research and then presenting new findings from a mixed methods multi-perspective study conducted by the author in which a group of students with ASD (and their typically developing peers) were followed across the transition. In doing so, its aims were to expand the existing research base and gain a greater understanding of how students with ASD become part of a new academic and social community.

Review of the literature

Transition from primary to secondary school

The process of transition poses a number of changes and challenges for all children, typically including increased school size and the number of pupils on roll, a stronger emphasis on relative ability and competition than on effort and improvement, and relationships with teachers that are often less personal (for a detailed discussion of the differences between primary and secondary school, see Coffey, 2013). Secondary school therefore requires a higher degree of self-organisation among pupils, and in social terms they are moving from the protected top of the social hierarchy to the bottom of a more complex one (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). Despite these changes, research indicates that deleterious effects, such as reduced academic progress, increased anxiety and social difficulties, are transitory for most young people (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012), and that the experience of transition is often easier than anticipated (Waters, Lester, & Cross, 2014).

The challenges of transition may be greater for young people with special educational needs (SEN) compared to their typically developing (TD) peers, due to increased academic and social difficulties. To date though, there has been relatively little research in this area, with a focus on pupils with SEN as a homogeneous group, rather than exploring differences between groups of learners whose needs may vary greatly (Maras & Averling, 2006). Indeed, in the only systematic literature review on transition for young people with SEN, Hughes, Banks, and Terras (2013) found that just 17% of transition studies focused on students with SEN, and only five met their inclusion criteria for the review. The authors identified young people with SEN as being more vulnerable to anxiety, becoming the victim of bullying, low academic self-esteem, and poorer psychosocial outcomes compared to their TD peers.

Transition for young people with autism – previous research

Research into the educational experience of young people with autism has identified a number of areas in which this group of young people may experience particular challenges compared to their TD peers. These include: poorer academic outcomes and an elevated risk of exclusion (DfE, 2014), social vulnerability and victimisation (Sofronoff, Dark, & Stone, 2011), anxiety and depression (Hebron & Humphrey, 2012), and behavioural difficulties (Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006). Similar to SEN transition research however, there remains a lack of primary-secondary studies focusing on students with autism. Nevertheless, this is an area in need of better understanding, given that 70% of autistic students now attend mainstream schools in England (DfE, 2014). A review of transition research literature revealed only 8 studies¹ specifically exploring the experience for young people with autism. An overview of these is provided in Table 1.

<<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>>

The studies are all recent, conducted in the UK, with relatively small sample sizes, and a range of methodologies, designs and respondents used. While this represents considerable variation, there are a number of common themes in the findings which begin to suggest some cautious generalisability. Of immediate note, however, is that many of the findings in these studies are similar to those for TD students, with concerns relating to the organisation and structure of the school, adapting to different teachers, coping with new academic demands and homework, making friends and bullying. In observing this similarity, Dann (2011) notes that, ‘Perhaps pupils

¹ In addition to the research reviewed, Mandy, Murin, Baykaner, Staunton, Cobb, et al. (2015) present the findings of an intervention study using the original transition study participants as a control group. The study is not included here as the focus is not on intervention studies; however, it is recommended for readers seeking an intervention for transitioning students with autism.

with ASC need more preparation (quantitative difference) due to their difficulties and may experience a greater intensity of worry and difficulty” (p. 305).

Central to a successful transition were co-ordinated efforts between primary and secondary schools, during which the parents and young people were involved (e.g. Tobin et al., 2012). This enabled students to be familiar with the new environment and staff prior to transition (e.g. Dann, 2011), while delays and inconsistent approaches to transition were associated with less positive outcomes (e.g. Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr, & Smith, 2006). Although parents sometimes felt the need for more visits, a bespoke transition package was viewed favourably (e.g. Peters & Brooks, 2016). Parents often expressed a desire for more support and tended to be more anxious than their children (e.g. Coles, 2014), who frequently viewed transition optimistically (e.g. Jindal-Snape et al., 2006). Knowledge of the young person, both pre-, during and post-transition were more likely to result in the student receiving suitable support, although positive staff attitudes and understanding of autism, as well as appropriate training were also considered vital (e.g. Dann, 2011).

Following transition, while many students appeared to cope well with the academic demands of their new school, homework emerged as a concern. This may have been exacerbated by a tendency for students to regard home and school as separate environments with little or no overlap (e.g. Dillon & Underwood, 2012). In addition, few young people were found to actively participate in extra-curricular activities (Coles, 2014). Nevertheless, social relationships were extremely important in the majority of these studies, with peer acceptance, support and friendship viewed very positively (e.g. Dillon & Underwood, 2012), and poor social relationships (including being bullied) associated with problematic transition (e.g. Peters, 2016). Anxiety was mentioned in the majority of studies, but with inconsistent findings. For example,

Hannah and Topping (2012) did not find any clear trends, while Peters (2016) highlighted it as an issue, especially at unstructured times of the day. Mandy and colleagues (2015) acknowledge that although they did not find any significant change in difficulties at the group level, many young people in their sample already had high (and often undiagnosed) levels of psychopathology at primary school that persisted across the transition. Of note in this study is that a decline in bullying post-transition was also found.

Satisfaction with school and social inclusion among young people with ASD at transition

The existing research base has identified that a successful transition for children with ASD may be affected by many factors. Indeed, Peters (2016) suggests that there is no single barrier to a successful transition, while Hannah and Topping (2012) note the importance of individual differences. Importantly, Mandy, Murin, Baykaner, Staunton, Hellriegel, et al. (2015) call for greater exploration of the ‘social and educational processes that occur during this time which might influence outcomes’ (p. 8): this represents a shift away from the more traditional deficit-led approach (Billington, 2006) towards an acknowledgement that external factors (i.e. the school ethos and environment) may be of equal or greater importance in securing successful outcomes. With these questions in mind, the study presented in the following sections explores how students with ASD experienced the transition to secondary school with a particular focus on satisfaction with school and social inclusion.

The study

This was a longitudinal mixed methods study. Participants were students with ASD ($N = 28$, 23 male and 5 female) and a comparison group of TD students ($N = 21$, 16 male and 5 female),

recruited from mainstream and special schools across the North West of England and North Wales. There were four data-collection points:

- T1 = Year 6, final term of primary school
- T2 = Year 7 term 1, first year of secondary school
- T3 = Year 7 term 3, first year of secondary school
- T4 = Year 8 term 1, second year of secondary school

Each time point was approximately 6 months after the previous one, covering an 18-month period in total. Students completed the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale (Goodenow, 1993) as a proxy of school satisfaction and social inclusion across the transition. This widely used and validated questionnaire permits an understanding of ‘the extent to which [students] feel personally accepted, included, respected and supported’ (p. 80) at their school. It contains 18 items (e.g. *I am included in lots of activities at my school*) which are scored on a 5-point Likert scale, with a mean score calculated. Questionnaire data were analysed statistically using ANOVAs, and t-tests².

In addition, 10 concurrent case studies were completed from among the ASD group and involved students (11 including twins; 9 boys, 2 girls), their parents and a key teacher. Interview data were analysed inductively and deductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative element was considered vital in order to give meaning to the responses given in the PSSM questionnaire, as well as to provide explanatory accounts of the transition from first-person, home and school perspectives.

Satisfaction with school across the transition

² The author can be contacted for further details of the statistical analyses.

The results of the PSSM questionnaire are presented in Figure 1. It is encouraging to note that both groups demonstrated a good level of satisfaction with school of this throughout the study (mean scores of 3 and above indicate a more positive sense of school membership), but there were very different trends in the two groups. Findings for the TD group were broadly as expected, with students experiencing less satisfaction with school when first starting in Y7 (T2), but this stabilised by the end of the first year (e.g. Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012), with evidence of a non-significant decrease at the beginning of the second year (T3-4).

<<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>>

Contrary to expectations, students with ASD reported a significant increase in their satisfaction with school from T1 to T3, in effect demonstrating the opposite trend to their TD peers. In addition, while there was a significant difference between the ASD and TD students in levels of school connectedness at T1 and T2, this was no longer the case at T3 and T4, with the gap narrowing considerably, although there were indications of it starting to open up again at T4. There are a number of potential explanations for the positive trends in the ASD group in this study, and they offer cautious optimism to suggest that transition to secondary school for young people with autism may not be the negative experience it is often hypothesised to be. However, of concern is the downward trend in scores reported for both groups at T4, after a term of Y8, with the ASD group reporting a greater fall in scores than the TD group. This may be indicative of the gradual disengagement found in secondary school students as they progress through the academic year groups (Coffey, 2013), but the finding warrants further exploration. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, the PSSM findings are discussed in more detail with the Case Study findings in the following section.

The experience of transition from students, parent and teacher perspectives

Thematic analysis resulted in six main themes (as presented in Figure 1) that were judged to encapsulate and reflect the experiences of participants during the transition to secondary school. These themes are considered in turn and discussed in relation to the PSSM findings in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the issues encountered during transition in relation to satisfaction with school and social inclusion.

<<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>>

i) Transition planning and management

Transition planning

Where transition worked well, there was a bespoke transition package in place that was negotiated between primary and secondary schools as well as parents and students. All students were involved in the transition open days, and this enabled them to meet new peers and experience lessons. In addition, the majority of students had additional visits that permitted further familiarisation and also the opportunity to explore more specific concerns. Students valued transition books (with their timetable, photographs of teachers, and maps) as well as being able to explore their new school while the building was empty. One parent reflected immediately post-transition: *'He was right in the middle of the hustle and bustle and buying his food and doing his thing and he was absolutely at home ... usually he's the one that's got all the struggling.'* For those students requiring the support of a teaching assistant, it was rarely possible to meet the member of staff in advance, and this was a source of anxiety for parents in particular. Where key staff were able to meet the young people and their parents pre-transition, this provided a useful point of contact and sense of consistency. While time-consuming to put

together, the benefits of a well organised transition plan clearly outweighed any disadvantages and parents felt reassured that staff had taken time to understand their child.

On-going transition management

Once the transition had taken place, it was vital that the transition plan was used consistently and information passed on to relevant teaching staff. This was not always the case, leading to breakdowns in communication and on occasion inappropriate strategies used in class with the student. In most cases issues were resolved reasonably swiftly if the special educational needs co-ordinator was made aware and intervened. However, in some cases, parents were not aware of a problem, and their child did not mention anything until reaching a crisis point: *‘Just a simple phone call or something just to say ‘we’re having this issue’ - we could have stopped it right there and then, [...] we wouldn’t have had the whole big explosion at the end of the week.’*

While the move into Y8 (T4) could be considered another transition to be planned and managed, it was reassuring to note that neither the students nor their parents expressed any significant concerns, and this was largely confirmed at T4 once Y8 had started. However, the findings from the PSSM do not support this, with (albeit non-significant) decreases in school connectedness reported by the end of the first term of Y8 (T4). This may reflect the gradual disengagement often observed in secondary age students (e.g. Coffey, 2013) as they enter puberty and are also faced with ever increasing academic demands. Given the potential social vulnerability of young people with ASD and the increasingly complex social behaviour that is associated with adolescence, more research from a first person perspective is needed to explain this trend. This is discussed in more detail in the section on Relationships.

ii) Communication

This is an important theme in previous ASD transition studies (e.g. Tobin et al., 2012), and its salience was reinforced in this study. Where effective channels of communication were open between home and school, the transition tended to go more smoothly. Parents valued what could be considered a ‘primary school’ model of close communication, and in some cases this was necessary in order to ensure continuity and consistency between home and school. One parent commented: *‘It’s amazing, it goes above and beyond really I think what’s reasonable...every day, at the end of the day, both of them come out to see me and to hand over.’* While this level of support was only needed in the short-term and in a small number of cases, parents valued it highly. More generally, parents appreciated being able to speak to or email trusted contacts in the knowledge that they would be listened to and any concerns would be acted on: *‘I’ve never phoned and not got through or not been able to get hold of them. If I’ve emailed I’ve had a response within an hour or so, it’s really good, it’s very good communication.’* However, this was not a one-way process and teachers also appreciated good communication from parents: *‘Everything we have done, we’ve had parental support for, you know, we’ve developed over the time a good respect there.’* This sense of mutual respect was vital, especially for parents who had previously experienced poor relationships with schools and teachers.

Nevertheless, in a minority of cases, parents felt that some problems could have been avoided if the school had contacted them. In addition, some parents simply needed some reassurance early on in the transition that everything was fine: *‘I think if I phoned up and pressed for answers I’ve got them, but I don’t think, I’ve not even had anybody phone me just to let me know how he’s getting on.’* This was clearly distressing for some parents who did not wish to contact the school unnecessarily for fear of being seen as a ‘nuisance.’ Lack of effective communication and understanding between home and school could mask serious issues, as demonstrated by one Case

Study student whose transition ultimately collapsed, causing a great deal of distress to the student and family.

iii) Support

Students

All the students had differing needs, but it was apparent that support would be required for the majority at least in the short-term in order to maximise opportunities for social inclusion and academic progress. Some students needed high levels of support (i.e. constant support from a teaching assistant), and this was likely to reflect a social or emotional need as much as an academic one. Others benefited from having a teaching assistant to ensure they remained on task during lessons, or a trusted member of staff who could to provide advice and support if required: *'I know I've always got my teaching assistants nearby if I ever need some help.'* This underlines the importance of school staff knowing the students as individuals with unique needs, rather than making assumptions about the type and level of support required. Many of the case study students excelled academically but encountered organisation or peer group issues. In addition, all secondary school staff mentioned independence as an important skill for the young people to develop. In 'best practice' cases, support was gradually withdrawn once the student was judged to be ready for greater independence, although the teaching assistant tended to remain in the classroom as a discrete support.

Parents

Parents often emerged as needing a high level of support from schools at transition. This is understandable given the significance of the change and was often reflected upon in the light of previous poor experiences at primary school or worries about having to get to know a new staff. Indeed, prior to transition, parents expressed considerably more concerns than their sons and

daughters: *'It's all change, yeah. Everything changes and to be honest I'm quite freaked out by it. I think I may be more...more nervous than he is, to be honest.'* Nevertheless, in light of the positive communication that most parents had with the secondary schools, the reality of transition tended to be better than anticipated. The same parent later commented: *'It was going to be a settling in year and well it hasn't been a settling in year it's been a spectacular year!'*

iv) Relationships

New friendships and the peer group

Most of the students had experienced difficulties forming and maintaining friendships in the past, although a number of them had successful primary school friendships, some of which persisted into secondary school. While some of the students continued to find it difficult to forge new friendships, there was a desire among all of them to do so, with varying levels of success.

However, it was encouraging to note some very successful new reciprocal friendships for about half of the Case Study students by the end of Y7 and into Y8. The common feature here was that new friends had similar interests and were highly supportive of each other: *'We're all kind of bookworms, so we're always hanging out in the library together'* and *'They're like really nice to me and they get my jokes, my jokes are horrible by the way!'* Some of these new friendships were with other students on the autistic spectrum but often they were not, perhaps reflecting the benefits of having a larger peer group at secondary school. On the whole, secondary peers appear to have been supportive and inclusive during the first year of secondary school, although there were indications that friendship groups were becoming more fluid, and the case study students increasingly left out. While this may not have been a conscious decision, there was a growing awareness among the Case Study students of their 'difference' from the peer group but also a

reluctance to be forced to conform to new social conventions: *'Everyone has their own little clusters, it's like they're penguins grouping together into one corner, it's very funny to me.'*

Bullying

All of the case study students had experienced teasing and bullying at some point in their primary school years. It was therefore encouraging to note that levels were no higher and may even have declined from T2 to T4. This would support the higher levels of school satisfaction reported by the ASD students on the PSSM as well as Mandy, Murin, Baykaner, Staunton, Hellriegel, et al.'s (2015) recent findings. However, approximately half of the Case Study students did experience some bullying behaviour from peers in Y7, and this ranged from physical attacks to social exclusion and teasing. In all cases this was very upsetting for the students, but both they and their parents reported that incidents had been dealt with promptly and appropriately by the schools. Reporting of issues could be problematic, and in a number of cases it was brought to the school's attention by peers or parents rather than the students themselves. Clearly this is an area that warrants continued attention, both in terms of personal awareness of bullying behaviour, as well as better educating the peer group and ensuring staff remain vigilance (especially at unstructured times). The students were also becoming increasingly involved in social media, and it is acknowledged that this is more difficult to 'police' for parents and schools.

v) *Attitude towards school*

Making a 'new start'

Many of the students were excited as well as apprehensive about their forthcoming transition, and this was reiterated by parents and teachers: *'He's looking forward to going [...] that idea of challenge and being pushed and seeing a worth and value of his education'* – primary school

teacher). In several cases, especially where the young person had experienced difficulties at primary school prior to ASD diagnosis, the move to secondary was seen as an opportunity to be seen as an individual rather than through the lens of a label or previous behavioural difficulties: *'It's been a completely fresh start for all of us to be honest and I think for him, because they're just taking him on face value, although they know all the background, they are allowing him to start again which is just, for me, is massive'* – parent. This notion of a fresh start continued over the first year of secondary school and was instrumental in many of the young people feeling a genuine sense of inclusion in the school: *'I thought it'd like be a bit weird moving, but after a couple of weeks I felt like...now, I don't even remember really going to that school, it just feels like when I think of school I think of here.'*

Academic considerations

For all of the young people, it took a few weeks to become used to the academic demands and multiple subject staff at secondary school, although having a complex timetable did not appear to cause any significant issues. This would suggest that the highly structured environment of a secondary school may suit many young people with ASD. Liking or disliking a subject seemed to depend more on the teacher and his/her style rather than the actual academic content.

Homework presented many challenges for the young people. While some were highly organised and accepted that homework must be completed punctually, others struggled to manage this at the end of an already exhausting day. with one parent commenting: *'It's battlefield homework because as far as she is concerned, school is for schoolwork and home is for doing the things she wants to do at home.'* This issue was circumvented in most cases by the students either completing homework during the school day (i.e. at lunchtime) or at an after-school club. A further issue emerged in terms of some staff not explaining homework tasks with sufficient

clarity for students who interpreted instructions literally (i.e. it is not enough to ask students to complete something if the teacher also expects it to be submitted).

Extra-curricular activities

Similar to previous studies (e.g. Coles, 2014), few of the students in this study participated in extra-curricular activities. While this sometimes reflected a reliance on school transport, it also emerged that the participants needed time to rest after the social demands of the day. This is an important consideration for schools, as young people with autism often manage the school day extremely well but have a resulting need to be able to relax and express any frustrations once they are home and in a safe environment.

vi) *Autism and identity*

Autism as a condition pervaded many aspects of the transition to secondary school, and the findings are consonant with previous research (e.g. Dann, 2011) suggesting that young people with autism may experience aspects of transition more intensely than their TD peers and so may require additional support.

Anxiety

Most of the young people in this study experienced high levels of anxiety and/or frustration on occasion, and at levels that could be considered unusual for a TD student. Similar to recent research findings (Mandy, Murin, Baykaner, Staunton, Hellriegel, et al., 2015), this level of psychopathology was already present in primary school for many of the students and only increased at transition in a minority of cases. Staff understanding of triggers and warning signs could defuse potentially difficult and upsetting situations, and often a clearer explanation or some 'time out' in a quiet area was sufficient for students to be able to manage their anxiety.

Anxiety was also experienced in some cases as a result of sensory sensitivities. While this was

something that mainstream schools sometimes struggled to understand, it is pleasing to note that reasonable adjustments were often made (e.g. a pass to go to lunch early to avoid busy corridors, permission not to wear a school tie).

Autism awareness among adults

Awareness of autism among staff, other parents and the peer group varied greatly, although all of the students were aware of their diagnosis. Where staff were well trained and had a good understanding of autism, students felt valued and safe in their classrooms. In many cases this allowed the young people to be themselves and enjoy the experience of education: *'you don't have to be someone you're not, just be yourself'* – student. However, this was not always the case, and a number of the students and their parents (as well as some of the teachers) commented on difficulties in ensuring that staff understanding was adequate, appropriate and did not rely on outdated stereotypes. Parents of TD students could also demonstrate poor understanding of autism, and in some cases this resulted in social exclusion.

Seeing past the label

In many cases, secondary school staff were proactive in valuing the students as individuals with their own often considerable strengths. This nurturing approach made the overall experience of school more fulfilling and undoubtedly contributed to the sense of school connectedness and inclusion most of these young people felt within a few weeks of joining their new school: *'She feels valued, she feels as if her opinion does matter, they do listen to her'* – parent.

Recommendations and future directions

The findings from this study and previous literature highlight that transition is a critical point in a young person's social and educational development. There is evidence for cautious optimism that it can be a positive experience for young people with ASD and their parents when planned appropriately. Continued research is warranted in this area, especially in terms of more mixed methods studies that can explore the processes underpinning transition, as well as flexible models of intervention that accommodate the heterogeneous nature of ASD. In education terms, there are a number of areas warranting attention and development, given that there are no statutory transition requirements in many countries:

- There should be more sharing of good practice, as many schools have excellent transition programmes in place.
- Schools need designated staff members to manage the transition of students with ASD (as well as other potentially vulnerable students), and this needs to begin well in advance of the actual transition.
- Bespoke transition plans are essential for many young people with ASD, and manualised transition interventions that allow a flexible approach (such as Mandy, Murin, Baykaner, Staunton, Cobb, et al., 2015) may be very useful.
- Parents and students should be involved in transition planning, allowing adequate time to become acquainted with the new school and key members of staff.
- It is important to have an 'autism-friendly' environment and ethos at the school that encourages diversity.
- Schools must ensure adequate training of all staff in autism awareness in order to make students feel more valued and accepted as part of the learning community.

- The social element of transition is vital to its success, as school contributes significantly to a student's social and emotional development.

Summary

The importance of a positive transition to secondary school cannot be under-estimated, and there is growing empirical evidence to suggest that this is achievable for young people with ASD, provided that schools provide appropriate planning and support. A successful transition is dependent on many factors and these will be unique to each individual. However, common to all transitional arrangements is the need to promote social inclusion by ensuring a nurturing ethos that embraces difference and diversity; getting to know the young person as an individual while understanding and accommodating their needs; supporting and communicating with parents; and remaining vigilant to social vulnerability and bullying from the peer group. In doing so, there is evidence that young people with ASD can quickly feel a keen sense of inclusion and belonging in their new school, which in turn will contribute to a positive experience of education.

Acknowledgements

The author's study presented in this chapter was jointly funded by the Leverhulme Trust and the University of Manchester Simon Fellowship. Sincere gratitude is extended to the students, parents and teachers involved in the study, without whose contribution this research would not have been possible.

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