The impact of primary-secondary school transition for children with autism spectrum conditions: a longitudinal, mixed-methods study

Judith Hebron Simon and Leverhulme Research Fellowship
Manchester Institute of Education, School of Environment, Education and Development

Background

Children with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) experience difficulties in social interaction, communication and imagination. These difficulties mean that they may struggle to make sense of the world around them, and school can present particular challenges for children with ASC. The experience of education has a profound influence on the lives of all children, from academic progress to social understanding, ultimately informing the way in which adult life is negotiated. Research suggests that when this experience is negative, the effects can be long-lasting and difficult to reverse[6].

The project utilises a longitudinal, mixed-methods design with Design and methods

Analytical strategy:

Analysis of data is on-going between data collection periods. Quantitative data are being analysed by means of statistical methods to assess change over time (e.g. multivariate analysis of covariance). Thematic analysis of both a priori and emergent themes is being used to explore S2 data.

Strand 1 (quantitative data):

The KIDSSCREEN (quality of life) questionnaire revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups at T1 across most domains, with young people in the ASC group reporting fewer positive experiences than the Comparison group. This finding was similar regardless of whether the student, parent or teacher completed it. At T2 differences remained between the two groups. However, the gap had narrowed slightly with fewer statistically significant differences (e.g. the ASC group felt more positive than they did at the end of primary school, but the Comparison group felt less positive). In terms of the School Membership questionnaire (completed by the students), both groups rated the experience of primary school positively. However, there was still a significant difference between the two groups, with the ASC group reporting their experience slightly less positively than the Comparison group. At Time 1, the ASC group were more positive about their school experience than at the end of primary school. While the Comparison group were more positive about their school experience than at the end of primary school. While the Comparison group were more positive about their school experience than at the end of primary school.

Research questions

1. How does transition from primary to secondary school impact on the psychosocial adjustment and academic progress of children with ASC compared with typically developing peers?
2. Are academic and psychosocial trajectories of children with ASC different during transition related?
3. Which factors influence the successful (or unsuccessful) transition of children with ASC, and are these distinct from those affecting other learners?
4. What is the experience of key stakeholders (pupils with ASC, their parents and teachers) before, during and after transition?

Design and methods

The project utilises a longitudinal, mixed-methods design with two and a half years of follow-up for allowing for integration and triangulation of data sources.

Strand 1 (Sts) - Quantitative modelling of psychosocial and academic trajectories

Pupils with ASC (N = 38) and a comparison group of children with no identified special educational needs (N = 22) are being monitored through transition from Year 6 to Year 8 (T1-T4). Pupil, teacher and parent outcomes are assessed for:

- Academic progress in English and Mathematics
- Social Responsiveness Scale[5] completed by parents of children with ASC

Strand 2 (Sts) - Qualitative explanatory case studies of transition

Experiences of transition are being explored through the eyes of pupils with ASC, their parents and teachers. It examines convergences and divergences in these key stakeholders’ understanding of the transition process, its impact, and the variety of factors associated with it. For example, teachers and parents have identified that the transition is difficult in a number of key areas. These include:

- Transitioning from primary to secondary school
- Adjusting to new learning environments
- Developing peer relationships

Overview of activities during the three years of the fellowship

Early findings (T1-T2)

Visits to schools took place during students’ final half-term of primary school (T1) and approximately 6 months later, towards the end of their first term of Y8. Questionnaires were completed by students, parents and teachers, and interviews were conducted.

Results

In some cases, anxiety was heightened by the move to a new school, with teachers and parents working closely to address it (e.g. by making reasonable adjustments). Many of the students were experiencing the challenge of new subjects, and the strict structure of the school day was viewed positively. Occasional concerns were expressed regarding inconsistent application of the school rules by different teachers. New friendships were being made, and many of the students commented positively on how they had enjoyed getting to know other young people. A number of the students had experienced incidents of bullying and/or teasing, but both they and their parents were satisfied that incidents had been dealt with quickly and fairly. When the transition went smoothly, parents felt that tailored visits and good communication with the new school had been extremely useful. Parents also commented very positively on how schools had taken time in advance of transition to get to know their son/daughter.

Next steps...

The third phase (T3) of the project has recently been completed and will provide a picture of how participating Y8 parents felt at the end of their first term of Y8. The final phase (T4) will be in November and December, when the students are approaching the end of their first year of secondary school.

References

5. White J, Davidson N. Interventions to improve the transition to secondary school. Educational Psychology in Practice 2008; 24: 118.

Contact: judith.hebron@manchester.ac.uk