

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

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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[1]. 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[4]. The process of transition poses a number of challenges for all children. In particular, secondary school requires a higher degree of resilience and self-organisation among pupils, as they are moving from the protected top of the social hierarchy to the bottom of a more complex one. Despite this, research indicates that negative effects are transitory for most children[5]. However, the difficulties experienced by children with ASC potentially make them an extremely vulnerable group. The child-centred environment of a primary school can be difficult to replicate in a secondary school where children have multiple subject staff, whose awareness and professional understanding of ASC may be limited. In adjusting to secondary school, children are also expected to form new social relationships in unfamiliar settings and adapt to changes in routine, both of which are major challenges for pupils who fundamentally struggle with the social world. Existing research has identified that the success of transition for children with ASC may be affected by factors such as support across educational phases and expertise of subject staff[6], but design limitations (e.g. small samples) in these studies preclude any firm conclusions.

Research questions

- 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?
- Are academic and psychosocial trajectories of children with ASC during transition related? If so, how?
- Which factors influence the successful (or unsuccessful) transition of children with ASC, and are these distinct from those affecting other learners?
- 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 related strands of fieldwork allowing for integration and triangulation of data sources.

Strand 1 (S1) - 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:

- Psychological and physical well-being, peer and social support (KIDSCREEN-52[7])
- Resilience (The Children's Hope Scale[8])
- School connectedness (The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale[9])

- Academic progress in English and Maths; attendance
- Social Responsiveness Scale[10] completed by parents of children with ASC

Strand 2 (S2) - 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 successful (or unsuccessful) adjustment. 10 families from the ASC group in S1 were selected for case study research using maximum variation sampling (e.g. to reflect a range of schools and special educational needs provision) with interviews at T1-T4.

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.

Year	Data collection	Projected output
Y1	Set-up, ethics, recruitment, Year 6 pre-transition data (T1)	Literature review Conference presentation
Y2	Year 7 post-transition data collection (T2 and T3)	Conference presentation - interim findings Interim report for participants
Y3	Year 8 post-transition data collection (T4), data analysis	Conference presentation - project findings Writing up of papers, reports and feedback

Overview of activities during the three years of the fellowship

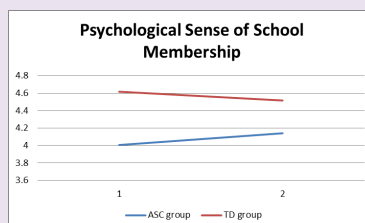
Early findings (T1-T2)

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 Y7 (T2). Questionnaires were completed by students, parents and teachers, and interviews were conducted.



Strand 1 (quantitative data):

The KIDSCREEN (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 2, the ASC group were more positive about their school experience than at the end of primary school. While the Comparison group were reported less positive feelings, they were still slightly more positive than students with ASC.



Changes in sense of school connectedness from T1 to T2



Strand 2 (case studies):

When speaking to students and their parents about the transition to secondary school, it was clear that this was a stressful time, especially for parents. However, in many cases there was also a sense of excitement among the students, with several looking forward to trying new subjects and meeting new people. Of the 11 students (including twins), seven appeared to have had an overall positive experience of transition, two were finding it difficult and in a further two cases experiences were mixed. Many of the challenges of starting at a new school were in line with expectation and included adapting to secondary school structures (e.g. different lessons and a complex timetable); adjusting to new styles of homework (and the sanctions for not doing it); getting lost in a much bigger environment (e.g. moving from a school of 200 students to one with 1500+); and losing things (e.g. PE kit).

"We have to win the parents and win their trust."
(Teacher)

"I had to free up some space in my mind so I could remember where everything is and all the teachers' names, so it took me a while."
(Student)

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 enjoying 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 staff. 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 schools where staff had taken time in advance of transition to get to know their son/daughter.

"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, it's massive"
(Parent)

Next steps ...

The third phase (T3) of the project has recently been completed and will provide a picture of how participating Y7s felt at the end of their first full year at secondary school. The final phase (T4) will be in November and December, when the students are approaching the end of their first term of Y8.

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