



Inclusive school practices supporting the primary to secondary transition for autistic children: pupil, teacher, and parental perspectives

Executive Summary

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Background

The primary to secondary ('vertical') school transition is one of the most important and challenging educational transitions, and can have a significant and long-lasting impact on young people (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Autistic children are particularly vulnerable to negative transition experiences as changes in routine can be especially difficult (Fortuna, 2014). The transition may not always be a negative experience for pupils with autism though, and Mandy et al., (2015) highlight the need to examine school-based practices that may support successful transitions from primary to secondary school. Thus, this qualitative research project aimed to collect data on experiences of the primary to secondary school transition to highlight effective practices from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders: pupils, parents, and teachers. This case study involves a mainstream secondary school in the South of England, which has a dedicated Learning Support base.

Research Questions

1. What are the views and experiences of young people on the autism spectrum about their vertical transition from primary to secondary school?
2. What are the views of parents and teachers about the transitions of young people on the autism spectrum from primary to secondary school?
3. What support can be given to parents and teachers to enable them to support children through the vertical transition?

Method

A photovoice activity followed by a semi-structured interview was conducted with five pupils with autism aged 12-16 years. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with six parents/carers, and four staff members to find out more about their perspectives on transitions.

Key Findings

- Five key themes emerged in relation to effective practice; **Inclusion, Child-Centred approach, Familiarisation, Visual Supports, and Communication and Consistency.**
- Overall, every pupil, teacher and parent reported having a positive transition experience.
- Pupils, parents and teachers all highlighted and appreciated the benefits of having the Learning Support base. Many parents felt Learning Support was essential for enabling their child to be in a mainstream school without having to negotiate the everyday transitions of secondary school, such as moving classrooms.

- Effective provisions were described as flexible and dependent on the individual needs, such as starting on part-time timetables.
- Parents also highlighted that school staff members need to have knowledge not only of the pupil, but also of parents.
- Familiarisation techniques including using visual supports were regarded as essential to reduce pupils' anxieties about the transition to secondary, but schools need to ensure pupils, staff and parents are shown how to use them effectively.
- Open and frequent communication between parents and school staff was seen as important.

Conclusions

- Practical implications include using the child's special interests and visual supports to engage and support them, enabling communication between parents and the school, and being patient and flexible around the transition to allow pupils and parents to become comfortable and familiar with the new environment.
- Many of these ideas support existing literature (e.g., Peters and Brooks, 2016; Stoner et al., 2007).
- This research highlights the importance of a needs-based approach to inclusion which recognises and understands what autism means for children, their families, and the teachers who support them.
- This research illustrates the use of a photovoice methodology with young people with autism, demonstrating that they can be supported to express their views on matters which affect them.
- The Learning Support base is likely to be a central characteristic in understanding the overall positive experiences reported by participants. This highlights the benefits of having this additional support and the difference it can make to individuals with autism during the transition.
- As this is a small-scale project generalisations are limited. However, this research illuminates transition practices that are experienced as effective by autistic children, their parents and teachers.
- It would be interesting to conduct similar research in mainstream schools that do not have a learning support base, to see if experiences of effective practices differ.

References

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