



Managing Educational Transition for autistic children from Pre-school to Primary Education

Executive Summary

Sarah Galea, MSc Education Management and Leadership, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

Background

The first major educational transition to primary school signifies an essential developmental milestone for all children (Quintero & McIntyre, 2010). Nonetheless, such a transition can bring about various stresses to parents, students and teachers alike. Children on the autism spectrum may experience the transition from preschool to primary as particularly difficult compared to their peers (Forest et al., 2004; Starr et al., 2010). Although a significant number of autistic children transition from preschool to primary every year (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010), the process itself is still significantly under-researched. There are currently four main gaps in the literature in relation to the transition process for autistic children from preschool to primary: (1) the experiences of Early Years transition for autistic children in the UK; (2) how such a transition is being planned, managed and implemented by staff members responsible; (3) the nature of the relationship between preschool and primary schools when planning and managing the transition; and (4) the evaluation of what makes a 'good transition' from preschool to primary school according to the teaching professionals involved.

Research Questions

1. What strategies do sending and receiving schools use during the transition planning and process?
2. What similarities and differences are there in the transition process between different schools?
3. What is the relationship between sending and receiving schools during the transition process?
4. How do schools define a 'good transition' for autistic children?

Method

Nine staff members (3 from each school) from a preschool in the South of England and two primary schools who receive children from the preschool shared their experiences on the use of various strategies used in the planning and management of transitions, stakeholders involved, and the definition of a successful transition through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis in order to determine similarities and differences in the participants' experiences.

Key findings

- Various strategies were used from both the preschool and primary schools in order to smooth the transition for autistic children. These included: **transition meetings and plans, visits at respective schools, visual supports, providing a gradual transition, and the use of strategies utilised within the preschool setting to the primary school.**
- Visual supports in the form of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and adapted Social Stories were regularly used to facilitate communication with children about the transition process. Photographs of the new school, classrooms and teachers were taken and included in a "Transition Book" which the child could then refer to during the summer holiday.

- There were procedural and practical issues for all with some of the strategies used, including limited resources and capacity (e.g. to make more visits to meet children) and perceptions that some strategies were not being used to their full potential as a result.
- Such issues could impact on the relationships and continuity of provision between the sending and receiving schools. For example, nursery staff felt that their expertise, and knowledge about the children, were undervalued by the primary schools.
- There were differences in described practices and perceptions between the preschool and the primary schools in relation to how staff members should get to know the children during visits. Staff at the preschool tended to emphasise the importance of spending time playing with the children, whereas staff from the receiving primary schools talked about observing the children, viewing paperwork, and talking to staff at the nursery.
- There were differences too regarding whether and how the transition to the primary school should be more gradual in nature. Staff at the receiving primary schools talked about the importance of taking a staggered approach to introducing the child to the school (starting part-time), the class (allowing more time in a quiet and calm environment), and assembly (joining for short periods to start with). Nursery staff questioned the extent to which the gradual approach was needed as children were used to attending the nursery full-time and so they already had experience of this.
- There is strong agreement between previous research (e.g. Starr et al., 2010) and the current study, that for a smooth transition from preschool to primary school, parental involvement is a key element in the process. It is vital to remember that it is not just the children who are transitioning, but the parents as well.
- Findings showed that most participants from the preschool and primary schools based the success of the transition on the individual needs and wellbeing of the child, rather than through adopting more generalised strategies based on a general category of need or diagnosis.

Conclusions

There is scope for strengthening the transition practices for autistic children between the nursery and the primary schools through nursery staff being supported and enabled to spend time with children in the new setting, and primary staff being supported to spend more time directly playing with children in the nursery. In addition, while some strategies that had begun in nursery were implemented by the primary schools, this was not always the case and so this is an area that could be discussed further. The practical challenges for achieving strengthened shared practices are not to be under-estimated, but these aspects could at least form part of a professional discussion between schools about expectations and possibilities that informs the transition planning. More research is needed to include a wider range of sending and receiving schools in investigating the management of educational transitions.

References

- Denkyirah, A.M. and Agbeke, W.K., 2010. Strategies for transitioning preschoolers with autism spectrum disorders to kindergarten. *Early childhood Education Journal*, 38(4), pp.265-270.
- Forest, E.J., Horner, R.H., Lewis-Palmer, T. and Todd, A.W., 2004. Transitions for young children with autism preschool to kindergarten from. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 6(2), pp.103-112.
- Quintero, N. and McIntyre, L.L., 2011. Kindergarten transition preparation: A comparison of teacher and parent practices for children with autism and other developmental disabilities. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 38(6), pp.411-420
- Starr, E.M., Martini, T.S. and Kuo, B.C., 2016. Transition to kindergarten for children with autism spectrum disorder: A focus group study with ethnically diverse parents, teachers, and early intervention service providers. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 31(2), pp.115-128.