



# PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL TRANSITION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM CONDITIONS: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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# Overview

- Background
- Primary to secondary school transition
- Young people with autism spectrum conditions
- Transition project
- Early findings
- Discussion and questions

# Background

- Initially studied Modern Languages
- Mainstream secondary school teacher
- Growing interest in SEND/educational psychology
- MEd Psychology of Education
- PhD in Education and Psychology
- Post-doctoral research fellowships 2013-present
  - Simon Fellowship (UoM)
  - Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellowship

# Transition – what do we know?

- ✓ Primary-secondary transition is a difficult time for all young people
  - Structural, academic and social demands
  - Impact is mostly short-term
- ✓ Development does not occur in a vacuum
  - School plays a critical role as well as home environment
- ✓ 25% of young people appear more vulnerable
- ✗ How do young people cope?
  - What is the experience like?
  - How do expectations compare with reality?

# New Y7 pupils: potential issues

- Learning in the classroom
- Making friends
- Settling in and managing change
- Homework
- Moving round school
- Keeping track of equipment
- Travelling to and from school
- Personal hygiene
- What to do if something goes wrong

# Transition – young people with autism?

- Difficulties with change
- Challenges in forming social relationships, including making friends
- Particularly vulnerable to bullying
- High levels of anxiety and frustration
- Limited research base

# Transition Project

- Longitudinal mixed-methods design (T1-T4)
- Students with ASC (and TD comparison group) tracked from Y6 to Y8 via questionnaires:
  - Self, parent and teacher report
  - Psychological well-being, school connectedness, peer and social support, bullying (*KIDSCREEN*, *PSSM*)
  - Academic progress and attendance
  - Contextual data
- Concurrent case studies
  - 10 students, their parents and teachers interviewed at T1-T4
  - Experiences, processes from different perspectives

## Early findings ...

- T1-T4 now completed
- 60 participants ( $N = 38$  ASC,  $N = 22$  TD); 10 case studies
- Minimal attrition (no students completely 'lost' at T3), 100% retention for case studies
- Schools, parents and young people motivated to participate 😊



# Case study findings T1-T2

11 students (9m, 2f): 6 good+, 1 adequate, 2 poor, 2 uncertain

- All experienced some anxiety as well as some excitement in advance:
  - *“I’m so excited that I feel like I’m going to explode.”* (Student)
  - *“I think he’s really looking forward to it. He’s looking forward to going to, you know, that idea of challenge and being pushed and seeing a worth and a value of his education.”* (Teacher)
- Parents were worried, often more so than the children:
  - *“It’s like a family that school and I am, myself, very reliant on [TA] to manage him and to make everything good for him. And I’m now going to have to make the same or a similar relationship with a bunch of other people I’ve never met before and there just isn’t that feeling of trust yet. I mean I’m sure it will come, but I am petrified.”* (Parent)

# Challenges

Very much in line with existing research:

– Adapting to new systems:

- *“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)

– Homework and sanctions

- *“In the primary school the teachers aren’t too bothered if you know, you forget your homework one or two times, but here you have one chance and if you forget it you’re straight on detention.”* (Student)

– Getting lost:

- *“It’s definitely a lot harder to navigate around due to there being well...way more lessons I have to go to with different teachers, so I have to know, I need to be able to navigate my way quite far around the school.”* (Student)

– Losing things:

- *“He’s left his planner, he’s lost his pencil case, you know things like that that tend to...unsettle him. But he knows...and he’s very good...he goes to [TA], she’ll come down to me and she’ll say ‘oh Adam’s lost his pencil case, and he has a spare one for the day, it’s fine.’”* (Teacher)

– Triggering anxieties

# What worked?

## Bespoke transition package:

- *“Because of his prior visits and he was more familiar with the environment to the extent that, I mean a couple of the boys were going to the library at lunch time and keeping out of the way and 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.”* (Parent)
- Planned strategies:
  - *“They start at twenty to nine, but [...] with the other kids and the noise, the hustle and bustle, it would be stressing him out, so I have to bring him in at nine o’clock, so it’s all calmed down and it’s all quiet because they find basically if Liam starts the day on a good note, he has a good day. However, if he starts on a bad note, it lasts the whole day.”* (Parent)
- Getting to know the young person:
  - *“It’s a small class with...they get a full time TA that goes round with them to every class that they go to because they’re not setted yet until Year 8 so at the moment the whole class moves to everywhere so it is this one particular group with this extra TA and she does the homework club so she knows them inside out individually and she knows how they all work and how they all tick.”* (Teacher)

# Communication



- *“We have to win the parents and win their trust.” (Teacher)*
- *“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.” (Parent)*
- *“It’s been a very bumpy ride and it still is and it’s been very, very stressful, incredibly so and there’s a lot of work to be done, but we’re all on the same page here.” (Parent)”*
- *“Just a simple phone call or something just to say ‘we’re having this issue’ - we could have stopped it right there and then, it wouldn’t have built up, we wouldn’t have had the whole big explosion at the end of the week.” (Parent)*
- *“Y8 started and all the TA and SENCO support stopped! I only found out when the old TA rang me on the last day of the first term to push me to complain on [son’s] behalf” (Parent)*

# Fresh Start

- *“They don’t seem to be dwelling on his condition, [...] whereas we were constantly having conversations with ‘well, he won’t settle well and the other children, he’s disrupting them...and so it’s gone from a very negative point of view to a very positive point of view here [...] we’re not looking at the negatives, we’re looking at the positives.” (Parent)*
- *“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, because I’ve always known the...I’ve always known how...well, I think he’s pretty awesome and it’s nice to see other people seeing that great side of him, that he’s not just...Jacob that comes with a whole package of problems.” (Parent)*
- *“He was ready for secondary school. He had a very bad year in [primary school], them last two years. I felt he was ready to move on. I felt like the pressure of him being in...one classroom with the same teachers was a lot...I thought he would be more suited to secondary school, walking from lesson to lesson...not having like a big energy build up and he’d be more suited to having different subjects. That’s what I was hoping would happen and I think that is what’s happened.” (Parent)*

# Final project findings ...

- including questionnaire findings
- coming soon 😊

# Conclusions

- Most students with ASC appear to have coped relatively well as a group with the initial transition
- Students with ASC reported improvements in QoL, with the opposite trend for TD students
- The quality of transition planning has a significant impact on its success
- Knowledge of the student as an individual is crucial
- Home-school communication facilitates transition
- Relationships and bullying need monitoring
- Transition does not stop in Y7

# Next steps

- Final data collection completed in November and December 2015
- Analysis – February!
  - what happened over the course of Y7 and into Y8?
- Reports and publications
- Conferences





- Thank you to:
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- Any questions?