

Primary to secondary school transition project – interim feedback (June 2015)

Thank you for your continued participation in this project. I am pleased to attach a brief report with information on progress to date. As the feedback only concerns the first half of the project, it is too early to draw conclusions. However, I have summarised the first six months (from the end of Y6 to early Y7) and mention some trends and early findings of interest

The Project

There are two groups involved in this project: 38 young people with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) - including Asperger's Syndrome and 22 young people with no additional needs (as a Comparison group). The reason for having two groups is to explore whether the experience of transition is similar or different. I wanted to focus on students with ASC for this project, as transition touches on areas that may be particularly challenging (e.g. changes to routine, environment and the peer group). However, participants in the comparison group are equally important, and I will be looking closely at their experience as the time progresses. It is important to ensure that the school years are positive for everyone, and so this project is designed to understand what transition is like through the eyes of young people, their parents and teachers. I am interested in how life changes and how young people feel about moving to a different, often much bigger school, and what can help to make this a smoother, less stressful process. I am exploring this by asking participants to complete questionnaires. In addition, there are 10 Case Study families (11 students) drawn from within the ASC group (chosen to represent different areas and types of school) who are taking part in interviews about transition. While questionnaires can tell us what is happening, interviews can explore why in much more depth, and there remains a lack of research in this area.

Time 1 (Summer 2014) and Time 2 (Nov/Dec 2014)

I met with all of the young people during their final half-term of primary school (Time 1) and approximately 6 months later, towards the end of the first term of Y7. Questionnaires were completed by students, parents and teachers, and interviews were conducted.

Questionnaires: The Quality of Life questionnaire¹ revealed that there was a difference between the two groups at Time 1, 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 Time 2 there was still a difference between the two groups. However, the gap between them had narrowed slightly, with the ASC group feeling more positive than they did at the end of primary school, but the Comparison group feeling less positive. In terms of the School Membership questionnaire (completed by the students), it was pleasing to see that both groups rated the experience of primary school positively. However, there was still a difference between the two groups, with the ASC group, on average, reporting their experience slightly less positively than the Comparison group. At Time 2, the ASC group were slightly more positive about their school experience than at the end of primary school. While the Comparison group were slightly less positive, they were still on average a little more positive than students with ASC. This is similar to the findings in the Quality of Life section on School, indicating that the gap in enjoyment of school was narrowing.

¹ This questionnaire, completed by students, parents and teachers has sections on: physical health, sense of well-being, mood, self-perception, friendships, school and bullying.

Previous research suggests that Quality of Life can be negatively affected at transition, although it is thought to be short-term – I will be following this up at Time 3 (currently underway).

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. After nearly a term at secondary school, it was interesting to reflect on new experiences and explore whether anticipation had matched the reality of transition. Of the 11 students, seven appeared to have had an overall positive experience, 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 also previous transition research) 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).

In some cases, anxiety was heightened by the move to a new school, with teachers and parents working closely to understand the reasons behind it and working creatively 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, as students knew exactly which lessons to expect (and homework). 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 and finding out that they had lots in common. 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 to the new school – in addition to open days and induction evenings – had been extremely useful in demystifying the new environment. Students enjoyed ‘taster days’, where they were able to meet their new teachers and classmates. Parents also commented very positively on schools where staff had taken time in advance of transition to get to know their son/daughter. Parents and staff valued good communication from the outset. Not all parents wanted or needed frequent contact with school, but when this was necessary parents valued it highly, whether face-to-face, by telephone, text, email or via a home-school diary/planner.

Next steps ...

The third phase of the project is currently underway, and this will provide a picture of how the participating Y7s feel at the end of their first full year at secondary school. The final phase will be in November and December, when the students are approaching the end of their first term of Y8. This will be particularly interesting, as no research has yet explored the experience of school more than a year after the transition to secondary school. All of this will be described in a longer, final report in 2016. I am delighted to say that all of the original participants are still involved (with very few questionnaires missing at any time-point) – this is unusual in a longitudinal project and reflects the wonderful support of all participants. I am grateful to everyone for taking part and for giving of your time so generously. This project would not be possible without your on-going support and enthusiasm. As always, if you would like more detailed information, please do not hesitate to contact me (Judith.Hebron@manchester.ac.uk).