

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

Keri Hoy^{1,3}, Sarah Parsons^{*1,3}, Hanna Kovshoff^{2,3}

* For correspondence: s.j.parsons@soton.ac.uk

1. The Centre for Research in Inclusion, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, UK
2. The Centre for Innovation in Mental Health (CiMH), Psychology, University of Southampton, UK
3. The Autism Community Research Network @ Southampton, <http://acornsnetwork.org.uk/>

Abstract

Purpose: The primary to secondary school transition can have a significant and long-lasting impact on young people. Autistic children are particularly vulnerable to negative transition experiences, however, there is a lack of research examining effective practices and provision for these pupils. This case study involves a mainstream secondary school in the South of England, which has a dedicated Learning Support base. The aim was to collect qualitative data on experiences of the primary to secondary school transition from multiple stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach: A photovoice activity followed by a semi-structured interview was conducted with five autistic pupils aged 12-16 years; semi-structured interviews were also carried out with six parents, and four teachers.

Findings: Five key themes emerged from the data in relation to effective practices: Inclusion, Child-centred approach, Familiarisation, Visual Supports, and Communication and Consistency.

Research limitations/implications: As a small-scale case study there are limitations regarding generalisation. However, this research illuminates transition practices that are experienced as effective by autistic children, their families and teachers.

Practical implications: Practical implications related to each of these themes are highlighted. These implications are important in the context of the mandatory responsibilities of schools in England to include the voices of children and young people with special educational needs in decisions about their education.

Originality/value: The findings challenge a rights-based approach to inclusion and illustrate the importance of a needs-based approach which appropriately recognises and understands what autism means for children, their families, and the teachers who support them.

Introduction

The transition from primary to secondary school, which takes place in the UK around the age of 11 years, is one of the most important and challenging educational transitions that pupils go through, and can lead to considerable stress and anxiety (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Secondary schools tend to be large, holding over three times as many pupils on average compared to primary schools (Department for Education (DfE), 2017a). This can be overwhelming, particularly for pupils on the autism spectrum, who may have heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013). Within secondary school, pupils typically have subject lessons with different teachers and classrooms; new routines containing multiple changes and transitions throughout the day can be especially difficult for children on autism the autism spectrum (Fortuna, 2014). Further stress and anxiety can arise from expectations of increased independence at secondary school, which autistic children may struggle to fulfil (Plimley & Bowen, 2007).

Ineffective and unsupported transitions between schools can negatively impact on a child's development and academic achievement (Fortuna, 2014). Consequently, transition planning is particularly important for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND; DfE / Department of Health (DoH), 2015). With autism spectrum diagnoses on the rise (Hansen, Schendel & Parner, 2015) and 70% of pupils on the autism spectrum educated in mainstream schools in the UK (DfE, 2017b), there is a significant need to identify the school practices that may support more successful transitions to secondary school.

Tobin et al., (2012) acknowledge that the increased demands on flexibility and social communication during secondary school can be especially challenging for autistic

pupils. They discuss how the children's strong preference for consistency can make adapting to new routines difficult. Despite this, there is a lack of empirical evidence focusing on the specific difficulties they face. This conclusion is supported by Makin, Hill and Pellicano (2017) who discussed how although autistic children are known, mainly anecdotally, to be vulnerable during the transition, little is known about the factors which cause this difficulty. Their longitudinal study assessed 15 autistic children in primary school through to secondary school. These pupils reported generally negative experiences, involving a lack of support from both their primary and secondary schools, as well as concerns about bullying and difficulties making friends (also Topping, 2011; Dann, 2011).

There are also some studies that report less negative transition experiences for autistic children. For example, Mandy et al., (2016) explored experiences of transition through standardised questionnaires assessing levels of 'psychopathology', 'adaptive functioning', and 'peer victimisation' in 28 pupils on the autism spectrum, aged 11 years. Parent-, teacher- and self-assessments were conducted during the final year of primary school and the first term of secondary school. Mandy et al., (2016) found that bullying levels decreased across the transition, whilst levels of 'psychopathology' and 'adaptive functioning' remained consistent i.e. they did not decrease. There are limitations of this study, not least the overwhelming focus on difficulties and challenges, as well as the fact that the social and educational processes which occurred during the transition were not directly investigated. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the transition to secondary school may not always be an unduly negative experience. Other authors also report some positive experiences within small samples of children (Neal & Frederickson, 2016; Fortuna, 2014). Crucially, however, Mandy et al., (2016; p.11)

acknowledge that the reduction in bullying found between primary and secondary school:

‘...could reflect proactive and successful strategies adopted by the secondary schools in this study. This possibility should be specifically investigated, as knowledge about any ecological processes that reduce bullying of people with ASD would be valuable for informing good educational practice’.

This comment clearly highlights the need to examine school-based practices that may support successful transitions from primary to secondary school. Makin et al., (2017) identify that additional planning is key to successful transitioning, and suggest interventions need to be applied before, during, and after the transition to modify the school environment to best suit pupils’ everyday needs. The question remains about what modifying the environment may look like in practice in terms of meeting the needs of autistic individuals, and parents (Stoner et al., 2007). The present study is, therefore, interested in illuminating specific practices that are implemented in the primary to secondary school transition that are identified as enabling and positive from the perspectives of the key stakeholders involved: parents, teachers, and of course the pupils themselves. This study was also interested in finding out more about the practices that could be developed and improved in the light of feedback from these key stakeholders. The specific research questions addressed were:

(1) What are the views and experiences of young autistic people about their transition from primary to secondary school?

- (2) What are the views of parents and teachers about the transitions of young autistic people from primary to secondary school?
- (3) What do these views and experiences identify as the effective practices that support transitions, and the practices that could be developed or improved further?

Context and epistemology

This research was conducted under the umbrella of the Autism Community Research Network @ Southampton (ACoRNS; acornsnetwork.org.uk). This is an education-focused initiative that aims to understand more about effective practices for supporting children and their families through transitions and trajectories. ACoRNS is a collaborative partnership between academics at the University of Southampton, and schools and colleges in the local community that span the statutory stages of schooling, and includes mainstream and specialist schools. The research agenda, with the views and voices of children and young people at the core, is co-constructed with these community partners to ensure that research and practice are mutually informing and of direct practical relevance and benefit (Parsons et al., 2013). Fundamentally, the ACoRNS partnership operates from an epistemological position of knowledge co-construction, rather than knowledge transfer or exchange (Guldberg, Parsons, Porayska-Pomsta, & Keay-Bright, 2017). Such an approach seeks to move beyond traditional assumptions about whose knowledge is prioritised in research and, therefore, how such knowledge should be captured, represented and disseminated in developing evidence-based practices (Milton, 2012). This approach reflects the need for an ethical shift in autism research that is more inclusive and participatory (Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2014), and in autism education research that places schools at the centre of the agenda (Parsons & Kasari, 2013).

Methodology

In line with this collaborative approach, this project adopted a single case study design focusing on one mainstream secondary school in the South of England. By examining data at the micro-level, and drawing on multiple perspectives, case studies help explain complexities which may not be captured through experimental or survey designs (Thomas, 2015). Data is collected within the context of its use, which is vital if research and practice are to inform each other (Parsons et al., 2013). The school was actively involved in planning the research, and generating ideas for the questions they would like answered. Additionally, this study drew upon the multiple perspectives of stakeholders in line with Fortuna's (2014; p.189) recommendation:

'Having the viewpoint of all participants in the transition process – parents, pupils and teachers – is quite rare; yet all three play a major role in the transition process, and need to be involved in any future research.'

School and Participants

This school has a number of pupils with severe and complex needs, including autism, and supports those needs in a Learning Support (LS) department within the school. The LS department supports pupils in a range of ways, with some spending a majority of their time within the dedicated base and others using it on a less frequent basis and spending more time within the rest of the school. Purposive sampling was used: the Assistant Head teacher selected pupils who were diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, according to school records, and who he felt would be willing to participate. Five pupils chose to participate (four males, one female), aged 12-16 years. Three of these pupils are in the LS, whilst two are in mainstream lessons but receive additional support from LS staff, such as weekly one-to-one sessions. Six parents agreed to

participate; five mothers, and one pupil's grandmother who was their legal guardian. Four staff members (two males, two females), including teachers, the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), and Assistant Head teacher were recruited on the basis that they worked closely with these pupils and knew them well.

Methods and procedure

A photovoice methodology was adopted with pupil participants to provide structure and visual support during their interviews. Carnahan (2006, p.44) defined photovoice as '...an educational action research tool that embraces visual communication through photography'. Asking participants to take photographs themselves can lead to more meaningful participation by actively engaging them (Povee, Bishop & Roberts, 2014), and reducing traditional power imbalances within research (Ha & Whittaker, 2016).

Four aspects of transitions were also proposed for participants to think about with regards to what they liked/disliked, and what support worked well/could be improved, based on the school's interests and existing research literature:

- (1) Moving between different classrooms: Mandy et al (2015) argued this involves a major ecological shift, increasing demands on the child's social, intellectual, and organisational capacities;
- (2) Having different teachers for different subjects: this may be difficult for children who find routine changes challenging (Neal & Frederickson, 2016).
- (3) Break and lunch times: the larger numbers of pupils in secondary school can be overwhelming for children with autism due to sensory sensitivities (Makin et al., 2017);

(4) Friends and other pupils: positive social relationships have been identified as key factors in determining the success of a transition (Dillon & Underwood, 2012; Peters & Brooks, 2016).

In the first session, pupils were individually asked to walk around the school with the researcher, and take photographs that showed what they liked/disliked about the school, including objects or people that helped/did not help them to settle in during the transition to school. This took approximately 15 minutes. A second session was conducted on the same or following day. Pupils met individually with the researcher, and were asked to look at their printed photographs and write 'like' or 'dislike' on each one, and to say more about why they took each picture. These photographs remained in front of participants throughout the interview so they could be used as prompts where necessary. This session lasted between 9 and 19 minutes.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with parents and teachers to explore their views and experiences about transitions, including the four key areas summarised above. Questions explored what had helped, what had hindered, fears and concerns, and strategies used to overcome these. Pupil, parent and staff interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet meeting room within the school, and were voice recorded (with permission) using a Dictaphone. Parent interviews lasted 12-23 minutes, and staff interviews 10-30 minutes each.

Ethics

Ethical approval was gained from the relevant Faculty Ethics and Research Governance Committee at the University of Southampton (Ref# 31030). Adult participants received information sheets explaining the research aims and what participation would involve, and a consent form to sign. A simpler, more visual information sheet was designed for

pupils, alongside an assent form. Participation risks were low, however it is possible that some participants who may have had particularly negative experiences could have experienced the discussion as distressing. The researcher reiterated that they were not required to answer questions they did not want to, and could take a break at any time. She also provided a contact within the school that the participants could speak with following the interviews. Data were kept in accordance with the University's data protection policy, stored on a password-protected laptop, and kept confidential.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analysed following Lichtman's (2013, pp.251) 'three Cs of analysis; from coding to categorising to concepts'. Firstly, deductive codes were identified based on previous research including bullying, communication and teacher knowledge. Then the data were coded inductively to find additional recurring categories. These codes were then combined into five main concepts/themes that emerged frequently throughout the data. Transcripts were then reread and colour coded with each of the five main themes. This enabled key issues, and similarities and differences both within and between participant groups to be identified.

Findings and implications for practice

Five key themes emerged from the data, which were seen to contribute to successful transitions: inclusion, child-centred approach, familiarisation, visual supports and communication and consistency. The notable overview of the data is that every pupil, teacher, and parent reported the transition as a positive experience. One parent stated 'it's been a super positive experience', whilst another said 'it couldn't have gone any better'. A summary of specific practices identified which support transitions, as well as implications for practice, is included in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Inclusion and the value of the Learning Support base: Pupils and parents expressed initial concerns about the structure of a mainstream school. One pupil was concerned about the schools' size being 'very confusing'. Similarly, a parent felt:

'my biggest concern was that he would just be roaming the corridors of the school and be totally lost and no one would look after him with sixteen hundred children'.

Other parents expressed concerns about their child being bullied, or 'overwhelmed' by other pupils. Additionally, the SENCo said that the 'biggest' question asked by pupils before the transition is about bullying. Two pupils and two parents discussed incidences of bullying at school, but said that LS colleagues were very quick to resolve the issues.

All pupils were happy to receive additional support in the LS base, and none expressed desires to be fully included into mainstream classes. One pupil, who is in mainstream for most lessons, said 'LS really does help a lot'. This was also evident in the pupils' photographs, as every pupil took at least one photograph of the LS area or staff (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

When asked what they disliked about school, four pupils took pictures of communal areas (Figure 2), describing them as 'busy' and 'noisy'. Some pupils disliked how busy the school gets during break and lunch times, and preferred stay in LS to eat their lunch as it is quieter. Staff and pupils described 'beneficial', and 'helpful' provision in which pupils from the LS go for lunch five minutes early to avoid the crowds.

Insert Figure 2 about here

However, despite being in LS for most or some of the time, pupils did not express feeling excluded from the rest of the school. One pupil said 'in a school we're all like a family, you know working together'. Three parents expressed desires for their child to fit into mainstream, but all six acknowledged the benefits of LS, with one parent saying 'this school's absolutely out of this world when it comes to LS'. Another parent described how LS is essential for their child, saying 'he just wouldn't cope in any other school'. LS was also beneficial for pupils following the mainstream curriculum, as one parent discussed:

'he just has help every minute of the day, he comes out of class when he has a problem, he goes straight to LS and they put his mind at rest'.

The LS department allows pupils to be in a mainstream school without having to negotiate the structural components of secondary school, like transitioning between classrooms and teachers. As one staff member described: 'the aim is that they don't have to move very far', 'everything is catered for up in LS' so 'they get to know this part of the school really well'.

Child-centred Approach

All staff members described how transition provisions are 'flexible' and 'very dependent on the individual needs', as 'what works for one child wouldn't always work for another'. Staff discussed various strategies to help pupils settle into the school, including starting on part-time timetables. All parents were satisfied with the transition provision their child received, frequently highlighting aspects that were individualised, such as 'they arranged for him to take photographs because that's something he enjoys'.

However, one parent and her son felt their provision was not individualised. This year 9 pupil follows the mainstream curriculum, and has little contact with LS unless there is a

problem. When talking about his taster day ahead of the transition, he explained ‘the thing that was unhelpful was...I had to do the same thing as everyone else’. Thus, it is important that those pupils who are fully based in the mainstream are not overlooked when it comes to additional individualised support and planning.

Another key idea in this category was the importance of staff having good knowledge of the child and their needs. Four parents described how ‘teachers need knowledge of autism’, along with knowledge about the individual child in order to ‘get more out of them’. Parents appreciated teachers making ‘a point of getting to know his personality and things that he’s really good at’, with another parent saying ‘I think you need to know the child really well’. All staff members discussed the importance of gathering information about pupils. One teacher described using an ‘all about me’ unit of work to ‘try and find out what their interests are’. One parent said: ‘they incorporate trains into his art projects and stories, and they use what’s of interest to him to get more out of him’. Further, pupils’ interests can be used to help aid the transition process. The SENCo described how they often ‘work our transition around those interests’ to help engage pupils more.

One parent highlighted that it is not just the child that the school needs to have knowledge about:

‘me as a parent is an outsider, and they need to understand the parent as well, and then once the parent’s understood it’s easier to transfer them into a different school because the parents understand what’s happening’.

However, none of the staff members described efforts to try and actively get to know parents. Interestingly, the importance of teacher knowledge about individual pupils prior to secondary school entry was rarely mentioned by the pupils themselves. One

pupil described how he liked his teachers that listened to him, and demonstrated this by taking a photograph of his tutor during the photovoice activity, whom he said is always there to listen to him. Another pupil took photographs of a room where he has one-to-one talks with a teacher, and said he likes being listened to in there.

Familiarisation

Familiarisation was highlighted as a way to reduce the anxieties that come with the transition to secondary school. As one pupil described, 'that's what I personally think is vital for autistic children, you have to prepare them for the environment'. When discussing effective transition provisions, pupils and parents spoke of school tours and chances to meet staff beforehand in order to familiarise themselves with the school environment. Parents appreciated when the primary school 'would free up a member of staff that [child] was familiar with so they could come with him' which 'helped a lot' as it was not a completely unfamiliar environment. Staff spoke about occasionally going to meet pupils in their primary school first, so they then had a friendly face when they toured the secondary school. Further, the SENCo described how transition work is done 'prior to the main... taster day' so that on the taster day 'those that need it have had a lot of input already' and are familiar with the environment. These familiarisation strategies were seen as beneficial by staff members and hence, could be adopted by other schools to help manage the transition.

One issue raised by parents was that they did not have enough opportunities to see the school and LS department themselves, particularly those parents of children in mainstream:

'As a mum I would have liked to have had a tour of the school because then that would have been easier to have a map and visualise where everything was'.

One parent argued that as autism has a strong genetic component, it is important to 'cater for the parents as much as the child', and ensure parents also have that familiarity with the environment to reduce their own anxieties about their child being there.

Visual Supports

Visual supports were emphasised by multiple participants as essential for successful transitions between primary and secondary school. Three staff members described using visual supports to aid autistic children through the transition, including sending photographs of the school to primary schools, and allowing pupils to come and take photographs themselves. The SENCo felt that visual supports are 'really important and powerful in terms of transitions'. They discussed how it is very beneficial for pupils on the autism spectrum to have photographs of where they will be and the staff they will be with. Another staff member discussed using Social Stories (Gray & Garand, 1993) with pupils before they transition. Five parents also praised the use of Social Stories and other visual supports such as photo-booklets. One parent said: 'photographic pictures you cannot get better than that...the more photographic keys you can give them the better'.

Another parent discussed how visual supports were beneficial over the summer holidays before their child started secondary school, as they could 'put the social story up in the kitchen so it was there all the time and he could see it regularly', to help familiarise them with the new environment. Further, when asked what support would be helpful for future transitions, 'more visual support' was frequently mentioned.

However, one member of staff described;

‘a lot of kids carry visual supports with them and don’t necessarily know how to use them because they need training and practice, and then the teachers and TAs [teaching assistants] don’t really know what to do with them’.

Therefore, simply having visual supports does not necessarily imply that they will be effective. Consequently, schools should provide training to staff and parents on how to use visual supports effectively, so they can assist pupils in using them in school and at home.

Interestingly, despite staff and parents discussing the usefulness of visual supports, none of the pupils mentioned them in their interviews. This may be because they were not directly asked, and so future research should cue children to discuss visual supports in order to explore their views about using them. Nevertheless, using photovoice as a method was beneficial for pupil interviews, which reinforces the point about the value of using visual supports in general.

Communication and Consistency

All parents were pleased with the communication received from the secondary school, stating they can always contact staff if they have any concerns, and that this was ongoing throughout the transition process. Effective communication with school staff appeared to be an essential factor for a successful transition from parental perspectives, with one parent saying ‘I did need lots of time to talk things through and you know just discuss how things were going’. Another parent described ‘I’ve never come up against a brick wall, they’re always very, very accommodating and helpful’ and went further to say ‘you’re always made to feel really welcome, that’s another important thing’. This highlights that effective communication between the school and parents needs to make parents feel relaxed and supported so that they feel able to contact the school. An

emphasis on effective and consistent communication was also apparent during staff interviews, as all staff members described parents being able to contact them at any time. One teacher said;

‘we have that communication right from day 1 so when they arrive there’s lots of phone calls, notes home and we put on an extra parents evening’.

Parents and staff both expressed the importance of ensuring teachers are well-informed. One staff member said:

‘we arm teachers with a training strategies booklet to support them, with any information about individuals coming to their class, so the teachers are very aware’.

Parents appreciated staff sending emails to all of their child’s teachers about particular issues. However, despite staff and parents thinking this is effective, some pupils raised concerns about the communication between staff, highlighting a lack of consistency in their methods. For example, one pupil described:

‘with one teacher who had the system of if I couldn’t remember I’d put my thumbs up, and it was really good, and I don’t have her anymore so the system went in the end’.

For this pupil, that system was beneficial as he did not have to repeatedly put his hand up, as this led to stigmatisation from peers. Further, lack of consistency between staff was also discussed by a staff member, who discussed how ‘teachers are not consistently using the resources put out to them’, because ‘it requires extra preparation’. Hence, it is important for school management to ensure not only that they pass information to

teachers, but that teachers are enabled to communicate between themselves about what strategies they have found effective/ineffective with particular pupils.

Discussion

This case study aimed to elicit the views and experiences of children, parents, and teachers to provide insights into effective practices for supporting the transitions of autistic pupils between primary and secondary school. Many practices were identified including how to enable communication between parents and the school; using the child's special interests to engage and support them; implementing visual supports in a range of ways; and allowing plenty of time ahead of the transition to allow pupils and parents to become comfortable and familiar with new staff and the new environment. While many of these ideas chime with existing literature (e.g. Whitaker, 2007; Peters & Brooks, 2016; Stoner et al., 2007; Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016; Mancil & Pearl, 2008; Neal & Frederickson, 2016), what is new here are the details that illustrate these effective practices from multiple perspectives and direct experiences, and the focus on the Learning Support base as a site for enabling positive experiences. Indeed, there are many more details about effective practices included here that are not described in the Autism Education Trust's Transition Toolkit (Stobart, not dated). In line with Neal and Frederickson (2016), the current findings confirm and extend the evidence base about the strategies that can support successful transitions to secondary school.

The Learning Support base, as a particular characteristic of the school (cf. Mandy et al., 2016), is likely to be central to understanding the overwhelmingly positive experiences reported by the participants. Such positive experiences were surprising given the difficulties and challenges in transition identified elsewhere in the literature (noted above). As a resourced provision, the Learning Support department at the school

reserves places for pupils with a specific type of SEN. Pupils are generally taught mainly within mainstream classes, but require the support of a base and some specialist facilities around the school, which may vary depending on need. Resourced provisions exist in just over 20% of mainstream secondary schools in England (729 schools; DfE, 2017), and are entitled to additional funding for each place in recognition of the resources required to provide extra support. Thus, this case study illustrates what is possible in the context of this additional support, and the notable differences it can make to individuals and families at the challenging and anxiety-provoking time of transition. Certainly, other literature points to the value of specialist resource bases for supporting children's outcomes (OfSTED, 2006) and as a type of provision preferred by parents (Frederickson, Jones & Lang, 2010; Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000).

The role of resource bases within the context of debates on inclusive provision is a contentious one; space precludes exploration of the main issues here but readers are referred to Hornby (2015) for an overview. In a nutshell, some critics argue that such resource bases are on a continuum towards anti-inclusion by maintaining specialist provision rather than enabling all children to be educated in mainstream provision (e.g. see overview by Huefner, 2015). Ravet (2011), discussing children and young people on the autism spectrum specifically, characterises this view as a rights-based approach to inclusion. By contrast, Ravet (2011) discusses needs-based inclusion, which acknowledges the heterogeneity of need across the school population and supports the preservation of a range of provision to meet distinctive learning needs. Ravet (2011) highlights that an understanding of autism is essential if teachers are to be able to meet children's needs effectively otherwise teachers may rely on general teaching

approaches, or neurotypical assumptions, that would then act as exclusionary practices for those children.

A needs-based approach to inclusion comes through very clearly in the findings presented here. From the pupils' perspectives, the understanding and flexibility of the LS base was vital for making them feel comfortable, included, settled and ready to learn. From parents' and teachers' perspectives, understanding the child as an individual, with personalities and special interests, was central to the approach taken by the staff in the LS base. What is clear is that this is about seeing and knowing the whole child and, therefore, it is about understanding and responding to what autism means to that child and to the family. Autism cannot be separated out, as a label or a distinctive category of need, from the provision that is made available and to do so would potentially undermine the successful transition practices that are illustrated here.

These findings, and indeed methodology, also have value in relation to the wider policy context for supporting children with SEND in England, following the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the provisions of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015). Therein, schools have mandatory responsibilities to ensure that children and families are included in decision-making about education and that their voices are heard. The use of a photovoice methodology shows that the views of these autistic pupils could be appropriately accessed and contribute to an understanding of what matters to them, although of course such a methodology would require adaptation for those who do not communicate verbally.

There are, of course, limitations to the study. As a case study of one school, with a small number of participants, it is not possible to generalise from the data (Yin, 2009).

However, generalisation *about* other contexts is never the point of a case study; instead

its value lies in exploring individual pupils or schools and the issues they have in context (Thomas, 2015). By illuminating particular practices it is feasible that at least some of these could be implemented in other schools, albeit in different (context-sensitive) ways. The focus and small-scale nature of the study do not undermine the validity of what has been revealed for *these* individuals at *this* school. The participants could have been selected for inclusion on the basis that they would give a particularly positive view of their transition experiences. This is unlikely given the discussions had with the Assistant Head and the impossibility of knowing in advance what individuals would actually say; indeed, some participants also highlighted aspects of provision that they felt could be improved. However, even if this was the case, the collation of experiences and practices that highlight positive and successful transitions is important, as they provide a basis upon which this school, and others, can reflect on what has been achieved thus far, and what can be achievable in the future.

Acknowledgements

We very gratefully acknowledge the engagement and interest of everyone who took part in this study, as well as the ACoRNS team more widely for supporting, and contributing to, the research. ACoRNS was established with funding from the University of Southampton's Public Engagement with Research unit (PERu).

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition. Washington, DC: Author.

Barnard, J., Prior, A. and Potter, D. (2000). *Inclusion and Autism: Is It Working?* London: National Autistic Society. Available at: <http://www.freewebs.com/laset/documents/inclusion%20and%20autism.pdf> [accessed 27th May 2018].

Carnahan, C.R. (2006). Photovoice: Engaging Children with Autism and their Teachers. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 39(2), 44-50.

Dann, R. (2011). Secondary transition experiences for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASCs). *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 27(3), 293-312.

Department for Education. (2017a). *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2017*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/650547/SFR28_2017_Main_Text.pdf [accessed 27th May 2018].

Department for Education (2017b). *Special educational needs in England: January 2017*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2017> [accessed 27th May 2018].

Department for Education/Department of Health (2015). *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf [accessed 27th May 2018].

Dillon, G. and Underwood, J. (2012). Parental Perspectives of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders Transitioning From Primary to Secondary School in the United Kingdom. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 27(2), 111-121.

Fortuna, R. (2014). The social and emotional functioning of students with an autistic spectrum disorder during the transition between primary and secondary schools. *Support for Learning*, 29(2), 177-191.

Frederickson, N., Jones, A. and Lang, J. (2010). Inclusive provision options for pupils on the autistic spectrum. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 10(2), 63-73.

Gray, C.A. & Garand, J.D. (1993). Social stories: Improving responses of students with autism with accurate social information. *Focus on Autistic Behavior*, 8(1), 1-10.

Guldborg, K., Parsons, S., Porayska-Pomsta, K. & Keay-Bright, W. (2017) Challenging the knowledge transfer orthodoxy: knowledge co-construction in technology enhanced learning for children with autism. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(2), 394-413.

- Gunn, K. and Delafield-Butt, J. (2016). Teaching Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder with Restricted Interests: A Review of Evidence for Best Practice. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(2), 408-430.
- Hornby, G. (2015). Inclusive special education: development of a new theory for the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities. *British Journal of Special Education*, 42(3), 234-256.
- Huefner, D. S. (2015). Placements for special education pupils: The promise and the peril. Chapter in Bateman, B., Lloyd, J.W. & Tankersley, M. (Eds.) *Enduring issues in special education: Personal perspectives*, (pp.215-230), Routledge: New York.
- Ha, V. and Whittaker, A. (2016). 'Closer to my world': Children with autism spectrum disorder tell their stories through photovoice. *Global Public Health*, 11(5-6), 546-563.
- Hansen, S., Schendel, D. and Parner, E. (2015). Explaining the Increase in the Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders: the Proportion Attributable to Change in Reporting Practices. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169(1), 56-62.
- Kasari, C. and Smith, T. (2013). Interventions in schools for children with autism spectrum disorder: Methods and recommendations. *Autism*, 17(3), 254-267.
- Lichtman, M. (2013). *Qualitative Research in Education* (3rd edn.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Makin, C., Hill, V. and Pellicano, E. (2017). The primary-to-secondary school transition for children on the autism spectrum: A multi-informant mixed-methods study. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*. DOI: 10.1177/2396941516684834
- Mancil, G. R., and Pearl, C. E. (2008). Restricted interests as motivators: Improving academic engagement and outcomes of children on the autism spectrum. *Teaching Exceptional Children Plus*, 4(6) Article 7. Available from: <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol4/iss6/art7> [accessed 27th May 2018].
- Mandy, W., Murin, M., Baykaner, O., Staunton, S., Hellriegel, J., Anderson, S. and Skuse, D. (2015). The transition from primary to secondary school in mainstream education for children with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 20(1), 5-13.
- Milton, D. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem'. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883-887
- Neal, S. and Frederickson, N. (2016). ASD transition to mainstream secondary: a positive experience? *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 32(4), 355-373.
- Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) (2006) *Inclusion: does it matter where pupils are taught?* Document reference number: HMI 2535. Available from: www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/HMI-2535.doc.doc [accessed 27th May 2018].

- Parsons, S., Charman, T., Faulkner, R., Ragan, J., Wallace, S. and Wittemeyer, K. (2013). Commentary – bridging the research and practice gap in autism: The importance of creating research partnerships with schools. *Autism*, 17(3), 268-280.
- Parsons, S. & Kasari, C. (2013) Editorial: Schools at the centre of educational research in autism: Possibilities, practices and promises. *Autism*, 17(3) 251–253
- Pellicano, E., Dinsmore, A. and Charman, T. (2014). Views on Researcher-Community Engagement in Autism Research in the United Kingdom: A mixed-methods study. *PLoS ONE*, 9(10), p.e109946.
- Peters, R. and Brooks, R. (2016). Parental perspectives on the transition to secondary school for students with Asperger syndrome and high-functioning autism: a pilot survey study. *British Journal of Special Education*, 43(1), pp.75-91.
- Plimley, L. and Bowen, M. (2007). *Social skills and autistic spectrum disorders*. London: Sage Publications.
- Povee, K., Bishop, B. and Roberts, L. (2014). The use of photovoice with people with intellectual disabilities: reflections, challenges and opportunities. *Disability & Society*, 29(6), 893-907.
- Ravet, J. (2011). Inclusive/exclusive? Contradictory perspectives on autism and inclusion: the case for an integrative position. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(6), 667-682.
- Stobart, A. (not dated) *Transition Toolkit: helping you support a child through change*. Autism Education Trust. Available at: <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/transition%20toolkit.aspx> [accessed 27th May 2018]
- Stoner, J., Angell, M., House, J. and Bock, S. (2007). Transitions: Perspectives from parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). *Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 19(1), 23-29.
- Thomas, G. (2015). *How to do your case study*. London: Sage Publications.
- Tobin, H., Staunton, S., Mandy, W., Skuse, D., Helligreil, J., Baykaner, O., Anderson, S. and Murin, M. (2012). A qualitative examination of parental experiences of the transition to mainstream secondary school for children with an autism spectrum disorder. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 29(1), 75-85.
- Topping, K. (2011). Primary-secondary transition: Differences between teachers' and children's perceptions. *Improving Schools*, 14(3), 268-285.
- Whitaker, P. (2007). Provision for youngsters with autistic spectrum disorders in mainstream schools: what parents say – and what parents want. *British Journal of Special Education*, 34(3), 170-178.

Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: design and methods*. (4th edn). London: Sage Publications.

Zeedyk, M., Gallacher, J., Henderson, M., Hope, G., Husband, B. and Lindsay, K. (2003). Negotiating the Transition from Primary to Secondary School. *School Psychology International*, 24(1), 67-79.

Table 1: Summary of successful practices identified, areas for improvement, and implications for practice

Main theme identified from interviews	Successful practices for supporting transition	Areas for improvement	Implications for practice
Inclusion	<p>Using the Learning Support base for break and lunch times</p> <p>Leaving for lunch 5 minutes ahead of everyone else</p> <p>Able to come out of class if there is a problem and access support from Learning Support staff</p> <p>Minimising the number and distance of transitions between lessons / activities</p> <p>Having Teaching Assistants available to help transitions between classrooms</p> <p>One-to-one sessions with Learning Support staff to discuss how the pupil is getting on</p> <p>Starting with some lessons in mainstream and adapting access to mainstream lessons accordingly</p>	<p>Ensuring pupils who are mostly, or completely within mainstream classes can access this support and not just those in Learning Support</p>	<p>Support flexibility for pupils with regard to the ending of lessons and start of break times</p> <p>Be clear with all pupils and when, where and from whom support can be accessed</p> <p>Plan the location of lessons carefully to minimise 'horizontal' transitions where possible</p> <p>Schedule a place in the timetable when pupils can communicate their views about the support they receive and why / how this has been helpful to them.</p>
Child-centred approach	<p>Starting on part-time timetables</p>	<p>More differentiation needed with respect to taster days</p>	<p>Using special interests to help to frame and plan transition activities, including taster days</p>

	<p>Arranging for pupil to take photographs of the school when preparing for the vertical transition to secondary</p> <p>Gathering personalised information about pupils, including their special interests</p> <p>Having patience to allow the pupil to settle in at their own pace</p> <p>Providing pupils with opportunities to voice their views</p> <p>Asking parents to provide bullet point lists about their child to give to school staff</p>	<p>Identify any special interests, or preferred communication, prior to taster days so that this information can be incorporated where possible</p> <p>Ensuring that parents' knowledge of their child, and own preferences and needs for communication, are elicited by staff as part of the planning process</p> <p>Ensuring information is gathered about the parents as well as pupils</p>	<p>Using special interests to support engagement with the taster days and the curriculum</p> <p>Provide time in the timetable for pupils to meet with staff and be encouraged to share their views about their individual needs and preferences</p> <p>Support flexibility and have patience during the first weeks of the transition</p> <p>Encourage parents to share information about themselves as well as the pupil</p>
Familiarisation	<p>Having school tours and chances to meet staff members during year 6 (final year of Primary)</p> <p>Primary school staff coming with pupils to tour the secondary school</p> <p>Secondary school staff going to the primary school to meet pupils in their environment</p> <p>Implementing these familiarisation strategies before the main year 6 taster day</p>	<p>Ensure that parents have opportunities to visit/tour the school themselves</p> <p>Doing more bridging work between year 6 and 7, so there are some familiar aspects that pupils already know</p> <p>Provide pupils with opportunities to meet other pupils who will be in Learning Support before they start</p>	<p>Providing multiple opportunities for both parents and pupils to tour the school</p> <p>Ensure parents and pupils have opportunities to meet key members of staff before the transition</p> <p>Schedule a session as part of the transition planning for pupils coming from different schools to meet each other within the Learning Support context</p>

	<p>Having staff names and pictures in pupils' planners</p> <p>Starting term with familiar topics that have been covered in primary school</p>		
Visual supports	<p>Arranging for pupils to take photographs of the school ahead of the main transition to secondary</p> <p>Sending photos of the school to primary schools to show the pupils in year 6</p> <p>Having photos showing the rooms and staff members that the pupil will be working with</p> <p>Using Social Stories about transition during the summer break before the transition</p> <p>Providing maps of the school layout</p>	<p>Ensuring staff members know how to use visual supports effectively</p> <p>Ensuring all pupils who would like them receive photos of the school – particularly including those in mainstream</p>	<p>Provide visual supports before the transition</p> <p>Provide training to staff and parents on how to best support pupils to use their visual supports effectively during the summer break and then into the new academic year</p>
Communication and consistency	<p>Ongoing communication between parents and school staff</p> <p>Having an open doors policy so parents can contact school staff at any time</p> <p>Providing teachers will booklets containing information about the needs of individuals coming to their class</p>	<p>Ensuring teachers are consistent in their methods of supporting pupils in-class</p> <p>Ensuring teachers are communicating between themselves</p> <p>Encouraging communication between parents who have a child</p>	<p>School Management should pass information down to teachers as well as ensuring they communicate between themselves about effective/ineffective strategies for particular pupils</p> <p>Having open, consistent communication with parents before, during and after the transition</p>

	<p>School staff meeting parents before the transition</p>	<p>with autism going through the transition</p> <p>Providing teachers with opportunities to speak to the pupils' primary school teacher to better understand how to support them in class</p>	<p>Work with parents to develop a group or contact point for peer support</p> <p>Continue to emphasise a learning culture whereby teachers and other professionals from the different schools can learn from each other</p>
--	-----------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Figures



Figure 1: Pupil photographs of Learning Support area (liked)



Figure 2. Pupil photographs of communal areas (disliked)