Everyday experiences of inclusion in Primary resourced provision: the voices of autistic pupils and their teachers

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Abstract

Resourced provision is an important model for inclusive education, possibly providing the 'best of both worlds' for pupils with Special Educational Needs (Flewitt & Nind, 2007). Typically, pupils split their time between specialist and mainstream classes, offering balanced support that is highly valued by parents. However, there is little research about resourced provision from the perspectives of the pupils. This small-scale study explored how children and teachers experience resourced provision and manage the daily transitions between activities and classes. A qualitative visual storyboard methodology was co-created between the researchers and school staff and used to access the views of five pupils on the autism spectrum aged 9-11 years about their everyday experiences, including transitions between special and mainstream classes; six staff members from the resource base were also interviewed. Findings highlighted the importance of friendship and peers; where and how support was provided; tensions between structured and unstructured periods; and student / school identity. The school has implemented changes to how daily transitions are supported in response to pupils' views, with positive impacts on practice. The storyboard method is a simple and adaptable approach that can enable children to share their views in research and practice.

Keywords: Resourced provision; autism; pupil voice; inclusion

Introduction

There have been longstanding concerns about the experiences and outcomes of autistic[1]

children in education in the UK (APPGA & NAS, 2017; House of Commons Education and Skills

Committee 2006; Van Herwegen, Ashworth & Palikara, 2018). Given these concerns, and the

complexity of needs across the autism spectrum, it is unsurprising that a range of provision

exists to meet those needs (Wittemeyer et al., 2011). Nationally (APPGA & NAS, 2017) and

internationally (Renty & Roeyers, 2006), there is good evidence that parents value provision

where children's needs specifically related to their autism are well understood and supported.

Autistic young people say similar things when given the opportunity to share their views in both

special (Zilli, Parsons & Kovshoff, 2019) and mainstream (Hummerstone & Parsons, 2020)

contexts. Indeed, understanding what inclusion means for autistic children and their families

has helpfully moved past a simple binary or reductionist debate about whether children go to

mainstream school to a more nuanced discussion about *how* education may or may not be

experienced as inclusive across a range of contexts. As Falkmer et al., (2015) state: '…the right

to be present in school is not enough to call it inclusive' (18).

This aligns with Ravet's (2011) integrative conceptualisation of inclusion which offers a middle

ground between the often-polarised positions of what she calls rights-based inclusion (focusing

on mainstream schools for all) and needs-based inclusion (focusing on a range of provision to

meet a range of needs including specialist approaches to teaching and support). Ravet's (2011)

integrative position acknowledges that it is essential for *all* teachers to have a good

understanding of autism in order to be able to respond effectively to students' needs since

'there is no 'recipe' for the inclusion of children on the autism spectrum' (680). Good practice

guidance indicates that educational strategies and social support at school must be informed by

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[1] In line with the preferences of the UK autism community, the terms 'on the autism spectrum' or 'autistic person' will be used rather than 'person with autism' to represent identity first language (see Kenny et al., 2016).

an autism lens so that teaching strategies, awareness, and responding are appropriate and can effectively meet pupils' needs (Guldberg, Bradley & Wittemeyer, 2019). This raises important and timely questions about how such an integrative approach could be achieved in practice.

Resourced provision, or resource bases, provide a possible solution since they offer a combination of provision between smaller classes within a base at a mainstream school for some parts of the day and inclusion in mainstream classes for the remainder of the time. The overall balance between mainstream classes and time spent in the base can '…vary widely, reflecting the local approach to inclusion' (Education & Skills Funding Agency, 2020, 34). In 2019 (DfE, 2019, Table 11), 1,045 (6.2%) primary schools and 640 (18.6%) secondary schools in England were recorded as having resourced provisions (8.3% of schools overall). Resource bases are entitled to additional funding for each pupil who has a place, usually reflecting higher staff to pupil ratios (Education & Skills Funding Agency, 2018).

Combined educational settings offer flexibility and support (Jordan, 2005) and are highly valued by parents (Lindsay et al., 2016), potentially providing 'the best of both worlds' when it comes to inclusion (Flewitt & Nind, 2007, 425). Indeed, there is independent evidence that mainstream schools with resourced provision were the most successful for providing good academic, social and personal outcomes for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities relative to mainstream or special schools (OfSTED, 2006).

Given these positive indications for the benefits of resourced provision it is surprising that only limited evidence exists about the views and experiences of autistic children within them. Increasingly, it is recognised that in order to understand more fully what inclusion means it is vital to find out the views and perspectives of the pupils themselves (Goodall, 2018). Hebron and Bond (2017) reported one of the few studies that has specifically examined the perspectives of autistic pupils and their parents about resourced provision in England. Sixteen parents / carers and nine pupils (aged 8-15 years; four with an autism spectrum diagnosis and five with speech and language difficulties) were asked about their experiences. Findings were generally

in line with the positive features summarised above: resourced provision was liked because of the support on offer alongside opportunities to mix with mainstream peers, and engagement with school was strong, including for pupils where this had not always been the case. Pupils reported liking the flexibility of provision and the good relationships established with staff and peers.

However, most of the evidence presented came from parents rather than pupils and most of the children were secondary-aged pupils rather than primary-aged. The tendency to include the voices of older autistic children is noticeable in other studies too (DePape & Lindsay, 2016; Goodall, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Krieger et al., 2018; Saggers et al., 2011). A review of stakeholder perspectives on inclusion for autistic pupils (Roberts & Simpson, 2016) included a small number of studies with primary-aged children, but their focus was on mainstream provision only and children's voices were only minimally represented. Wood (2019) included ten primary-aged pupils in her study on intense interests but again the focus was on mainstream schools. Thus, we know very little about how primary-aged autistic children experience resourced provision, including the transitions they make between the base and mainstream classes, which is a distinctive characteristic. These horizontal transitions (Kagan & Neuman, 1998), which refer to daily movements between settings, subjects and situations, can be vital for supporting children's engagement at school (Zilli et al., 2019) and yet can be experienced as particularly challenging for autistic children because of their preferences for similarity, structure and routine (Fortuna, 2014; Hume et al., 2014).

Therefore, this small-scale study was designed to explore the daily experiences, including transitions between the special and mainstream parts of the school, of autistic pupils within resourced provision. Alongside children's views we asked the teaching staff from the same resource base about their experiences since, as Falkmer et al., (2015) remind us: 'Teachers are the main facilitators of, and barriers to, inclusive schools' (18). We focused on children and teachers in order to get a close-up of the activities and practices that take place during the

school day. Parents are more at a distance from these everyday practices and so we did not seek their views. Specifically, our study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the views and experiences of primary-aged autistic pupils and their teachers about resourced provision, including transitions between special and mainstream classrooms?

2. What do these views and experiences identify as the effective practices for supporting inclusion and the practices that could be developed or improved further?

Methodology

<u>Research context</u>

When considering evidence-based practices, Mesibov and Shea (2011, 125) argued that small-scale, qualitative studies are much more likely to be '…useful for teachers than the large 'horse race' studies…' because of the heterogeneity of autism and educational settings. Thus, we focused on one resourced provision in a mainstream school in the South of England. The research was part of the Autism Community Research Network@Southampton [ACoRNS] initiative which aims to reduce the gap between education research and practice through co-creating research with school practitioners (Parsons & Kovshoff, 2019). Teaching staff were closely involved in specifying the research questions, co-designing the storyboard methodology, and in co-authoring this paper.

The resource provision has been operating since September 2013 and is one of three led by the specialist school, which employs and deploys staff as needed. Maths and English lessons are accessed within the resource bases, which maintain small class sizes and high adult to pupil ratios. This class access the full range of foundation subjects in mainstream, differentiated as appropriate by resource base staff. There are typically up to 10 pupils in the base, with one class teacher and four support staff. Pupils are a key part of the mainstream school with lunch and

playtimes, assemblies, school trips and other activities taking place together. There are also weekly visits to access specialist teaching rooms at the special school.

Participants

A purposive sampling approach targeted pupils with an autism diagnosis, and teaching staff, within the resourced provision. Parents/carers were provided with information sheets and consent forms. Six consented for their child to participate, and two declined. Children were provided with accessible project information and an assent form. One child did not provide their assent to take part. Participants comprised three 9-year-old and two 11-year-old autistic boys, one male class teacher and five female teaching assistants. The research was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Southampton (Ref# 46209).

Methods and procedure

Pupils: Working with the class teacher, we piloted a storyboard method that encouraged children to draw and write about the main aspects of a 'typical day at school'. Children were asked to reflect on their own experiences and emotions of the different parts of the day, including their likes/dislikes and who they generally spent their day with, to create a poster. Figure 1 shows three examples of the posters produced. This activity was completed in the resource base by all children within the usual class timetable and with the support of their familiar teaching staff. The following week, the researcher spent time with the children for whom consent to participate was received, asking them about their posters and the activities or times of the day that they liked or found difficult. These conversations took place in a separate room and were audio-recorded. All five children asked for a teacher to be present. The interviews with pupils lasted between 6 and 20 minutes (just under 11 minutes on average).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Teaching staff: a semi-structured interview schedule was developed for staff focusing on three main areas from the literature: (1) the potential challenges for pupils in making their everyday

transitions, including moving between the resource base and the mainstream areas of the school (Hume et al., 2014); (2) knowledge about pupils' likes and dislikes about school (Calder, Hill & Pellicano, 2013; Wainscot et al., 2008) (3) observations and experiences about how / with whom pupils from the base form friendships with others (Calder et al., 2013; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008); and one area of practice identified specifically by the school (4) the 'dual identity' of the resource base and how this may impact on teachers' experiences and practices, as well as what pupils' sense of what school means to them. Interviews took place in a separate room, lasted between 3 and 35 minutes (just over 16 minutes on average), and were audio-recorded.

<u>Data Analysis</u>

Interview transcriptions of staff and children, and children's posters, were analysed by the first author through a method of categorisation from Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). First, deductive categories were established from the literature and interview questions as cited in the previous paragraph. Emergent (inductive) categories were then identified through further reading and coding of the transcripts, especially relating to identity. Analysis was then focused by question, to identify any differences or similarities across participants. Through identifying patterns and connections within the transcripts and categories, main themes were established, and transcripts were colour coded according to these themes. Themes were revisited and reviewed by the third author. Four main themes were identified and are described below: (1) Structure and routine (2) Friendship and peers (3) Support and communication, and (4) Dual identity. These are followed by a summary of changes to practices implemented by the school in response to these findings.

Findings

<u>Structure and routine</u>

Staff (denoted as S below) stressed that their specialist resourced provision offered the opportunity for more structure during the school day, allowing the class to stick to a routine. This was something that the pupils (denoted as P) implicitly seemed to appreciate also. One

pupil wrote on their poster that they felt anxious as they first arrive at school in the morning; when asked why he said:

> *'I don't know what's in store, 'cause it can be like children flying across screaming or maybe it could be a calm day where everybody is normal' - P4*

But the same pupil then expressed:

> *'I feel fine when I do handwriting in the morning 'cause I find it quite easy and it settles me in everyday and it kind of makes me feel welcome.'*

Handwriting was part of their first lesson in the base and an example of a period providing familiarity, routine and structure. Discussion revealed that the time spent in the base was enjoyable and successful for both pupils and staff. Although a few pupils described the content of the lessons within the base as sometimes challenging, they all enjoyed and preferred the morning lessons in comparison to their time spent in the mainstream classrooms in the afternoon. For example, the top poster in Figure 1 reveals that the pupil felt happy during spelling in the base, but angry during mainstream classes in the afternoon, and worried about assembly later in the day.

The familiarity of routine was suggested by staff as a possible reason for the pupils' preferences for their time spent in the base. However, none of the pupils spoke directly about routine when discussing their feelings about their lessons. The main reasons given for disliking mainstream lessons was because of the volume of noise, which staff also agreed was an issue. However, staff also commented that ensuring structure in the lessons in the base can result in a quieter and calmer environment and so it may have been this that pupils noticed.

Staff also commented that the less structured transition periods can lead to the most challenging times for the pupils:

'The in between times, when we go to assembly, play, the snack, that's the time they struggle with the most, that's when we see the most behaviour which communicates to us 'we don't like this' 'this is not easy to deal with' – S3

Physical Education (PE) lessons were a common topic of discussion in relation to its increased number of transitions. Within this lesson the pupils are separated into three different groups where they engage in one activity and then move onto the next. These transitions could be challenging for pupils:

'if they like the activity, they have to end something they really enjoy to move onto something they may not, and if they don't like PE at all then they're having to go on from one thing they don't like to another' – S3

However, the staff acknowledged that reducing these transitions may not necessarily be beneficial to the pupil's personal growth:

'They need to experience transitions, because it's real life situations…a safe environment can change, they need to learn how to cope with that' – S3

As part of the daily routine, the journey to and from school raised concerns for pupils and staff. Three pupils described this negatively, with feelings such as *'worried'* and *'sad'* and referring to their journeys as *'chaos' 'loud'* and *'difficult'*. P4 wrote '*I feel weiry (sic)'* next to his picture of the bus; when asked why, he highlighted that it was often noisy and that he felt anxious about what was in store for the day. However, the same pupil described his feelings as *'satisfied'* on the journey home as he used this journey to sleep and wind down after a busy day. A staff member reported how a different pupil dislikes the journey home: '*I think he likes the security of school, so he becomes unsettled at the end of the afternoon' (S1).*

Therefore, it may not necessarily be the environment of the bus or taxi *per se* which is problematic for pupils, but that this journey is the period where possible anxieties surrounding

school or home can arise. It is important to recognise that these transitions between home and school can be challenging and so more support may be needed, as one staff member said:

> *'they come in and straight away we expect them to sit quiet and do their handwriting, perhaps some of them really need to let off a bit of steam first'* – S1.

Friendship and Peers

All pupils interviewed spoke of having several friends, but usually one or two who were important to them (P2):

> *(P) My best part is with [friend] *points to poster*.*
>
> *(I) Playtime with [friend]? Why do you like that part?*
>
> *(P) Because it's good.*
>
> *(I) Yeah. What do you do with [friend]?*
>
> *(P) Run around.*
>
> *(I) Anything else?*
>
> *(P) Skipping.*
>
> *(I) Is it just [friend] you play with at break time?*
>
> *(P) *nods**
>
> *(I) Yeah? Would you say he's your best friend?*
>
> *(P) Yeah.*

When asked about their favourite part of their day most pupils said break time where they played with their peers: *'I get to run around and I love running… mostly I play with some other people, but mostly I spend my playtime with [friends' names]'* (P4). Lunch time was popular too but not so much for seeing friends; pupils were hungry and looked forward to specific food: *'I get some pie and pie taste just taste amazing. Same with fish fingers and pasta'* (P5)*.*

Three pupils also reported playing with children from the mainstream class, although the staff agreed their friendships were mainly formed with the other pupils in the base. Indeed, the

pupils spent most of their day with the other children from the base, including in the mainstream classroom. One staff member explained how their physical placement within the class will be usually be sat away from their mainstream peers and suggested that an improvement would be for them to sit together: '*they do feel part of the class, but sometimes it feels a little bit still that we aren't*' (S6)*.*

However, another staff member stated that the autistic pupils often interact with their mainstream peers and that *'there are a lot of lovely children who will automatically grab our children to partner up with'* (S1). Break time was not always felt positively by the pupils, however. For example, P5discussed his difficulties with communicating with peers, emphasising feelings of loneliness:

> *(I) What have you written next to playtime?*
>
> *(P) Lonely.*
>
> *(I) Why do you feel lonely?*
>
> *(P) Because some people won't allow, because some people don't want to play with me. Sometimes I get too annoying.*
>
> *(I) You think you're being annoying? How does that make you feel?*
>
> *(P) Sad. It's because I like to play Doctor Who.*

One staff member also mentioned how this pupil frequently spends time alone during break times:

> '*He tends to sort of be in their [the other pupils] faces all the time and no one tends to want to play with him'* – S1

Although staff spoke of the strategies they put in place to support this particular pupil such as encouragement and monitoring on the playground, one also suggested: '*maybe it would be quite good to have like a buddy, so they have a link with the mainstream'* (S6). The same staff member

suggested that mainstream pupils should be further educated about autism, believing this was an obstacle for enabling positive experiences for some.

<u>Support and communication</u>

It was emphasised by staff that the resource base provides the pupils and staff with a *'supportive'* and *'safe'* environment in which to teach, as well as for pupils to develop everyday life skills. *'Secure'*, *'confident', 'scaffold'* and *'encourage'* were also frequently used terms to describe the support in the base. Overwhelmingly, staff were very positive about the mix of provision and noted that children soon adjusted to the transitions between the base and the mainstream classrooms because this was part of their routine and *'they cope brilliantly because if they've got the adult with them, they feel secure'* (S1).

Good communication between staff and pupils was expressed as vital for supporting smooth transitions and the overall content of the day. However, four staff members expressed a desire for further communication with the mainstream staff members, stating that a lack of communication with them was sometimes a drawback. They emphasised that advance communication ensures they can provide the additional support for pupils through preparing and differentiating work to their individual abilities. Two staff members spoke of how occasionally the content within the mainstream lessons was not at an appropriate level, which one described as sometimes *'not pitched right'* and *'way over the children's heads'*, though it was acknowledged *'it's not often this happens'* (S6).

Staff confirmed that their pupil to staff ratio of 2:1 allowed them to provide enhanced, focused support in the mainstream periods. Methods used to facilitate learning included use of visual schedules and 'foundation boxes' which consisted of work activities catered for each pupil. If any difficulties arose (such as unsuitable content) then the resource base staff could apply the use of these boxes as needed, including leaving the room and continuing work elsewhere if necessary. This way anxieties were reduced but productivity remained high. However, one staff member stated that they avoided leaving the mainstream classrooms as much as possible as the

swift changes in the afternoon represented a more realistic experience for the pupils: '*that's life, they've got to learn how to adapt*' (S1).

When asked about the strategies they use to support the pupils, one staff member highlighted their use of modelling appropriate behaviours and responses:

> '*We use loads of modelling, we model, and we've got high expectations here, so we model a lot of behaviour of how we expect them to behave. I like to think this teaches them valuable life skills too*' – S1

However, staff also spoke about how the school was currently struggling with the behaviours of several mainstream pupils. This was something picked up by two of the pupils as well, especially in relation to the noise (P3):

> *(I) Are there any parts of the day which you do not like?*
>
> *(P) Mainstream.*
>
> *(I) Why do you not like mainstream?*
>
> *(P) Because it's the people.*
>
> *(I) What do you not like about the people?*
>
> *(P) Um cause they keep shouting.*
>
> *(I) So it's too loud?*
>
> *(P) Yeah.*
>
> *(I) So when it gets too loud in mainstream what do you do?*
>
> *(P) Um I ask the teacher for some help.*
>
> *(I) Do you leave the room?*
>
> *(P) If I want to.*

As well as being challenging for some of the autistic pupils because of disruption and noise, the staff were concerned that the misbehaving children (a minority) were modelling behaviour which was inappropriate. Staff had the option to respond flexibly though so that if pupils

seemed to be uncomfortable or not concentrating, they could take them back to the resource base.

<u>Dual identity</u>

The pupils were either unfazed or excited by the fact they were part of two schools, and none suggested any difficulties or dislike about the situation. P4 spoke about how he felt '*different*' because of it but in a positive way such as it was '*cool*' to have his photo as a pupil on the websites of both schools. Another pupil (P5) also used the words '*cool*' and '*exciting*' to describe his feelings about being part of the base and the mainstream school. One thing pupils particularly enjoyed was the opportunity to visit the affiliated special school every week to go swimming, which both staff and pupils described as the *'highlight of the week'* (S3). When talking about the special school, this staff member said, *'they see it as a place that is very free, relaxed and chilled'.* Further positives mentioned were the opportunity to go on both the specialist and mainstream school's trips, and the specialised input from staff.

For the pupils, there was some evidence of a split identity between the base and the mainstream classrooms. One member of staff spoke of a pupil who felt like *'a big fish in the base but a very small fish in mainstream'* (S2), thereby offering one explanation for that pupil's dislike for mainstream lessons. Nevertheless, the staff member also emphasised that this pupil still successfully transitioned to the mainstream classroom every day.

Staff perspectives highlighted the positives of accessing mainstream provision including supporting the pupils to develop social skills in naturalistic ways and having access to the same taught content as other pupils their age:

> *'I think mainstream are a bonus to us, it teaches them how to cope for their transition to secondary. I think we are a bonus to mainstream because the children here learn empathy with our kids and they on the whole they are very supportive to our children, so I think we do them a favour as well as them do us a favour'* (S1).

The same staff member also said that there is a '*sense of your own community'* and '*a strong team'* within the resource base. They, and other staff members, also spoke of the base providing the freedom to make choices and engage in activities which they would not otherwise be able to do. Indeed, another staff member said*: 'The underlying philosophy behind...the base is so positive... It's changed my life as a teacher, I don't think I'll go back to mainstream'* (S3).

However, the interviews also revealed some drawbacks for staff. One spoke of feeling: '*like a spare part in somebody else's school'* and *'you can feel like you're out here by yourself, but that's not because the school aren't doing enough or overlooking it'* (S3)*.* This staff member highlighted that in some cases they '*lose out'* on what the special school could offer to their pupils, including the ICT suite and kitchen which were not available in mainstream. The staff member believed that not having access to these resources meant that pupils missed out on some aspects of '*fundamental life learning'* which the special school tended to emphasize relative to academic targets, which were the priority for the mainstream school.

<u>Impact of research on school practices</u>

As a co-constructed project, it is important to report on how the research has informed transition practices at the school. The class team looked at pupils' storyboards and, in consultation with the pupils, introduced some changes. At the beginning of the day it was identified that some pupils needed longer to transition to the classroom and so handwriting (identified by the pupils as a positive activity) was extended and 1:1 reading time introduced. This enabled pupils to spend time with a staff member to either read or share any concerns and proved successful in settling and engaging the pupils and so was also introduced for targeted children before heading home on the bus.

As structure was confirmed to have such a positive impact on pupil wellbeing, the routines before key transition times were reviewed and adapted. For example, listening to a book after breaktime, and a mindfulness activity after lunchtime, were introduced as ways to calm down and restart learning together. The pupils now get a choice of which activity they want to help

them settle back in to class. Often handwriting is chosen as it has been identified as a known routine and is associated with the calm time at the beginning of the morning. This time also allows the pupils time to prepare for the transition into their mainstream classes in the afternoon. As part of relaxation sessions breathing exercises have been taught explicitly and the pupils are then encouraged to use those techniques in general situations that may cause them challenges. Finally, a monthly visual calendar was introduced to show key upcoming events, which has allowed pupils to anticipate and look forward to these and to prepare for additional transitions.

Discussion

This small-scale study provides insights into how one resourced provision is experienced by primary-aged autistic children and their teachers, using a simple visual, storyboard methodology. Children's voices, especially younger children, are substantially underrepresented in autism research (Cascio et al., 2020; Parsons et al., 2020) and so this study makes a valuable contribution by demonstrating how younger children's voices can be explored and used to inform practice. The storyboard activity was easily understood by children and can be readily adapted with symbols and other visual materials. This is a simple and effective inclusive method that can be easily deployed to find out more about pupils' experiences and preferences in research and practice. In doing so, we found that autistic pupils in this resource provision liked the dual identity of being a part of two schools and valued the rhythm and structure of mornings within the resource base as well as the friends they made there. Afternoons in the mainstream classes were anticipated and experienced with some anxiety by some pupils, mostly due to the environment feeling louder and busier than the resource base. Teachers emphasised that it was important for pupils to do things that were less comfortable for them as a way of helping them to cope with real life and commented that pupils *'coped brilliantly'* in the mainstream classes, not least because there was flexibility in how support was provided.

Transitions between more and less structured activities were, as might be expected, identified by teachers as pinch points that children found more difficult to navigate (Hume et al., 2014). Similarly, transitions between home and school were identified by staff and pupils as times that could be experienced as difficult and tiring due to noisiness and worries about the day (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). In line with other research (APPGA & NAS, 2017; Hummerstone & Parsons, 2020; Wood, 2019), sensory challenges negatively impacted on experiences and so this adds further evidence about the importance of knowing what these challenges are within specific contexts and where environmental accommodations may be needed.

Given what is known about the difficulties that many autistic children experience with daily transitions (Fortuna, 2014; Hume et al., 2014), there could be concerns that the number and variety of transitions within resourced provision may be experienced as especially challenging. However, the reverse seemed to be true: our findings emphasized the benefits of a combined setting through exposing pupils to daily changes that needed to be navigated successfully, while simultaneously providing the support, knowledge and strategies needed to cope with such changes. Interestingly, our findings also challenge the perceived benefit of exposing autistic children to the social context of a mainstream school (Lindsay et al., 2016). In this case, it was the behaviour of a small number of pupils in the mainstream class that caused disruption and concern for the autistic pupils, rather than the other way around. Perhaps in this context it was not surprising that friendships were mainly formed with other pupils from the base given that opportunities to mix throughout the day was more limited (Humphrey & Symes, 2011), although some friendships certainly spanned mainstream and special classes. Overall, pupils were mainly happy with their friendships, and it is important to understand these from the children's perspectives rather than via adult or normative interpretations about what friendships should be like or who they should be with (Calder et al., 2013).

Effective practices for supporting daily transitions included many that are already identified as good practice, thereby reinforcing their importance (Bond & Hebron, 2016; Frederickson, Jones

& Lang, 2010; Hume et al., 2014): visual schedules showing clear timetabling and structure for the day, as well as the modelling and scaffolding of behaviours that could be practiced in naturalistic ways (e.g. turn-taking at snack time, co-operation on tasks). Individually-tailored 'foundation boxes' were very useful for teachers supporting the pupils in mainstream classes since this enabled differentiation of tasks and supported pupil engagement. The use of a range of facilities, especially the swimming pool at the special school, was an important, motivational benefit for the children as well.

There were also some aspects of practice identified where positive changes could be made, for example, revisiting the transition between transport and the first timetabled activity. Indeed, the school responded to pupils' views and implemented several changes which have already had a positive impact on practice. The school reports that pupils are recognising the benefits of relaxation and of being calm and are choosing their own preferred methods to calm themselves (with support), both within timetabled sessions and during times of challenge as they arise. The beginning of the day feels very settled, with the children arriving at the base and settling quickly into their routine. The end of the day is much calmer than before, with pupils transitioning with increased independence to the bus. Pupils also talk about upcoming events and discuss the positives and negatives of these with familiar adults.

Of course, there are also some limitations that need to be considered. As a small-scale study focused on one resourced provision and with relatively short interviews, the data are inevitably limited; exploring experiences of pupils within other resourced provisions would be valuable for future research in understanding where commonalities and differences in practices and experiences may lie. Pupils were asked to think about, and represent, only one day on their storyboards; a focus on a different day for each of the children could have revealed a different snapshot of their experiences. Nevertheless, through enabling snapshots of experiences to be shared, the methodology lends itself to being used over time, perhaps as something more akin to a visual diary method (cf. Fortuna, 2014; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). It would also have

strengthened the co-production of the paper if staff and students had been involved in the analysis of the data, however this was not possible due to time constraints. Finally, resourced provision is, by definition, about specialist and mainstream spaces. Given the underrepresentation of autistic children's voices in research, we wanted to prioritise their views and experiences but there is clearly a need to develop a more holistic understanding of resourced provision that includes the views and experiences of mainstream pupils and teachers too.

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Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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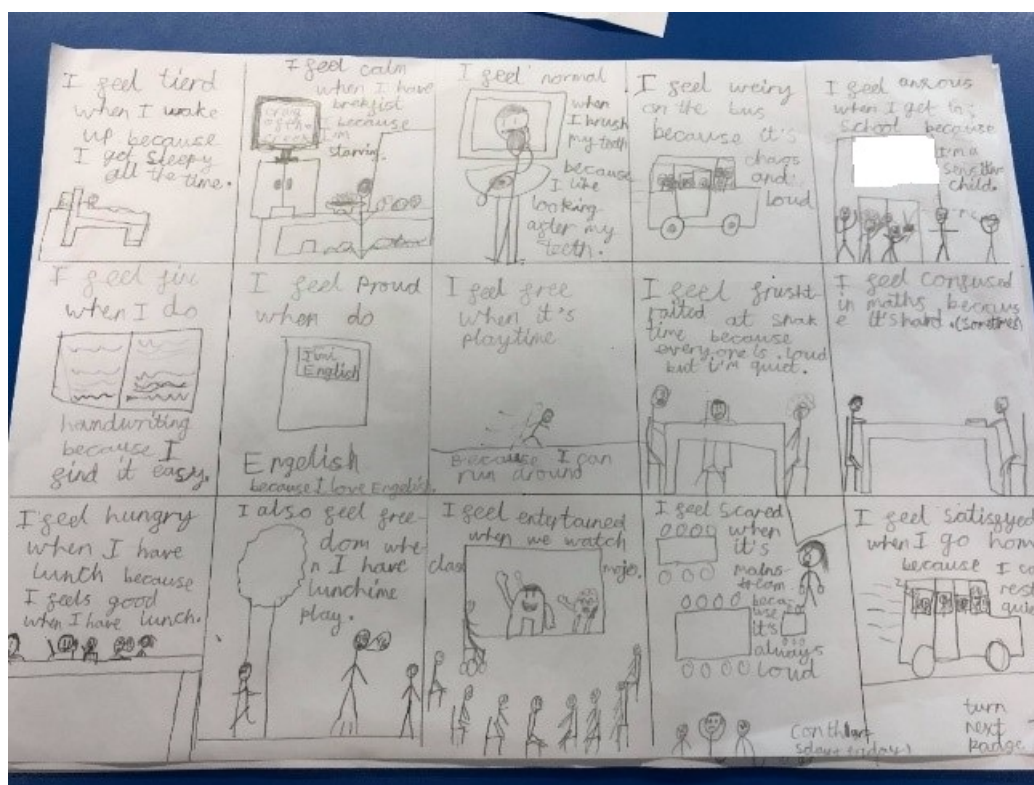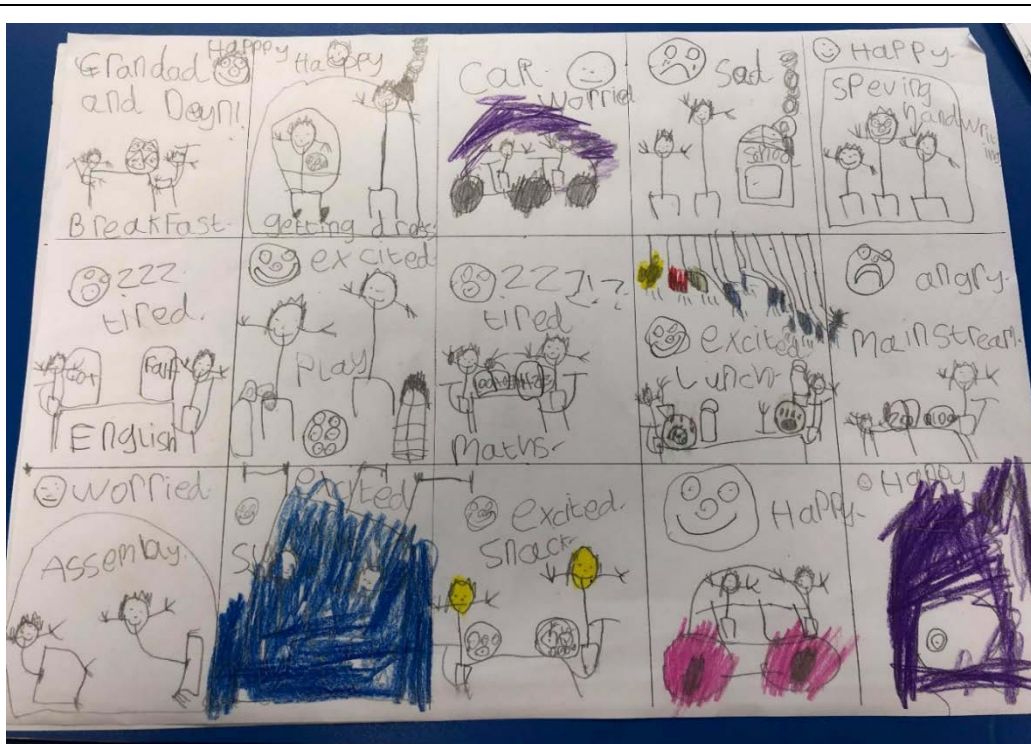
Figure 1: Examples of storyboard posters