**the transition from primary to secondary school:**

**Perspectives of students with autism spectrum disorder**

**and their parents**

**Elizabeth F. Hannah**

**Keith J. Topping**

*University of Dundee*

*The perspectives of students with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) during the period of transition from mainstream primary to mainstream secondary school are under-researched. This paper reports a longitudinal investigation into the feelings, expectations and experiences of nine students and their parents during such a period. Employing student and parent perspectives, students’ expectations of the move to secondary school were generally negative; there was a combination of positive and negative feelings prior to the move; and their experience of the move was better than expected. Findings are considered in the context of the literature on transition for the general student population and the restricted literature for students with autism spectrum disorder. Comparisons are drawn between the students’ and parents’ perspectives of transition experiences and support. Limitations of the research are considered. Implications for policy makers, professionals and researchers are discussed.*

The majority of compulsory education systems involve a move between primary and post-primary stages (Le Métais, 2003), a transition which can be construed as a significant life event for students, parents/carers and other family members (Lohaus, Elben, Ball, & Klein-Hessling, 2004). Changes associated with this move can present both opportunities and challenges to children (Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2010) and their families. Families can offer welcome support during this time (Ashton, 2008). Typical changes experienced by students include those of the physical environment (usually involving a move to a larger school with a more complex organisational structure and physical layout) (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010; Zeedyk et al., 2003); the curricular environment (new subjects, a wider range of teachers, and different teaching methods) (Ashton, 2008; Tobbell, 2003) and the social environment (different peers, teachers, and other adults) (Ashton, 2008; Graham & Hill, 2003; Ward, 2000).

This paper will present the findings from a small-scale study into the perspectives of a group of students with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their parents during the period of transition to secondary school. It will draw on resilience and ecological theories of human development to conceptualise educational transition; apply this to the experiences of students with a pervasive developmental disorder; highlight new theoretical insights; and consider the implications for educational policy and practice. Legislative and policy imperatives and the theoretical importance of seeking the views of key stakeholders, such as parents and children, are considered.

*Ecological perspective and transition*

Ecological theories of human development emphasise the dynamic and bi-directional nature of the interaction between an individual and his/her environment; the role of proximal and distal systems; and the interplay between those systems. Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystemic conceptual framework, originally developed more than thirty years ago and subject to ongoing revision, comprises four nested systems: microsystem, mesosytem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992). The microsystem represents contexts in a child’s immediate environment, such as the home or school; the mesosystem denotes interactions between settings in which a child can be located; the exosystem describes an interaction between an immediate setting, such as the home, and a remote but influential setting, such as the parent’s work situation; and the macrosystem, which takes account of the potential impact of such factors as culture and beliefs on a child’s development. In the 1980s, Bronfenbrenner incorporated the chronosystem, which took account of temporal elements. This enabled account tobe taken of the impact of experiences in a child’s life, both normative (e.g. starting secondary school) and non-normative (e.g. parental divorce) (Bronfenbrenner, 1988).

The ecological systems perspective has been influential in educational transitions research, including the transition to school (e.g. Hannah, Gorton, & Jindal-Snape, 2010; Margetts, 2007) and the transition from elementary to middle school (e.g. Akos, 2010). It has the flexibility to be employed as a sole theoretical framework or in an integrated fashion, for example with resilience theory (Waller, 2001).

*Resilience theory and transition*

Resilience has been defined as *a phenomenon or process reflecting relatively positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma* (Luthar, 2006, p. 742). Early work on resilience focused on the identification of individuals, and their associated personal attributes, who appeared able to adapt despite being exposed to potentially detrimental circumstances. Later and contemporary work has seen a shift from a focus solely on personality traits, which protect the child in the face of significant adversity, to an interactionist perspective which takes account of risk and protective factors in the individual and the environment. Newman and Blackburn (2002), based on an extensive review of the resilience literature, identified three dimensions within which risk and protective factors operate: the child, the family and the environment.

The definition of resilience has two key constructs, namely the experience of *significant adversity* and *positive adaptation*, which has been the subject of debate. Although an extensive account of this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, it is pertinent to consider these concepts in the context of primary-secondary transition. In particular, it is legitimate to ask whether transitions can be construed as times of significant adversity. Newman and Blackburn (2002), from an examination of extant literature, construe transitions as *any episode where children are having to cope with potentially challenging episodes of change* (p.1). Similarly, Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) argue that for some children transition can be considered *a challenge of living* and that there should be a greater focus on social and personal experiences at such times.

Students with a pervasive developmental difficulty, such as ASD, are at greater risk of experience of *significant adversity* during the transition to secondary school due to the presence of risk factors at the individual level. However, these factors will be moderated by the presence or absence of risk and protective factors in the family and the environment. Luthar (2006) argues for research into the processes within families and communities which underpin resilience with the aim of informing interventions. Furthermore, he proposes the utilisation of qualitative methodologies to supplement and complement quantitative methodologies. Similarly, Waller (2001) proposes that *narrative approaches which tap into subjective experience may reveal protective factors not apparent even to participant-observer researchers* (p. 295) and are critical to understanding resilience.

*Listening to Stakeholders and Inclusive Practice*

Educational policy and practice should be informed by the views of all key stakeholders, including those of children. From a children’s rights perspective, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child holds that *state parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child* (United Nations, 1989). An international drive towards inclusive practice such as the influential Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) has led to an increased interest in listening to the views of key stakeholders, including children, and developing appropriate methodologies (Barrow & Hannah, 2012). Furthermore, listening to children’s views provides a more holistic picture of educational practices, avoiding the pitfall of over-reliance on the views of one group. For example, in a recent review of 88 studies, Topping (2011) found that teachers and pupils had different perspectives on primary-secondary transition.

International and national legislative and policy imperatives (Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004; Standards in Scotland’s Schools Act 2000; UNESCO, 1994) resulted in an increased focus and drive within the host local authority to develop more inclusive educational practices. The move from primary to secondary school had been identified as representing a period of potential risk for students with additional support needs (ASN) (Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004), indicating a need to evaluate existing authority transition practices and if necessary develop new structures and systems.

*Experiences of students moving to secondary school*

Research into the experiences of students in transition in the general population (utilising prospective and retrospective accounts), has identified both positive and negative features (anticipated and actual) associated with the move to secondary school. Positive expectations and experiences of secondary school include the breadth and variety of subjects; learning new things; finding work easier; having a range of teachers; increased opportunities for movement; and making new friends (Besley, 2004; Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Fouracre, 1993; Graham & Hill, 2003; Mizelle, 1999; Pointon, 2000; Tobell, 2003). Negative expectations and experiences include the size and layout of the school; the potential for getting lost; the number and range of teachers; higher expectations of secondary school teachers; different approaches to classroom management; the level and amount of work and homework; students’ organisational skills; a sense of loss of ownership of personal space; leaving the stability of peer relationships formed in the primary school to the insecurity of forming new social groups in the high school; not knowing anyone; and being picked on, teased or bullied (Ashton, 2008; Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Fouracre, 1993; Graham & Hill, 2003; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Johnstone, 2001; Mizelle, 1999; Pointon, 2000; Tobbell, 2003; Ward, 2000; West et al., 2010; Zeedyk et al., 2003). Students report a mixture of positive feelings about moving to secondary school (such as happiness, excitement and anticipation) and negative feelings (such as sad, lonely, scared, and anxious) (Ashton, 2008; Johnstone, 2001; Lucey & Reay, 2000; Pratt & George, 2005). Such heightened feelings of anxiety and associated levels of stress have been construed by some researchers as fulfilling a positive and adaptive function during periods of change (Lucey & Reay, 2000).

*Transition experiences of students with ASD*

Moving school presents a particular challenge to students with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), given the nature of their language and communication difficulties (Wing, 1993). ASD is used here to embrace a range of diagnostic labels including classical autism, atypical autism and Asperger Syndrome. Underlying the behaviour of individuals with ASD, regardless of their level of intelligence or any additional difficulties, is the *triad of impairments.* Thisterm was originally coined by Wing and Gould (1979) and refers to difficulties in social interaction, social communication, and imagination. It forms the basis for the ASD diagnostic criteria employed in the International Classification of Diseases 10th edition (ICD-10) (WHO, 1993) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 4th edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association,2000). Associated with the impairment in imagination, individuals with ASD experience difficulties with environmental change, resulting in an insistence on routines (Mesibov & Shea, 2010; Wing, 1992; Wing, 1993).

In educational contexts, of course, students experience changes on a daily basis. Pietarinen et al., (2010), drawing on students’ reflections, provided a useful conceptualisation of horizontal and vertical dimensions of transition. The latter referred to normative transitions such as moving between school stages and the former to the adjustments that students make in response to the *more unpredictable and non-normative transitions in their everyday life* (p. 147). Both dimensions are significant for students with ASD, who need predictability in their lives (American Psychiatric Association,2000).

There appear to be few published studies that have considered the perspectives of children with ASD moving from primary to secondary school. Only three studies were found none of which drew on an ecological perspective or resilience theory. All were in the UK and involved small samples, considering students’ retrospective(Johnstone & Patrone, 2003; Larney & Quigley, 2006) or prospective (Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr, & Smith, 2006) views of transition support arrangements. The studies also provided suggestions for improvements to practice. Larney and Quigley (2006) noted that although pupils were generally positive, they sought *ongoing consultation with them throughout the transition process* (p.3). Similarly, Johnstone and Patrone (2003) report that pupils would have liked adults to have taken more time to listen to their questions and concerns. In addition, the children wanted to be included in decisions about transition and sought greater social continuity (peers and adults). Jindal-Snape et al., (2006) report that students valued the preparation for transition, including school visits, particularly where these involved active engagement in school activities.

*Aims of study*

It cannot be assumed that the experiences of students with ASD mirror those of students in general, although there may be some commonalities. Given the difficulties associated with the triad of impairments, it is likely that ASD students will require more and/or different forms of support during periods of transition. One way in which practitioners can achieve a better understanding of students’ experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school is through investigating their perspectives. This will help them tailor interventions to the specific needs of this group and provide a basis for evaluation of the impact of support strategies.

The present paper reports on the experiences of a small group of students with ASD moving from primary to secondary school in Scotland (where this transfer typically takes place between the ages of 11yrs 6m and 12yrs 5m). Addressing limitations in previous studies, it considers the students’ views at three time points, thus providing a longitudinal perspective. Furthermore, it compares the students’ views with those of their parents. It has been suggested that there is a causal relationship between parental concerns and those of their children (Zeedyk et al., 2003). This study provided an opportunity to explore this question.

The first author, working in close collaboration with an experienced teacher and speech and language therapist, developed and evaluated a transition programme which complemented the host local authority transition arrangements (these typically involved exchange of information, preparatory visits for students, and transition planning meetings). The structure of the transition programme was informed by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1992); including elements of the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem. The importance and role of parents (student-home microsystem) was incorporated through parent information sessions and homework activities to encourage parent-child discussion and consolidate session activities. The role of primary and secondary teachers (student-school microsystem) was captured through information exchange about the programme and individual students, and by providing resources (e.g. school maps and timetables) in the group sessions. Peers (student-peer group microsystem) played a significant role in the six group sessions, and the students were encouraged to share contact details and communicate outside the formal sessions. The programme supplemented existing communication practices between primary and secondary school staff (primary school-secondary school mesosystem) and provided opportunities for parents to meet, share experiences and issues (parent-parent exosystem). Drawing on understanding of the nature of difficulties associated with ASD and evidence of effective teaching and support strategies for students with ASD, the programme incorporated six two-hour sessions in school. These offered a mixture of individual and group activities, designed to enhance students’ knowledge of secondary school; understanding of expected behaviour in school; understanding ASD and personal insights; and developing social communication, organisational and emotional regulation skills.

This paper considers those aspects of the study which explored students’ and parents’ views about secondary school, including expectations and reality; feelings associated with the move; and support provided. The findings will be discussed in the context of previous transitions research, an ecosystemic perspective and resilience theory.

*Research Questions*

1. What feelings do the students’ experience during the transition to secondary school?
2. What are the students’ expectations of secondary school?
3. What are the students’ experiences of secondary school?
4. What are the students’ views of the support provided during the transition to secondary school?
5. What are the parents’ views of the support provided during the transition to secondary school?

**Method**

*Design*

The study employed a longitudinal design with the aim of exploring students’ and parents’ perspectives of transition. There was no control or comparison group; all participants participated in the transitions programme.

*Setting*

## This study took place in a large, inner city in Scotland which faces challenges due to the levels of deprivation within its locality. The number of pupils registered for Free School Meals, as a proxy indicator of socio-economic status, placed the host authority in the top 25% of local authorities in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2010).

*Sampling*

A sample of students was purposively selected from the population of all students with a diagnosis of ASD, attending the last year of a mainstream primary in two quadrants of the city (which was served by one local authority) and eligible to transfer to a mainstream secondary school in a locality served by that authority. It should be noted that applications had been made to specialist provision attached to mainstream secondary schools for some of the pupils, but that the outcome of those applications was not known before the start of the transition programme. A potential drawback was the reliance on full and accurate information. Other sources, such as speech and language therapy records, provided a cross-checking mechanism improving the reliability of the method.

*Participants*

Nine male students participated, all of whom had a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome. The absence of females in the sample is not surprising as typical prevalence levels (male to female) range from four to one (across the whole spectrum) to eight or nine to one (higher functioning individuals) (Mandy et al., 2011). In addition, one student had an additional diagnosis of Tourette syndrome. Participants’ ages at commencement of the study ranged from 11 years 3 months to 12 years 4 months (*Mean* = 11 years 8.9 months; *Standard Deviation* = 4.6 months). There was some attrition over the period of the investigation. Due to parental disengagement after completion of the six-session transition programme (completed before the summer break), data was not available for one of the participating students post-transfer. His pre-transfer data is included in the findings. Details of participants by gender, age at commencement of the study, diagnosis and school provision are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Details of Participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Student No.** | **Age at Start of study** | **Diagnosis** | **Primary School Placement** | **Secondary School Placement** |
| 1 | 11 years 8 months | Asperger syndrome | Mainstream primary | Secondary communication support unit |
| 2 | 11 years 3 months | Asperger syndrome | Mainstream primary | Secondary communication support unit |
| 3 | 12 years 2 months | Asperger syndrome | Mainstream primary | Mainstream secondary |
| 4  | 11 years 6 months | Asperger syndrome | Mainstream primary | Mainstream secondary |
| 5  | 11 years 10 months | Asperger syndromeTourette syndrome | Mainstream primary | Mainstream secondary |
| 6 | 12 years 4 months | Asperger syndrome | Mainstream primary | Mainstream secondary |
| 7 | 12 years 1 month | Asperger syndrome | Mainstream primary | Mainstream secondary |
| 8 | 11 years 5 months | Asperger syndrome | Mainstream primary | Secondary communication support unit |
| 9a | 11 years 5 months | Asperger Syndrome | Mainstream primary | Mainstream secondary |

Data for this student is available pre-transfer but not post-transfer

*Measures and Procedures*

*Ethics.* Relevant permissions were obtained from senior managers within the local authority. The principal researcher complied with the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (British Psychological Society, 2009). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Hard data was stored in a locked filing cabinet and electronic data was stored and retrieved through a password protected computer. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity in dissemination of findings were communicated to all participants.

*Transition questionnaire: pre-transfer.* Students completed a pre-transfer questionnaire (see Appendix A), with support as required from teaching and non-teaching staff, during the first session of the transition programme (in May prior to the move to secondary school). This included the question *What three things would most help you with the move from primary to secondary school?*, thus providing insight into their perceived support needs. Parents completed a pre-transfer questionnaire (based on the student questionnaire in Appendix A) which incorporated the question *In your opinion what are the three things that would most help your child with the transfer between primary and secondary education?* at the information session in March (academic session before the move).

*Group activity: post-transfer.* Two months following the transfer to secondary school, eight students and parents were invited to a reunion meeting after school hours (the ninth student and his parent were not invited due to apparent disengagement from the research). The aims of this meeting were to share their views and experiences of the transition process; discuss whether further support could be provided during the transition period; and use the shared information to inform future developments of the programme. Six students and six parents attended and all three members of the transition programme team were present, namely the first author, a senior educational psychologist, the principal teacher (PT) autism unit (AU) and the AU speech and language therapist (SALT). During the first part of the session, the group was sub-divided into parents and students. The first author facilitated the parents’ group while the PT (autism unit) and SALT facilitated the students’ group in a separate room. The two groups reconvened at the end of the session to share views and discuss similarities and differences in their responses.

The group activity drew on the methodology of group interviewing. It has been suggested that the group interview is particularly useful with children as it enables the use of familiar language and encourages group interaction (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007); addresses issues of power and status typical of individual interviews (Kellett & Ding, 2004); and offers a supportive environment (Jones & Tannock, 2000). Participants were asked *What has helped you/your son in the transition from primary to secondary school?* They worked in pairs identifying factors which had assisted the transition process; noted them on flip chart paper; and then prioritized them through the allocation of stickers. Each participant was provided with fifteen stickers. They were encouraged to think about all aspects of the transition process and not just the transition programme. Participants were also asked *What else could have helped you/your son in the transition from primary to secondary school?* Responses were collated on flip chart paper.

Interviews: post-transfer. Letters to parents outlining the purpose and nature of the interviews were distributed six months following the transfer to secondary school. Between late February and early April, the first author conducted interviews with eight students and nine parents (one was a joint parent interview) in their homes at convenient times.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the students’ and parents’ perspectives on the move from primary to secondary school. The relevant extract from the student interview schedule is shown in Appendix B; the parent interview schedule being along similar lines. The perceived advantages of using interviewing as a data collection method were the facility to address any misunderstandings on the part of the interviewee; enable further exploration of ideas through the use of prompts and probes; and provide rich information. Students and parents were asked to evaluate prior conceptualisations of secondary school against experiences such as:-

1. When you/your son were/was at primary school, what did you/he imagine secondary school would be like?
2. How does secondary school compare to your/his expectations of it?
3. What feelings do you/did your son associate with the transition from primary to secondary school?

There are specific issues to consider when interviewing children, including the power differential between the interviewer and the interviewees (Kellett & Ding, 2004); aspects pertaining to children’s linguistic and cognitive development (Dockrell, Lewis, & Lindsay, 2000); and children’s ability to recall information (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007). The use of techniques such as an open question format and avoiding recurrent probing for detail have been suggested as ways of enhancing the effectiveness of methods used to question children (Dockrell et al., 2000).These aspects wereincorporated into the procedures in this study.

The interview schedules were carefully planned and structured for ease of clarity. A preamble reminded each interviewee of the purpose of the interview; each section had an introduction explaining the purpose and focus; and various prompts and probes supplemented the main questions. The interview was piloted with a young person with Asperger Syndrome and his parent who were not involved in the study. This resulted in minor changes, such as ensuring adequate space to record verbatim responses; noting any additional prompts or probes; and asking a final *Any other comments?* at the end of the interview.

A number of potential threats to the validity of interviewing as a data collection method are acknowledged. Attempts were made to minimize the amount of bias by checking the interviewees’ understanding of questions; using prompts and probes to check that the interviewer understood the responses; and conscious awareness on the researcher’s part of the dangers of seeking answers that supported preconceived ideas (Cohen et al., 2007). Threats to reliability were addressed through utilization of the same interview content and format; and the same interviewer.

It is generally recommended that interviews are audio taped as they provide a permanent record and enable the interviewer to focus on the interview (Robson, 2002). However, the use of an audiotape recorder has the potential to constrain respondents (Cohen et al., 2007). It was the first author’s opinion that the introduction of a recording device in these one-to-one interviews could be unsettling and anxiety provoking. Therefore, it was decided to make contemporaneous notes of the interviews, recording as far as possible all verbatim comments and any significant non-verbal communication (e.g. smiling, frowning) made by the respondents. The first author had ascertained during the pilot stage of interview development that it was possible to make contemporaneous notes whilst maintaining the flow of the interview. A potential threat to the reliability of this recording method was the selection of comments, as it was not possible to record every utterance.

*Data Analysis*

*Transition Questionnaire: pre-transfer.* The responses to the three things question were subject to content analysis (Robson, 2002) using meaningful phrases as the recording unit. Categories were generated inductively but to be mutually exclusive. This procedure was also completed by an independent coder not involved in the research. Interater reliability was calculated using Cohen’s Kappa (K), with values of 0.88 and 0.82 for student and parent data respectively. Any minor anomalies were addressed, resulting in an agreed final analysis.

*Group Activity.*  Analysis of group activity data followed a similar procedure to that used with the pre-transfer transition questionnaire. Another independent coder was used, not involved in the research. Inter-rater reliability for the two questions was calculated using Cohen’s Kappa (K). Values of 0.95 and 0.75 were obtained for the student data; 0.91 and 0.73 for the parent data. Any minor anomalies were addressed, resulting in an agreed final analysis.

*Follow-up Interviews: post-transfer.* Analysis of interview responses, with student data and parent data considered separately, followed a similar procedure to that used with the pre-transfer transition questionnaire. With regard to students’ and parents’ views of the move from primary to secondary school (three questions) and the utility of the transition programme (one question), two sets of interview data were randomly selected and subject to content analysis by an independent coder (as for the pre-transfer questionnaire). Inter-rater reliability for the four questions was calculated using Cohen’s Kappa with values of 1.0 for student and parent data. Following agreed revision of the categories, the first author conducted a content analysis of the entire interview data set.

**Results and Discussion**

*Feelings experienced by students during the transition to secondary school*

In retrospective interview accounts, the majority of students (5/8) and parents (7/8) made reference to feeling *nervous/ frightened* about the move to secondary school (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Feelings Associated with the Transition from Primary to Secondary School**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Students** | **Parents** |
| Nervous/frightened  | 5 | 7 |
| Not seeing peers/friends from primary school  | 2 | 1 |
| Not knowing where to go in new school  | 2 | 0 |
| Missing primary school  | 1 | 0 |
| Wider range of activities  | 1 | 0 |
| Interested in activities in secondary school | 0 | 2 |
| Fun  | 1 | 0 |
| Excited  | 1 | 0 |
| Feeling welcomed  | 1 | 0 |
| Support of the unit  | 1 | 0 |
| Not mentally stimulating  | 1 | 0 |
| Looking forward to new school | 0 | 4 |

Two students and one parent commented on not seeing peers from primary school, and on friends going to a different school (child-peer microsystem). These negative feelings were balanced with positive feelings about the move, such as feelings of excitement and enjoyment of the new experience. Half of the parents noted that their children looked forward to the new school and were interested in the activities. Students used phrases such as *fun*, *excited*, *feeling welcomed* and a *wider range of activities*. A student who attended a specialist unit made reference to positive feelings about the support provided (child-school microsystem).

This combination of feelings of anxiety and fear mixed with those of excitement has been reported in research with the general student population. Lucey and Reay (2000) use the term ‘fearful excitement’ to describe this mix of emotions. There does not appear to be equivalent literature pertaining to students with ASD making the transition to secondary so these findings provide original insights. Theoretically, Lucey and Reay (2000) view the function of anxiety in a positive light seeing it as being necessary to the growth and development of the ‘self’ through helping the individual adapt to difficult circumstances and new experiences. Whether anxiety serves a similar function for students with ASD is not known and would be worthy of further research, perhaps employing similar qualitative methodology to that used by Lucey and Reay (2000).

*Expectations and experiences of secondary school*

Follow-up individual interviews in the Spring Term of first year of secondary school investigated students’ and parents’ views on students’ prior conceptions of secondary school and their evaluations of secondary school experience in relation to these expectations.

Perceptions prior to the move were negative in tenor. Students expressed concerns about physical and organizational aspects of secondary school (getting lost), academic and curricular aspects (getting harder work, having stricter teachers), and social aspects (being teased). Parents’ comments encapsulated similar concerns. These findings mirror those identified in other studies involving students with ASD (Johnstone & Patrone, 2003; Jindal-Snape et al., 2006).

Experience of secondary school (child-school microsystem) contrasted with expectations. Only one student said it was worse than expected whereas four said it was better than expected. Describing specific aspects of secondary school life, two of the students said it was easy to get around; and there were mixed comments about the nature of the work and the teachers. The majority of parents’ comments were positive e.g. likes variety, talks about what he enjoys in subjects, primary school is static in comparison.

*Support during the transition to secondary school*

Pre-transfer, students and parents were asked to comment on the three things which would most help with the move to secondary school. The findings are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Responses to Three Things Question**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Students** | **Parents** |
| Preparation of students  | 7 | 11 |
| Transition group  | 2 | 1 |
| Information | 2 | 3 |
| Friends  | 2 | 0 |
| Support  | 1 | 8 |
| Social cognition | 0 | 3 |
| Behaviour | 0 | 2 |
| Other  | 2 | 3 |

The category *Preparation of the students* had the highest frequency for both groups. Student comments included: *Learning about the school; Getting to know new teachers*; and *Go for a visit*. Parent statements included *visits to school prior to starting*, *meeting teachers for his year*; and *to have an in-depth understanding of different teachers/classes and subject system*.The value placed by ASD students on preparatory activities was found in a previous study (Jindal-Snape et al..(2006). Preparation for significant, potentially challenging, events such as moving school is seen as fulfilling a protective function through developing an individual’s self-efficacy (Gilligan, 2000).

The category *Support*, focusing on desired provision in the secondary school (child-school microsystem), was prominent in the parents’ responses, but less so in those of students. Typical parent wishes were *a safe area to go to in secondary school* and *someone he can go to if he has any problems* One possible reason for the absence of the *support* category in students’ responses could be their limited knowledge and awareness of the secondary school environment, possible support arrangements, and difficulty imagining their needs in that context.

Following transfer, the group activity and interviews provided retrospective accounts of transition support. In the group activity, responses to the question *What has helped you/your son in the transition from primary to secondary school?* are presented in Table 4.

Students focused on the support offered prior to the move. They valued the support offered by the enhanced transition programme (child-school microsystem), which both complemented and supplemented typical transition support arrangements. The most helpful factor programme activities, comprised specific components of the programme, and the second highest ranked category of personal benefits illuminated the perceived benefits of the activities, such as made transition easier, killed bad habits and more help with dealing with bullies. Parents placed most emphasis on transition information (35) e.g. knowing where he was going to school (home –school mesosystem) followed by transition group support (30) e.g. meeting with other kids/parents in same situation through transition group (child-peer microsystem, and parent-parent exosystem) then by general school support (18) e.g. Additional help for those subjects child has problems with (child-school microsystem).

**Table 4: What has Helped in the Transition from Primary to Secondary School**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Students** | **Parents** |
| Programme activities  | 36 | 0 |
| Personal benefits  | 15 | 0 |
| Meeting other people with ASD | 9 | 1 |
| Meeting people in general  | 8 | 0 |
| Support from external professionals  | 7 | 0 |
| Transition information  | 6 | 35 |
| Transition group support | 0 | 30 |
| General school support | 0 | 18 |
| Miscellaneous | 0 | 3 |

An interesting finding was the perceived benefit of being with other children with Asperger Syndrome going through a similar experience (child-peer microsystem). In the student group activity, meeting other people with ASD, was the third highest category. This was noted in the comments of one of the three pairings introduced others with ASD and discussing AS with people with AS. In the post-transfer interviews, this feature was commented upon by the majority (6/8) of parents. For example, one parent commented meeting with other boys who were similar used to come back and talk about it. The protective role of positive peer relationships has been highlighted in the resilience literature (e.g. Luthar, 2006; Newman & Blacburn, 2002; Waller, 2001). However, it is acknowledged that the nature and function of peer support for students with ASD during transition requires further research.

Identifying areas for improvement as part of the group activity, the majority of students’ comments (13) were grouped under the category *programme activities*, reflecting a desire for more activities, and validating the value placed on these activities (child-school microsystem). Some parents and students would have liked more information and opportunities to visit the new school (child-school microsystem and home-school mesosystem). Delays in the decision making process in the authority appear to be a contributory factor. Identification of the secondary was a category in the parents’ responses e.g. *knowing which school the child was going to sooner***.** These findings resonate with those of Jindal-Snape et al. ,(2006), which drew on the views of parents and professionals. The present study suggests that students are sensitive to the impact of authority practices.

**Conclusions**

This study provides original insights into the primary to secondary school transition experiences of students with ASD utilising students’ and parents’ perspectives. The employment of a longitudinal perspective is a perceived strength, as it enabled comparison between expectations and experiences. The potential utility of employing an ecosystemic perspective and resilience theory to aid understanding of transition and to inform educational policy and practice is assessed.

Expectations of the move to secondary school were generally negative, mirroring findings from previous studies involving students with ASD (Johnstone & Patrone, 2003; Jindal-Snape et al., 2006) and with the general population (e.g. Chedzoy & Burden, 2005; Zeedyk et al., 2003). Experience of the move was better than expected. Students, based on parents’ and children’s accounts, experienced a combination of positive and negative feelings prior to the move, similar to that found in the general population (e.g. Pratt & George, 2005).

The importance of preparatory information, transition activities and support were highlighted by all participants, with parents placing more emphasis on wider support mechanisms. Some of the parents and students commented on delays in receiving information about the secondary school; associated with the decision making process about specialist placements in the host authority. These findings provide further evidence of the importance of careful transition planning and support for students and their parents.

The transition to secondary school for students with ASD is viewed as a potentially challenging event in these children’s developmental trajectory. Consideration of risk and protective factors across ecosystemic levels has proved valuable in this study in understanding the perspectives of the participating students and parents. It is argued that this conceptual approach has application to other contexts.The authors acknowledge a number of methodological limitations with this study. The small sample (students and parents) which was drawn from one (not representative) local authority limits the generalisability of the findings to other populations in Scotland. The use of content analysis as the preferred data analysis method leads to some loss of data richness. The group activity, whilst developed as a creative and innovative group interview method, was not piloted. The retrospective nature of some of the interview questions could have been hampered by the poor recall and difficulties with imagination associated with ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The participants were involved in a transition programme designed to enhance and complement existing arrangements and it is reasonable to ask to what extent their views were influenced by that experience.

Notwithstanding these methodological limitations, it is anticipated that the findings and the conclusions will be of interest to an international audience of policy makers, practitioners and researchers given the interest in educational transitions for students with disabilities, including ASD. The utilisation of resilience theory and an ecosystemic perspective to interpret the perspectives of students with ASD and their parents is innovative and offers potential for future research in educational transitions. Insights into protective factors and processes which will assist these students will be beneficial to professionals working in education in different contexts. It is recommended that future research should build on the insights offered by this study through the utilisation of larger samples; longitudinal research designs; incorporating the views of other professionals; and undertaken in different educational contexts.

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**Appendix A**

**Transition Questionnaire:**

**Student Information about Secondary School**

1. Have you been told anything about the secondary school you will attend in August?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Don’t know \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If Yes, what information have you been given? *(Please tick all that apply)*

Name of school \_\_\_\_

Address of school \_\_\_\_

How I will get to school \_\_\_\_

Layout or map of the school \_\_\_\_

Name of the head teacher \_\_\_\_

Name of my pastoral care teacher \_\_\_\_

Start/finish times \_\_\_\_

Clubs/activities \_\_\_\_

What to wear \_\_\_\_

Other *(please comment)* \_\_\_\_

**Personal Passports**

1. Do you have a personal passport? (a booklet or leaflet which has information about you which is shared with your parent(s), teacher(s) and classroom assistants)

Yes \_\_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Don’t know \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If Yes, are there plans to change the personal passport before you go to secondary school?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Don’t know \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. If you answered Yes to Q2, who has seen your personal passport? *(please tick all that apply)*

Head teacher \_\_\_\_\_\_

Class teacher)s) \_\_\_\_\_\_

Classroom assistant(s) \_\_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_\_

**Understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder**

1. Do you have a diagnosis?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_\_ Don’t know \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If Yes, please rate the following statements.

I have a good understanding of my diagnosis.

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly disagree

I have a good understanding of how it affects me.

Strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly disagree

**Understanding of Expected Behaviour in Secondary School**

1. How good is your understanding of how people behave in secondary school?

Very good 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very poor

**Social Skills**

1. How would you rate your ability in these social skills?

Please complete the table below *(please tick one box for each skill)*

Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very good

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Skill | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| Understand facial expression, gesture, and body posture  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Use facial expression, gesture, and body posture  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Understand personal space |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Respond to criticism |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Share an activity with other children |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Share an activity with an adult |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Share in others’ enjoyment/pleasure |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Respond to praise |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Choose a partner or a group to work with |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mix with other children in a group |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Make friends  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Follow instructions given by adult when on my own  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Follow instructions given by adult when one of a group |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Start a conversation |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Finish a conversation |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Keep a conversation going |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| In a conversation, show awareness of listener’s interests  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| In a conversation, show interest in listener’s interests |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Turn-taking |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Avoid making inappropriate statements about people |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Have a range of interests/hobbies |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Share my interests/hobbies with others |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Change my behaviour according to the situation |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Accept changes in rules, routines or procedures |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Accept others’ points of view |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Plan an event or a task |  |  |  |  |  |  |

1. What three things would most help you with the move from primary to secondary school? *(please write these below)*
2. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Do you want to add anything else?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for completing this questionnaire

**Appendix B**

**Extract from follow-up interview schedule: student**

**Section 2: The move from primary to secondary school**

In this section, I want to find out what you think about the move from primary to secondary school.

**Question 9: When you were at primary school, what did you imagine secondary school would be like?**

*Pr*ompts

Repeat question/rephrase

Anything else?

*Probes*

Who did you talk to?

What did they tell you?

Did you get a chance to visit your school?

How did that help you?

What other information did he get?

**Question 10: How does secondary school compare to your expectations of it?**

*Prompts*

Repeat question/rephrase

Anything else?

*Probes*

Is it different to what you expected?

In what ways is it different?

**Question 11: What feelings do you associate with the transition from primary to secondary school?**

*Prompts*

Repeat question/rephrase

Anything else?

*Probes*

Were these helpful feelings?

**Section 3: The transition programme**

In this section, I want to find out what you think about the transition programme. In particular, I am interested in whether you think the transition programme helped you in the move from primary to secondary school

**Question 12**

**In what ways (if any) did the transition programme help you in the transition from primary to secondary school?**

*Prompts*

Repeat question/rephrase

Anything else?

Particular topics?

Particular activities?

*Probes*

Were there aspects that you found helpful?

In what ways were they helpful?

What makes you think that?