

**An examination of the transition from primary to secondary school for
children with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in one local
authority.**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Institute of Education,
University of London, for the Doctorate in Professional Educational Child &
Adolescent Psychology

Abstract

Many children can find it difficult to adjust to the social and curriculum differences they encounter when they begin secondary school. For some children – particularly children with a special educational need (SEN) – a difficult transition from primary to secondary school undermines educational, social and emotional outcomes. Children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are known to be especially vulnerable at the time of secondary transition. It is well recognised amongst practitioners that these children have a profile of needs, including difficulties in social communication, problems coping with the sensory environment, and anxiety difficulties, which can potentially make changing schools particularly difficult. Despite this knowledge, there is a paucity of academic research that has focused specifically on this group of children at the time of secondary transition.

This study aimed, for the first time, to examine the factors that both support and hinder a successful transition from primary to secondary school for children with an ASD in one local authority. Adopting an eco-systemic perspective and utilising a mixed methodology, this study investigated which potential intrinsic characteristics of the child and wider systemic factors influenced the secondary transition process for 15 children with an ASD. Children were seen twice in the space of 3 months – once before the process of changing school and once the move to secondary school was made. This longitudinal design enabled the examination of any possible changes in the views and perspectives of children, parents, and teachers during the transition process, in addition to the impact of systemic factors on the process. It also allowed for investigation of the possible pre-transition predictors – the intrinsic needs of the child with ASD – of a successful transition. Specifically, it was expected that children with better verbal ability, fewer autistic symptoms, fewer sensory issues, and reduced anxiety levels would experience a smoother transition. Unexpectedly, this study found no significant associations between pre-transition intrinsic ASD child characteristics and overall transition success. Nevertheless, it identified several systemic factors, including the child's identity, tensions over school choice, delay in placement decisions, lack of primary preparation and in-reach, which were found to have a strong influence on the process of secondary transition for the children and their families. Intriguingly, the children who transitioned from mainstream to specialist provisions were identified as experiencing particular difficulties coping with their new secondary school. These

findings have important implications for the role of educational psychologists in the transition process.

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Word count (exclusive of appendices, list of reference and bibliography):
37, 968 words

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people, without whom this study would not have been possible.

First, I would like to thank my wonderful family, particularly my husband James, for all your encouragement, support and patience. To all my friends who have supported me through the doctoral programme, thank you for helping me through the highs and the lows.

Second, I would like to thank all the children, parents and teachers that participated in this study, for their willingness to take part.

Finally, a huge thank you to my tutors, Dr Liz Pellicano and Vivian Hill, your time and unwavering support throughout the duration of this research has been greatly appreciated.

List of Contents

Contents	Page
Abstract	2
Chapter 1: Introduction	14
1.1 Rationale	14
Chapter 2: Literature Review	16
2.1 Secondary Transition	16
2.1.1 The wider transition literature	16
2.1.2 An eco-systemic perspective on secondary transition	19
2.2 Factors impacting on secondary transition success	20
2.3 Children with autism spectrum disorder	21
2.4 Transition guidance and policy for ASD students	24
2.5 ASD and Secondary School Inclusion	25
2.5.1 ASD students' experiences in mainstream secondary schools	25
2.5.2 The importance of a good transition	29
2.6 Parental Views on Educational Provision for their Child with ASD	29
2.7 ASD and Transition	34
2.7.1 Transition for Children with ASD: Views of Key Stakeholders	34
2.7.2 Multiple perspectives on primary to secondary transition for children with ASD	37
2.8 The current study	39

Chapter 3: Method	42
3.2 Participants	42
3.2.1 Identification of potential participants.	42
3.2.2 Recruitment	42
3.2.3 Final sample	43
3.2.4 Children	43
3.2.5 Parents	43
3.2.6 Teachers	44
3.3 Ethical Considerations	46
3.4. Pre-transition measures	46
3.4.1 Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence	46
3.4.2 The Social Responsiveness Scale	47
3.4.3 The Sensory Profile	47
3.4.4 The Spence Child Anxiety Scale for Parents	48
3.5 Post-transition measure	48
3.6 Interview measures	49
3.7 Piloting	50
3.8 Procedure	51
3.8.1 Pre-transition phase	51
3.8.2 Post-transition phase	52
3.9 Data Analysis	53
3.9.1 Analysis of quantitative data	53
3.9.2 Analysis of qualitative data	53
Chapter 4: Results	56

4.1. Quantitative results	56
4.1.1 Descriptive statistics: pre-transition phase	56
4.1.1.1 Cognitive Ability: WASI	57
4.1.1.2 Autistic behaviours: SRS	57
4.1.1.3 Sensory features: SP	57
4.1.1.4 Trait anxiety: SCAS-P	57
4.1.2 Relationship between behavioural measures	60
4.1.3 Successful transition: post-transition phase	60
4.1.3.1 Pre-transition predictors of successful transition	62
4.1.3.2 Within-group differences	63
4.2 Qualitative results	65
4.2.1 Children’s themes: pre-transition phase	65
4.2.1.1 Theme 1: Already Finding School Challenging	65
4.2.1.2 Theme 2: Anxious Anticipation / Change and Coping	68
4.2.2 Children’s themes: post-transition phase	70
4.2.2.1 Theme 1: Loss of Familiar Relationships, Routines and Systems	70
4.2.2.2 Theme 2: Adjusting to a New Organisation	73
4.2.3 Parents themes: pre-transition and post-transition phases combined	74
4.2.3.1 Theme 1: Impact of Late Decision	74
4.2.3.2 Theme 2: Lack of Provision for ASD Needs	76
4.2.3.3 Theme 3: Tensions with LA	78
4.2.3.4 Theme 4: Pressure on Parents	80
4.2.3.5 Theme 5: Holistic Education	83
4.2.3.6 Theme 6: Getting the Placement Right	84
4.2.4 Primary teacher’s themes: pre-transition phase	88

4.2.4.1 Theme 1: Child's Identity	88
4.2.4.2 Theme 2: Secondary is a very different context	89
4.2.4.3 Theme 3: Anxiety and Stress	91
4.2.4.4 Theme 4: Delay affects transition support	93
4.2.4.5 Theme 5: Importance of Relationships	94
4.2.4.6 Theme 6: Resistance to Change	95
4.2.5 Secondary teacher's themes: post-transition phase	97
4.2.5.1 Theme 1: In-reach and outreach to plan for transition	97
4.2.5.2 Theme 2: Importance of child participation in transition decisions	99
4.2.5.3 Theme 3: Understanding the needs of the child in a new context	100
Chapter 5: Discussion	103
5.1 Which individual characteristics predict a more successful transition to secondary school in children with ASD?	103
5.2 What are the systemic factors that can either support or hinder a successful transition to secondary school for students with an ASD, from the perspective of the child, parent and teacher?	109
5.2.1 Individual level: the child's identity	110
5.2.2 Family level: tensions over school choice	112
5.2.3 Local Authority level: delay in placement decisions	113
5.2.4. School level: lack of primary preparation and in-reach	115
5.3 Implications for professional practice	117
5.4 Strengths and shortcomings of this research study	120

5.5 Conclusions	121
References	123
Appendices	133

List of Tables

Tables	Page
Table 1 Participant details	45
Table 2 Mean performance for all child participants on measures of IQ, autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety	56
Table 3 Scores for all child participants on measures of IQ, autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety	59
Table 4 Pearson correlation coefficients between measures of verbal cognitive ability, autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety	60
Table 5 Post transition questionnaire items used to derive factor scores to define successful transition	61
Table 6 Descriptive statistics for each of the 5 factors of a successful transition	61
Table 7 Pearson correlation coefficients between all five z score factor scores (five dimensions underlying a successful transition)	62
Table 8 Pearson correlation coefficients between verbal raw scores, autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms trait anxiety and transition z scores	63
Table 9 Final secondary school placements for child participants following transition from primary school	64

List of Figures

Figures	Page
Figure 1 Children's pre-transition theme 1	66
Figure 2 Children's pre-transition theme 2	68
Figure 3 Children's post-transition theme 1	70
Figure 4 Children's post-transition theme 2	73
Figure 5 Parent theme 1	75
Figure 6 Parent theme 2	77
Figure 7 Parent theme 3	79
Figure 8 Parent theme 4	81
Figure 9 Parent theme 5	83
Figure 10 Parent theme 6	85
Figure 11 Primary teacher theme 1	88
Figure 12 Primary teacher theme 2	90
Figure 13 Primary teacher theme 3	92
Figure 14 Primary teacher theme 4	93
Figure 15 Primary teacher theme 5	94
Figure 16 Primary teacher theme 6	96
Figure 17 Secondary teacher theme 1	97
Figure 18 Secondary teacher theme 2	99
Figure 19 Secondary teacher theme 3	101
Figure 20 Summary of implications for EPs	117

List of Appendices

Appendices	Page
Appendix A Letter to families	133
Appendix B Information sheet	134
Appendix C Consent form	135
Appendix D Child letter	136
Appendix E Child and parent post-transition questionnaires	138
Appendix F Interview schedules	155
Appendix G Task schedule	161
Appendix H Example mind map	162
Appendix I Example coded transcript	163

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Rationale

Secondary transition is a well established time of worry for all children (Ashton, 2008). This systemic change has been the focus of much research with the findings suggesting that many children experience problems adjusting to the social and curriculum discontinuities between the primary and secondary school phases (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). Furthermore, the structures and factors associated with wider systems are also known to exert considerable influence on the transition process (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). Research has also indicated how the existence of a special education need can create further difficulties for a child to adjust to secondary school life, and thus experience a successful transition (Evangelou et al., 2008).

Children within the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) population have a profile of needs that makes them particularly vulnerable during this process, linked to the core features of the condition (DSM-IV-TR, American Psychiatric Association, 2000) as well as the likelihood of co-morbid psychiatric presentations (Simonoff et al., 2008). However, there has disappointingly been little research that has focused specifically on the secondary transition process for this group.

Nationally, there is a lack of specialist secondary provision to meet the unique needs of children with an ASD (Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers & Yuille, 2006), and so the majority of them begin their secondary career within mainstream schools (Batten, 2005). Many parents desire more specialist support and teaching for their child as they reach secondary school age (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000), and they increasingly challenge local authorities around access to specialist provision (SENDIST, 2010; Tissot, 2011). It is clear that many children with ASD and their parents experience stress and anxiety in managing the process of secondary transition, yet research studies which have directly elicited their views and experience at this time are lacking. In very recent times, the government has highlighted the necessity and desire to raise parental confidence and involvement in the SEN system (Lamb, 2009; SEN Green Paper, 2011). To achieve these legislative aims, there is an urgent need for more rigorous academic research which directly considers the views of children and their families at key transition points.

The current research adopted an ecosystemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and using a mixed methodology and longitudinal design, considered both the intrinsic child characteristics and wider systemic factors influencing the secondary transition process for children with an ASD. The study took into account the broader ASD profile, including not only cognitive ability and severity of autism, but also sensory symptoms and anxiety. The proposed DSM-5 criteria (APA, 2010) make explicit reference to the sensory difficulties which are so often experienced by individuals with a diagnosis of ASD (Williams, 1996). Furthermore, a recent epidemiological study indicates that the co-morbidity of psychiatric conditions with ASD is frequent and multiple across the population, with social anxiety being the most commonly experienced difficulty (Simonoff et al., 2008).

The ASD population is diverse and heterogeneous. Key researchers in the field of autism stress how in designing any interventions which can effectively meet the different, individualised needs of children, there is first the necessity to understand the profile of needs of any ASD sample being researched. Without this information, policy and practice cannot be fully informed (Howlin, 1998; 2006). Therefore, in this study, data were collected to understand the intrinsic characteristics of a sample of ASD children transitioning to secondary education in one Local Authority (LA). In order to gain an understanding of child attributes, but also wider systemic views and influences on transition, the study included interviews with children, parents and teachers both before and after the move to secondary school. The aim of the study was to provide the LA with insight into the experience from the perspective of the children, their parents and teachers, and to consider both intrinsic and systemic factors that can support and hinder a successful transition to secondary school for children with an ASD.

This research was commissioned by an LA due to the known difficulties in managing the secondary transition process for children with an ASD. In recent years, the LA has become increasingly aware that many parents feel that transfer to secondary presents considerable challenges for their ASD children. These are often children who may have coped in a mainstream primary school, but faced with a transition to a large mainstream secondary school, their parents believe their child's needs may not be met. Therefore, many families are increasingly seeking out specialist provision. The LA was keen to understand the concerns and wishes of these families to review future policy and provision (B. Clarke, Personal Communication, September 2009).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the existing literature that is related to secondary transition and children with ASD. Exploration of the current literature highlights a lack of research specifically examining the transition of children with an ASD into secondary schools, and the views of key stakeholders regarding this process. This lack of research stresses the relevance of the current study. Due to the limited transition literature available a wider literature base is examined.

First, the wider literature regarding primary to secondary transition for all students and then research that has examined different factors which can impact on secondary transition success is reviewed. This is followed by an introduction to the intrinsic difficulties associated with an autistic spectrum disorder and then a review of the existing research which has considered implications of these difficulties in mainstream secondary schools from the perspective of students themselves. Next, research which has elicited parental views on educational provision for their child with an ASD is presented to outline the issues families can encounter at transition times. After this, research studies which have considered transitions for children with ASD are critically reviewed. Finally, the current study is introduced and an outline of the ways in which it sought to overcome the methodological limitations of previous research is given.

2.1 Secondary Transition

2.1.1 The wider transition literature

In the UK education system at around age 11, children leave primary school to begin secondary school. Research has consistently indicated a hiatus in academic progress for a large percentage of students when they make this move, as well as disaffection in relation to the new school context for a significant minority (Galton & Willcocks, 1983; Hargreaves & Galton, 2002). For these reasons, unsurprisingly, this particular systemic transition has come under close scrutiny by researchers. The growing body of literature looking at the secondary transition process for all students raises some interesting discussion around why this change can prove to be so difficult.

It is recognised that the move from primary to secondary school is problematic for many students to negotiate due to the discontinuities in both the curriculum as well as the context between the two school phases (Anderson et al., 2000). In relation to the curriculum, Galton (2000) outlines how the main function of the primary school stage is

to impart basic skills in literacy and numeracy. This focus is in contrast to secondary school, which emphasises the acquisition of knowledge and conceptual understanding across a range of subjects. This inevitably raises both curriculum and pedagogical discontinuities on transition to the next school. Furthermore, it is also acknowledged that changes in the school context when children begin secondary school can present discontinuities in comparison to primary school. At an organisational level, the transition to secondary school will usually involve a student being able to cope with a larger school size, departmentalised teaching, higher teacher expectations, as well as an increased necessity for student autonomy. At a social level, changes in the diversity of the population and more complex relationships with teachers and peers are presented at secondary level (Tobell, 2003). As Shaw (1995) outlines, the primary school context can often “typify” a family, whereas the secondary school context presents itself as a much larger, more complex organisation. Therefore, a student is required to adjust to a change in ethos as teaching inevitably becomes less child-centred and more subject-centred. To complicate matters, this particular systemic transition is closely related in time with the onset of puberty and a surge in brain development (Nelson et al., 2005), as well as academic pressures, such as the year 6 standardised assessment tasks (SATs). Therefore, developmental stressors may well interact with organisational factors to produce anxiety and possible disruption to the educational and personal careers of a significant number of students (Anderson et al., 2000).

In relation to these known curriculum and contextual discontinuities which children are faced with at secondary transition, some research has sought directly to elicit children’s views at the time they are contemplating changing schools. Ashton (2008) gained the views of 1,673 children in their last term primary school and found they had many concerns regarding their new school. These worries were largely related to friendships, bullying, getting lost, teachers and growing up. In fact, the author highlighted how children were predominantly more concerned with the social and environmental aspects of moving schools, rather than the differences in curriculum and work that they would encounter. A further key theme discussed by Ashton (2008) was the mixed feelings which the children expressed towards their transition. Lucey and Reay (2000) referred to feelings of anxious-anticipation, where fears towards transition are tinged with excitement for what lies ahead. Lucey and Reay (2000) suggested that these feelings are a natural and inevitable consequence for any individual facing such a transition. Furthermore, they suggested that a certain level of anxiety is central to the development

of effective coping strategies, as part of the continuum of life and learning. Finally, the children surveyed by Ashton (2008) referred to their desire to be provided with as much experience of their secondary school before they began year 7. The author highlights the benefit of appropriate induction opportunities to allow the management of realistic expectations for students and to allay their fears. For many children, however, their worries about secondary school are short lived and they quickly settle into their new environment. It is the small but significant percentage of children who do not appear to adjust so well who are of concern (Chedzoy & Burden, 2006).

In a review of the findings of early studies investigating the dip in academic progress for many students on transition to secondary school, Galton, Morrison and Pell (2000) established that this could largely be explained by poor curriculum continuity across the primary and secondary phases. One section of the Cambridge Primary Review considered the difficulties that may be associated with primary to secondary transition as part of a wider study on transitions through education (Blatchford, Hallam, Ireson, Kutnick & Creech, 2008). The review focused on the learning tasks in schools, in reference to the consistent and alarming finding that 40% of students transferring to secondary school stop making progress academically. A number of issues were highlighted in this study including, an increase in the challenge of the work set for students, students' difficulties in adjusting to the learning and social environment, secondary teachers not fully utilising the information passed on by primary schools, and distrust over the assessments made by primary teachers. Galton, Gray and Rudduck (1999) discussed the subsequent "start from scratch" approach within secondary schools and repetition of work completed in primary school to be a key issue that may explain why some students, whilst doing well academically, were being "turned off" learning and school.

Other researchers have criticised the exclusive focus on school-inherent structural limitations on student's transition difficulties. Instead, they widen the discussion to look at the influence of broader social structures to account for the problems in the learning trajectories of pupils moving to secondary school. Noyes (2006) highlights the importance of the peer group, the social structures and the systems within school, but also the family background on a student's transition success. Exploring issues through the case studies of two young people, the author suggests how if conflicts exist between the values and priorities of a school system and a family system, this can create challenges for smooth transition and adjustment to the social and curriculum demands

of the secondary context. Overall, Noyes suggests that any difficulties an individual child possesses can be further intensified within the larger, more complex secondary school system.

Jindal-Snape and Foggie (2008) also took a more holistic approach to examine the process of secondary transition through a longitudinal study they conducted with 9 children in years 6, 7 and 8 in Scottish schools. They purposively sampled children who were identified as being 'vulnerable' during the transition process, although the authors did not define how these children were vulnerable and therefore potentially disadvantaged. They conducted interviews with the children as well as their parents and professionals. In light of the sampling they took it is perhaps unsurprising that 3 of the children continued to find it difficult to cope with transition at their follow-up interviews. The study found that these children experienced difficulties coping in their school for a number of reasons, including, bullying, the larger size of secondary school, forming attachments with new teachers, coping with higher expectations and the need for greater student independence at secondary school, and leaving old friends and making new friends. Some researchers, like Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008), emphasise the psychosocial processes involved in transition and the impact of the individual resilience and self-esteem of a child on their transition success and their level of anxiety at this time. However, Jindal-Snape and Foggie (2008) asserted that the issue of transition was much more complex than this and went beyond the individual child. Alongside child attributes, they found there was a number of factors at the systemic level, including the family, peers, school systems, professionals and the community, which had a considerable impact on the success of children's primary-secondary transition.

2.1.2 An eco-systemic perspective on secondary transition

These broader systemic perspectives on the secondary transition process are consistent with the ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). From this viewpoint, secondary transition is seen as an ecological concept comprising a series of nested structures of home and school (microsystems), linked together in a network of family, teachers, peers, curriculum and pedagogy which are around the individual child (the mesosystem) and influenced by the wider society (the macrosystem). This interlocking set of systems made up of home, primary school and secondary school are those which the child travels through upon their transition. In this ecological model put

forward by Bronfenbrenner (1979), a child's development is viewed as being influenced by their direct and indirect experiences of particular contexts within a broader socio-cultural setting. Thus, children's transition to secondary school and their ability to continue learning is influenced by a variety of personal and family characteristics, societal and family trends and contextual and life experiences. Therefore, within this theoretical account, any examination of a child's secondary transition success would need to consider the influence of a number of multi-level systems on this process of change.

2.2 Factors impacting on secondary transition success

A large national study conducted in the UK considered the secondary transition process for young people at the level of the individual child, family, school and local authority. The Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education 3-14 project, is an on-going longitudinal study investigating the influence of pre-school, primary and secondary school on children's cognitive, social and behavioural development. As part of this larger study, Evangelou et al. (2008) carried out a sub-study focused on the transition from primary to secondary school. They examined transition practices with the aim of highlighting what both helped and hindered children's transition success. Questionnaires were completed by 550 children and their parents in their first term of secondary school to give their views and experiences, and teachers and local authority officials also participated in interviews. The authors treated "successful transition" as a composite measure of 5 key dimensions, which they derived from a factor analysis on children's and parents' questionnaire responses. These 5 dimensions were used to define a successful transition and included: 1) expanding friendships and boosting self esteem and confidence; 2) settling very well into school life; 3) showing a growing interest in school and work; 4) getting used to new routines and organisation of secondary school; and 5) experiencing curriculum continuity.

The authors carried out 12 case studies of those children who reported experiencing a good transition, allowing them to highlight supportive and inhibiting factors, and thus implications for transition practices. Those children who felt supported by their schools were more likely to settle in successfully, and those children who experienced greater curriculum continuity were those whose secondary school had helped to support them through the transition process. For many children, making new friends and maintaining existing relationships with their peers was one of the most important factors of a

successful transition, and having a sibling or friend in their secondary school significantly helped children's transition. Low levels of bullying and an ability to adjust to different teachers were both factors found to be significantly and directly linked with a successful transition.

Evangelou et al.'s (2008) sample also included a significant number (20% of sample; n=110) of children who had been identified as having a special educational need (SEN). These children's parents were more worried about their children having to adjust to having different teachers. Despite these parental concerns, the authors found that children with an SEN did not actually experience a less successful transition compared to children without an SEN. Nevertheless, children with a SEN were more likely to be bullied, and bullying was found to be a key limiting factor to a successful transition. Children who had been victims of bullying were more likely to belong to the group of children who did not find it easy to get used to the routines of their new school. Finally, the study also found that those children living in low socio-economic status households had less positive transitions than other children.

The broad sampling of participants drawn from families, schools and local authorities, as well as the mixed methodology employed, is a key strength of this study, which allowed the authors to examine a wide range of factors that both hinder and support secondary transition. They were further able to provide a deeper insight into those children who were vulnerable through the transition process, as well as suggest the key supportive factors that appeared to have an influence on transition success.

2.3 Children with autism spectrum disorder

Within the group of children identified on the SEN Code of Practice (2001) as having additional educational needs, there falls the growing number of those who are being identified as living with the developmental and learning difficulties associated with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASD is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. As defined in the DSM-IV (APA, 2000), individuals with autistic disorder present with difficulties in social interaction, impairments in communication and they manifest restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) – the so-called 'triad of impairments' (Wing & Gould, 1979; Wing, 1996). There is much variation in the degree to which different people experience difficulties across the broad areas of social interaction, social

communication and flexibility in thinking and behaviour. Researchers and clinicians capture this variability in autistic symptoms, as well as in language ability and general cognitive ability (IQ) by referring to the 'autistic spectrum' (Wing, 1996). A diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder includes those individuals with Asperger syndrome.

More recently, the proposed revisions to the diagnostic criteria in the forthcoming DSM-5 moves from three broad areas of difficulties to two, including: 1) persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts; and 2) restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. The proposed DSM-5 also explicitly acknowledges the pervasiveness of individuals' so-called "sensory symptoms", including hyper-or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment, which will be included under the "restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviour" domain (APA, 2010).

These revisions to the diagnostic criteria reflect the increasing recognition of the significant impact these symptoms have on the everyday lives of people with autism. In a book describing her recollections of school, a woman diagnosed with autism in adulthood writes:

"My ideal educational environment would be one where the room had very little echo or reflective light...where the educators wore the same clothes all the time so they became visually similar and able to be relied upon...where the educator's volume was soft, so that you had to choose to tune in rather than being bombarded...intonation and tone of voice would remain the same so that auditorily they were perceived as consistently being the same person...it would be an environment that took account of being mono and sensory hypersensitivity and information overload and didn't assume that the educator's perceptual, sensory, cognitive, emotional or social reality was the only one." (Williams, 1996, p.284)

A teenage boy diagnosed with Asperger syndrome makes reference to similar frustrations in relation to his sensory difficulties:

"The only thing I cannot stand is the echoing in swimming baths or big empty halls. There is another thing that I find really annoying and that is the fact that exams are taken in big halls. I can hear everyone turning their pages on their exam sheets and this drives me crazy." (Jackson, 2002, p.74)

Alongside these soon-to-be defining characteristics of autism, it is also increasingly recognised that there is a high prevalence and co-morbidity of psychiatric disorders in individuals with autism. Using an epidemiological population derived sample of 112 children with ASD aged 10 to 14 years, Simonoff et al. (2008) investigated the presence of additional child psychiatric disorders through parental interviews using the Child and

Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment. They found that as many as 70% of participants met the DSM-IV diagnosis criteria for at least one co-morbid disorder and 41% for two or more. Social anxiety disorder was the most common co-morbid diagnosis found in 29.2% of the participants, followed by attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (28.2%) and oppositional defiant disorder (28.1%). Of those children who had attention deficit/hyperactivity, 84% received a second co-morbid diagnosis. Due to the sampling procedure employed, the rates of disorder reported by the authors are representative of the broader population of children with ASD. As a result, there now exists, strong evidence to indicate that additional psychiatric disorders are not only common, but also frequently multiple in children with ASD.

The core features of ASD – the difficulties in social reciprocity, verbal and nonverbal communication, extreme resistance to change, and sensory difficulties – in addition to the presence of possible co-morbid difficulties in anxiety provides good reason to suspect that children with this condition will be particularly vulnerable during the transition to secondary school. Indeed, this is especially the case when we consider that any difficulties an individual may have are only likely to be intensified by the larger, more complex system of secondary school (Noyes, 2006).

Recent research has indicated that the incidence of ASD in the primary school population has risen substantially over the last 20 years. Baird et al. (2006) screened individuals at risk for autism spectrum conditions, using the SEN register, and estimated prevalence to be 116 per 10,000 children aged 9-10 years old in the South Thames East region of the UK, or approximately 1% of the child population. In a subsequent study, Baron-Cohen et al. (2009) used different methods (based on counts from SEN registers) to estimate the prevalence of autism spectrum conditions in primary aged school children in Cambridgeshire, enabling them to also include previously undiagnosed cases. The results from this study were very similar to those from Baird et al.'s (2006) South East Thames region study (94 per 10,000). Baron-Cohen et al. (2009) asserted, however, that these estimates should be regarded as the minimum figure, highlighting how in reality there will be cases that remain undetected. Both studies show that, even amongst their most conservative estimates, ASD remains nearly 12 times higher than estimates made in the late 1970s (Rutter, 1978).

The reasons for this substantial increase remain unclear, although they are likely to be related to improved assessment and identification, broadening diagnostic criteria, and

even possibly increased incidence (Baird et al., 2006). Whatever the cause for the increase in prevalence, the greater number of children with ASD in the primary school population has far-reaching implications for educational resources and the types of provision within which these children are educated. Indeed, over 5 years ago, Batten (2005) outlined how only approximately 7500 specialist school places existed for the 90,000 children with ASD in the UK at that time. In light of more recent higher estimates of prevalence and the shortfall in specialist provision, alongside the drive for inclusion within government legislation (Removing Barriers to Achievement, DfES, 2004), mainstream education is likely to be the reality for most children with an ASD at the current time. Therefore, this has implications for parental preference and choice regarding educational provision at key transition periods.

2.4 Transition guidance and policy for ASD students

There are many references to the secondary transition of students with ASD within publications, the policy and guidance of local authorities, as well as materials provided by parent advocate organisations for autism. Most of these appear to make the assumption that ASD reflects a pathological difficulty and that students with ASD will, therefore, require a different approach to other students to support their move to secondary school.

The National Autistic Society (NAS) provide guidelines to raise the awareness of teachers towards the potential difficulties children with ASD may face in secondary school, such as a larger school, increased numbers of teachers, added responsibility, social problems and new and different routines and procedures. For example, they have published materials, such as 'Moving from Primary to Secondary School: Guidelines for Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders' (Thorpe, 2003), which detail different strategies to be considered in supporting ASD students with their transition. The Autism Education Trust (AET, 2011) also refer to how this major transition phase can be particularly difficult for individuals with ASD, and outline good practice guidance for improving the transition between primary and secondary school (Stobart, 2011). The AET have held conferences for education professionals and families dedicated to transitions, where seminars have focused on practical strategies for facilitating the move from primary to secondary school.

There are publications that have been written regarding ASD in secondary schools which highlight strategies for making good transitions from primary school (Plimley &

Bowen, 2006), and others which provide a guide and resources for schools and parents to support this move (Al-Ghani & Kenward, 2009). A local authority in the South East region of the UK produced a booklet in partnership with the National Autistic Society to outline practical strategies for achieving successful primary to secondary transition for students with ASDs (Ennis & Manns, 2004). This booklet communicates how planning and preparation for transition should begin in year 5 and continue into year 6. It then outlines key areas of difficulty for students when they arrive in year 7, related to broad areas which are entitled social, communication, organisation, sensory, bullying, behaviour and homework.

These publications and programmes all indicate that the transition to secondary school will be challenging for children with ASD. However, what is apparent is that very little reference is given to academic literature to support any of the suggestions made. Furthermore, they give no reference to the views and experiences of the children they discuss. In fact, there is very little rigorous academic literature which has directly focused on the perspective of these children and their parents at this key transition point, to enable a full understanding of what constitutes a good transition or supports or inhibit the process from their perspective.

2.5 ASD and Secondary School Inclusion

2.5.1 ASD students' experiences in mainstream secondary schools

Ensuring that children and young people's voices are heard was central to the previous government's agenda and work within 'Every Child Matters: Next Steps' (DfES, 2004). However, the views of students with an ASD have not been consistently sought, despite advocates for this group being very active within the political arena (e.g., the NAS). There currently exists a very small amount of academic research (3 studies) which has sought to elicit the views of young people with Asperger syndrome, looking at their experience and understanding of the physical and social context of daily school life (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Connor, 2000; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Although not directly examining the transition process, this body of work does provide some findings regarding these children's views in relation to mainstream secondary schools, and furthermore appears to offer some indication about the importance of a good transition.

A qualitative study carried out by Carrington and Graham (2001) used an in depth case study approach to elicit the views of two teenage boys with Asperger syndrome in

Australia in relation to school. Their mothers' perspectives were also gathered using semi-structured interviews. Three of the identified themes were drawn from the parental perspective. The mothers recognised how their children showed developmental differences as a result of their Asperger syndrome, specifically with respect to (1) the boys' interactions with their parents (2) interactions within play and (3) the need for the boys to have routines. The mothers also expressed their belief, that in the social context of school, the boys 'masked' their emotions and difficulties through various coping strategies and behaviours until they returned home. The boys' themselves spoke of the stress they experienced in social situations with peers at school and in relation to completing school work. Both boys and their mothers highlighted that the children's social and communication difficulties relating to understanding other people and interpreting social cues impacted on the formation and maintenance of friendships. They also emphasised the boys' restricted and obsessive interests, which one boy talked of affecting his ability to concentrate in school. Many of these themes reflect what is already known about ASD, but the 'masquerading' theme drawn from the mothers' interviews may provide a deeper understanding into the daily experiences of individuals with Asperger syndrome at school. As well as sample size, a potential limitation of this study is the lack of teacher perspective. In relation to the mothers' assertions that some autistic difficulties are hidden in the school context, it would have been useful to compare this with the view of professionals working in that context.

A study conducted by Humphrey and Lewis (2008), however, with a larger sample (n=20) pupils with Asperger syndrome in mainstream secondary schools, deduced similar themes. These authors collected data through semi-structured interviews and pupil diaries, providing a powerful insider account of the young people's experiences in school. One key finding that emerged was the pupils' constant negotiation of their differences in the context of school. The authors interpreted this finding to imply how many of the pupils felt forced to adapt in order to fit in, and as highlighted by Carrington and Graham (2001), they felt as if they were 'masquerading'. Humphrey and Lewis (2008) described other themes which serve to point out the challenges that the students faced in secondary school as a direct result of their autistic difficulties. They found that many of the students reported how the noisy, busy, chaotic secondary school environment itself was a considerable source of overwhelming anxiety and stress for them. This finding relates specifically to the sensory features of their ASD, although the authors do not explicitly make reference to this possibility. The study also

found that those students with strong “special interests” in a specific area (e.g. sporting talents) prevented them from forming reciprocal relationships with their peers.

Is it notable within this study, however, that there was considerable variability and individual experience for the students in relation to their Asperger syndrome and school experiences (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). There were those students whose interviews revealed they were much more able to accept their condition, were more adept to ‘fitting in’ and coping with the organisational and social demands of secondary school context than other students within the sample. This is perhaps not surprising given the wide spectrum of need within the autism population. Humphrey and Lewis (2008) conducted a qualitative study, however, and did not attempt to specify the behavioural profile of their sample. A richer picture of the possible determinants of these children’s reported difficulties might have been possible had the authors taken objective measures of the children’s autistic symptoms, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety. It could have allowed for a direct examination of any associations between the individual perceptual and behavioural profile of a child and their experiences of coping and success in secondary school, thus informing future intervention and school practice more clearly (Howlin, 1998; 2006).

One finding that was noted by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) to be much more consistent across all of the students was their vulnerability to bullying and teasing, which nearly all of the students experienced to some level of regularity and severity. The authors suggested how the social naivety of the students, characteristic of ASD, was frequently used for exploitation purposes by other pupils. This finding is in line with the outcomes of other research, such as a survey carried out by Reid and Batten (2006) as part of the NAS’s ‘Make School Make Sense’ campaign. Through their consultation with 1400 families about experiences of bullying in school, Reid and Batten (2006) found that as many as 3 in 5 young people with Asperger syndrome had been bullied, and bullying was more likely to occur in mainstream school environments and in older compared to younger children. Other research has compared the frequency of bullying experienced by adolescents with ASD in mainstream schools and the level of social support they received. Humphrey and Symes (2010) compared the views and experiences of ASD students to two comparison groups, including students with dyslexia and students without any identified SEN. Students with dyslexia were thought to be a valid group with which to compare students with ASD by the authors for the following reasons. Firstly, both conditions can be thought of as a broad spectrum of abilities and

difficulties. Second, there are similar proportions of students with both conditions at various stages of the SEN code of practice. Third, male to female ratios for both conditions are similar, and fourth estimated incidence rates of the conditions are comparable. However, the difficulties experienced by students with dyslexia relate primarily to cognition and learning, which the authors suggested provided a useful contrast to the primary difficulties in communication and interaction experienced by students with ASD. The study found that experiences of bullying were higher and level of social support received lower for those students with ASD than for both comparison groups. Humphrey and Symes (2010) asserted that these findings provide some preliminary evidence to suggest that it is not simply having any SEN that increases the risk of bullying, but rather the specific characteristics that are associated with ASD.

Other research which has interviewed students with Asperger syndrome directly, has also stressed these students' social difficulties as significant factors in their experiences of secondary school. Connor (2000) elicited views from 16 pupils with ASD in year 7 and year 9 of a mainstream secondary school. Across the sample, the young people expressed the anxiety they felt when interacting with peers at unstructured times of the day or working with other students within groups in class. They also raised other social situations that often occurred or were expected in secondary school, such as speaking in front of other students within a lesson. Unlike previous studies, Connor (2000) also sought the view of these students' teachers. Many of the issues and concerns the teaching staff raised were in relation to the idiosyncratic nature of ASD symptoms, especially the students' social difficulties. The teachers felt these difficulties impacted on the students' social acceptance, peer interactions, and consequently caused social isolation within school.

Overall, these three studies, which have directly elicited autistic young people's own views and experiences, suggest that the mainstream secondary school environment presents a challenge to them, largely due to the characteristics and difficulties associated with the nature of their autism. Alongside these studies, a number of researchers have emphasised, in 'perspective' papers, a mismatch between the scholastic, social and behavioural demands of mainstream settings and secondary schools and the particular styles and needs of individuals with ASD (Adreon & Stella, 2001; Connor, 1999; Harrison, 1998; Humphrey, 2008). These researchers make many references to the modifications required with respect to the curriculum, teacher style and social support structures to meet the needs of such students within the school context. The clear

message conveyed in these writings is that the gap between the ‘inclusion rhetoric’ and ‘classroom reality’ in meeting the specific group needs of children with an ASD is far too wide in many mainstream environments (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a).

2.5.2 The importance of a good transition

Within the inclusion literature, one perspective paper and one study point towards the importance and value of a good transition to support secondary school success and inclusion for ASD students. Konza (2005) focused specifically on Australian pupils with Asperger’s syndrome in years 7 to 11 in order to provide a perspective paper that gave a review of key strategies necessary to support inclusion in Australian secondary schools. One of these strategies related specifically to transition. Konza (2005) discussed the need for a planned transition over an extended period of time to allow for familiarisation with staff, the school surroundings and expectations within the new environment – that is, to adequately prepare children for the forthcoming change. A UK study conducted by Tobias (2009) elicited the views of ASD students in year 9 and year 11, and their parents, through a series of focus groups to uncover the different support structures they valued within their secondary school context to promote their inclusion. Like Konza (2005), Tobias (2009) suggests that one essential and effective principle for ensuring success at secondary school is the family experiencing an appropriately assisted transition. The study briefly discussed how good transition planning can relieve student anxiety, support the communication of important information between staff and allow students the beneficial opportunity to receive specific, detailed information about their new school.

However, both of these studies only hint at the importance of a good transition to secondary school. Konza (2005) provides a perspective paper regarding successful secondary inclusion, drawing on experiences of students. Tobias (2009) focused on eliciting views regarding secondary inclusion rather than specifically on the transition process to secondary school. Neither author conducted a study set out to elicit the views of children and their parents specifically on the actual transition process they experienced or had the aim of informing and evaluating transition practices specifically.

2.6 Parental Views on Educational Provision for their Child with ASD

There are a number of survey studies that have gained the views of parents of autistic children regarding inclusion and their satisfaction towards different types of educational

provision for their child. Although not specifically focused on the primary to secondary transition process, this literature gives some insight into the type of provision that parents desire at secondary level, as well some of the issues they encounter at transition times.

Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger and Alkin (1999) surveyed parents of children with autism and children with Down syndrome in the United States. They found that age was a factor that significantly influenced parental perceptions regarding inclusive education compared to specialist education as the ideal placement for their child. Parents of older children favoured inclusive education much less, but this was a finding across both groups of parents and not specific to the autism group. However, there were differences with respect to diagnostic group. The parents of Down syndrome children were significantly more likely to choose inclusion as their ideal placement of choice for their child when compared to the parents of autistic children. Parents of children with autism felt that their child's needs could not be best met within an inclusive placement as a result of larger child to teacher ratios, worries about ridicule and rejection of their child from peers and, especially, a lack of teachers with specialist knowledge about autism. Overall, this study found that parents of autistic children had a greater desire for specialist support and much more caution around mainstream provision as their child became older. This suggests that parents may feel their child needs specialist ASD provision at secondary school level, even when they have been maintained within mainstream provision at primary age.

Kasari et al. (1999) also found differences in parents' views dependent on the educational programme their child was receiving (early intervention, mainstream education or special education). Across parents in both the autism and Down syndrome group, it was those whose children were in special education who were the least satisfied and who most desired change. However, it was also these parents who were significantly more likely to recognise teachers, but notably not the curriculum, as an advantage of their child's current educational placement. This finding suggests the potential conflict that parents can experience in deciding what is educationally best for their child with a disability. It shows the potentially difficult decisions and choices parents are required to make regarding an appropriate placement for their child around transition times. For a parent, finding a 'best fit' placement for their child while covering all priorities may well feel like an impossible decision to make.

Similar themes were found in a NAS survey (Barnard et al., 2000), which focused on parents' actual experiences of education. Drawing on the views of a large sample of parent members from this organisation, the results indicated that parents would like teachers to be specifically trained to understand the needs of their autistic child. They further showed that parental satisfaction towards inclusion within educational provision decreased as their child became older, and satisfaction was highest when families had access to autism specific support.

A more recent report published by the NAS entitled 'Make School Make Sense' (Batten et al., 2006) compiled findings from a large-scale survey completed by 1,271 parent members of school aged autistic children in England and Wales. Parents reported difficulties in finding the right school for their child and having a good range of choice over the school placement for their child, which were much more pronounced at secondary school level. The findings also revealed that parents felt there was a shortfall in specialist education for secondary school age children. Fifty-nine percent of the parents of secondary-aged children reported they were not able to exercise any choice regarding whether their child attended a mainstream school or a special school. The report highlighted how this figure could indicate how the absence of a range of provision for autistic children is particularly acute at the secondary level, with a more limited choice for parents over provision as their child gets older. In 2007, of the 6000 out of authority placements in England, 1,380 (23%) of these were for children and young people on the autistic spectrum (Audit Commission, 2007). In the survey conducted by Batten et al. (2006), as many as 30% of parents of secondary aged children reported their child attended a school outside of their local authority. This percentage was more than twice as great as those children who were of primary age.

Taken together, the findings from these three surveys show how parental desire for more specialist teaching when their autistic child is older and of secondary age (Barnard et al., 2000; Kasari et al., 1999) is juxtaposed with a paucity of ASD specialist provision at secondary level (Batten et al., 2006). Consequently, it is likely that, for many families, the transition from primary to secondary school may be a stressful and anxious time, particularly if they find it difficult to obtain provision they feel is the most appropriate for their child.

Some research suggests that transition times are disproportionately more difficult for autistic families when compared to families who have children with other disabilities.

Parsons, Lewis and Ellins (2009) directly compared the views of parents of children with and without autism and found the two groups differed significantly regarding their thoughts on transitions between schools and choosing the right school. The parents of children with ASD were much more concerned about, and less satisfied with, the information and choice available when deciding on schools compared with parents of children without ASD. Other research emphasises the substantial stress that parents feel during times of transition, and the ineffectual relationships they have with local authorities, which they perceive as bureaucratic and time wasting (Tissot & Evans 2006; Tissot, 2011). In fact, the adversarial relationship that can build up between local authorities and parents is reflected by the fact that over recent years there have been more tribunal appeals concerning children with ASD than children with any other category of SEN. Between 2008 and 2009, 26% of the total number of appeals to the SEN & Disability Tribunal (SENDIST) in England concerned autism. This number rose to 31% between 2009 and 2010 (SENDIST, 2010). Back in 2006, The House of Commons Education & Skills Committee published a report which reviewed provision for children with special educational needs (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). Within this report, the families of autistic children were explicitly singled out as being in need of special attention to tackle the frustration and upset caused by the system in meeting the needs of their children. Indeed, more focused research that can support local authorities in understanding the concerns, views and experiences of parents around key transition periods appears vital.

Much of the research discussed, regarding autistic parents' thoughts about educational provision, has used surveys. Although the majority of these studies contain large sample sizes, their participants were nevertheless drawn from advocate organisations whose core purpose is to campaign for parents. The findings and conclusions drawn from such surveys should be interpreted with some caution since it is difficult to know the extent to which the views of that membership are representative of the wider population of parents of children with an ASD. Parsons et al. (2009) used an on-line survey to elicit parents' views, although this sample might have been biased towards those parents who were computer literate. Furthermore, eliciting parents' views through questionnaires alone provides much more limited information than other, qualitative methodologies. There are only two studies that resolve these issues to some degree, and their findings appear to be fairly similar to the survey studies that have been reviewed.

A study conducted by Whitaker (2007) sought to address the potential issue with sampling and representation by seeking the views of every parent or carer with a child with an ASD living in the entire English county of Northamptonshire, using an anonymous questionnaire. The study used a mixed method approach to gain statistics (using closed/rating questionnaire items) relating to satisfaction levels amongst parents and some qualitative information (through more open questionnaire items) to examine the factors associated with the different levels of satisfaction. Overall, the levels of dissatisfaction were higher for parents whose child was in mainstream provision compared to special schools or unit based provision, a finding in line with other previous surveys (e.g. Barnard et al., 2000). Interestingly, the qualitative data showed that even those parents who rated themselves to be satisfied with current provision still went on to identify some areas of significant concern, and as many as one quarter of them referred to major difficulties and concerns in previous schools or classes. This finding may well further illuminate the on-going difficulties and problems that parents of children with autism can experience in getting their child's needs sufficiently met within educational provision. Whitaker's study also suggested that communication between home and school is highly important to parents of autistic children. This was because the study found that parents tended not to actually expect teachers to have expert knowledge in autism or specialist training, apart from in relation to social skills teaching which was of high priority to parents. Instead, parents reported wanting good communication with teachers, and they valued situations where teachers showed a willingness to listen to them and flexibly adapt school arrangements to the needs of their child.

A study conducted by Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr and Smith (2005) conducted interviews with parents of 5 children with autism and professionals around the time the child was making the transition from primary to secondary education. The authors were interested in parents' views regarding the various provisions available on the specialist to mainstream continuum, and the support structures available within different provisions. In specialist settings, the teaching staff's expertise in autism resulted in substantial modification of the curriculum with respect to a child's communication and social skills. In contrast, within mainstream settings there was considerable variability in the extent to which curriculum modifications occurred, as well as marked differences in the availability of other support structures, such as one to one support and speech and language therapy involvement. Overall, the study found

that parents were generally of the view that whatever the educational provision their child was in, teachers should have 'adequate' autism-specific training. Similar to Whitaker (2007), this study highlighted the need for effective dialogue between parents and professionals at transition times to agree what is best for meeting the individual child's needs.

2.7 ASD and Transition

2.7.1 Transition for Children with ASD: Views of Key Stakeholders

Despite the difficulties inherent in the transition from primary to secondary school for children with ASD, there have been remarkably few studies, which have gained the views of key stakeholders during this critical period. There are also some studies related to other key transition phases.

Stoner, Angell, House and Bock (2007) investigated the perspectives and concerns of parents with an autistic spectrum disorder in relation to transitions, but these children were of a young age (6-8 years). The interviews with parents (both mothers and fathers) of 4 children with autism focused on vertical transitions, or transitions from one school to another or yearly changes, and horizontal transitions, or movements from one situation to the other. Parents deemed child-centred transitions to be most effective and they also perceived advanced planning and communication between home and school in relation to transitions to be essential. Parents were most concerned about professionals failing to understand their child's specific needs and reactions in relation to transition situations. The parents' thoughts about any barriers to successful transition were most focused on the failings of professionals rather than the intrinsic difficulties their child had.

This study was concerned with the transition for young children, which may have only limited relevance to school transitions at later stages. However, a pertinent finding was that when the parents were directly questioned about later transitions, their answers demonstrated they were aware of the future and they had already given some thought to the major transitions ahead for their child, in particular the school-adult life transition. The parents highlighted a major concern about the 'unknown' ahead of them and the uncertainty they felt regarding how much progress their child would make moving forward. This finding indicates the level of stress and anxiety that autistic parents can

feel throughout their child's life and the on-going worries they have about the future outcomes for their child.

In fact, research has shown that there is much variability in the long-term outcomes of people with autism, even for cognitively able individuals, who are likely to be unemployed in adulthood, or in unskilled and low-paid jobs, despite a high level of education (Howlin, 2000). Furthermore, recent evidence gathered as part of the NAS's 'You Need to Know' campaign, indicates that parents experience huge difficulty in accessing services to support their child's mental health needs. Moreover, if and when they do gain access to services, very few families feel they receive support from professionals who have specialist training or understanding about autism (NAS, 2010).

Recognising that long term prospects for individuals with ASD are poor, a study carried out in the UK by Browning, Osborne and Reed (2009) sought to examine the concerns of young people with ASD when they experience a systemic transition. They interviewed 10 secondary aged students with ASD and 7 students without ASD to understand their views regarding feelings of stress and coping related to transition, and so the study was specifically focused on their move from school to post 16 services. The key finding related to group differences in coping and stress. Adolescents with ASD were more likely to perceive stress about things that caused actual physical harm and were highly concerned about interpersonal relationships in the future. Adolescents without ASD, however, were largely more concerned about their future education, but felt they could cope well with stress and were confident that future worries could be resolved by themselves or seeking advice from others. The adolescents with ASD perceived themselves to be poor at dealing with stress and predicted they would continue to be so in the future, although they did not seem to be able to attribute reasons for their poor coping or suggest they would actively consult anyone should they be suffering stress in the future.

The authors concluded that support services in secondary schools either need to be strengthened, or made more visible for students with ASD, to facilitate them in seeking help from others. However, little research has focused on ASD students' actual experiences of secondary support, or interviewed them on transition to elicit opinions on the support they perceive will be valuable in secondary school.

One small scale piece of research by Maras and Aveling (2006) did focus on the move from primary to secondary school, but considered the views of 6 children from a wider

SEN category than ASD alone. These students were worried about an increased workload, including homework and a longer day in school, organisation and orientation issues relating to a more complex timetable, and making friends. Two factors in particular seemed to facilitate transition for most students. The first was a number of visits to new schools prior to the move to decrease their concerns and promote 'knowing in advance'. The second was the availability of a safe space in secondary school away from other students. One may assume that for students with ASD, the latter suggestion would be required to manage their anxiety and sensory issues, but the study did not give any detail regarding the reasons why the availability of such a support structure was important to the children.

A key finding from this study was that despite students having the same statement label, their individual needs and wishes for the level of support and types of provision to be available for them in school were quite different. Therefore, these findings seem to suggest the need for advanced planning that is tailored to individual needs and concerns. Furthermore, flexibility on the part of schools in delivering individualised intervention and support, as well as schools openly communicating with families, appears to be essential for successful transition. This study considers some stressors that may develop during secondary transition for children with an SEN, and gives some indication of possible measures needed to minimise their effects. However, students were interviewed at different times, some before transition and some following transition, and only one student was seen at both time points. This methodological issue was in addition to the small sample size.

One particular finding within this study appears to warrant further attention. The two students with an ASD interviewed pre-transition both spoke of going to schools without primary peers, even though they both expressed a preference for this. This situation occurred due to parents wanting their child to attend the school with the best special needs provision. This suggests that tensions can exist between child and parent around placement preferences of secondary school. Arguably, this could impact on the children's secondary transition experiences and success, although this particular issue was not investigated further in this study. Certainly, it would have been beneficial to examine these students' perspectives – and their parents' – both before and after the transition to secondary school using a longitudinal design.

2.7.2 Multiple perspectives on primary to secondary transition for children with ASD

Only one study exists that has specifically investigated primary to secondary transition for ASD children from a multi-informant perspective. Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr and Smith (2006) conducted interviews with 5 children, their parents and professionals from a Scottish local authority prior to secondary transition. The professionals were key people involved with the family, including current primary school head teachers, speech and language therapists and school psychologists, as well as teachers from receiving secondary placements. Interviews with the children revealed a central theme of preparation, similar to the findings of Maras and Aveling (2006). The study found that despite the size and complexity of their new school, the children were generally positive about transition, but they talked of particularly valuing the opportunities to visit their new school and become fully involved in transition activities there. Many of the children referred to how adults could assist them with changing schools by helping them feel prepared for transition.

The children made quite distinct transition routes, in terms of the type of provision they transferred to, and so unsurprisingly a large number of possible transition arrangements were identified across schools. Of interest, though, was that overall evaluation of the transition arrangement by parents was considerably lower than that of professional stakeholders, and the difference between parents and secondary teachers was particularly striking. The possible reasons why parents evaluated transition arrangements in a far less positive light than secondary school teachers was not fully examined by the authors of this study, but the study did outline some problems identified in transition arrangements, which included, a lack of places in appropriate provision, insufficient provision for a particular combination of needs, communication and consistency issues between professionals, as well as a full range of provision not being explained to or understood by parents before choosing a place for their child. A number of these are issues that have been highlighted elsewhere (Barnard et al., 2000; Batten et al., 2006).

A dominant theme that emerged in Jindal-Snape et al.'s study was the considerable delay in transition arrangements. It was found that in many cases, final placement decisions were not made until well into the summer term before the transfer. The interviews with the children and parents indicated how this was associated with high levels of stress and anxiety for them. The interviews with the primary teachers

suggested how they felt that this presented primary schools with added problems in managing transition arrangements. The clear message from stakeholders was that a more proactive and earlier approach to making placement decisions would have been beneficial.

By focusing specifically on primary to secondary transition for children with ASD, Jindal-Snape et al.'s study begins to provide some much needed insight into this process for this vulnerable group. It would appear that by gathering views through interviews, with a range of informants involved in the process, the study was also able to begin to illuminate key factors that may require consideration at the level of policy and practice by a local authority. However, since the sample represented in this study was so small, and confined to just one specific local context within the UK, the possibility for generalisation of this study's findings is extremely limited. Clearly, further research is necessary to elucidate if similar or further issues exist within other local contexts.

The range of views gathered in Jindal-Snape et al.'s study is helpful in considering the impact of wider systems on the transition process. However, the study did not measure the behavioural profile of the children in the sample, such as their degree of autism or associated difficulties and the impact on transition. From an eco-systemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), a child's transition to secondary school and their ability to continue learning is influenced not only by wider systems but also their personal, intrinsic characteristics. Therefore, within this theoretical account, a thorough examination of transition would also involve consideration of these internal characteristics.

In Jindal-Snape et al.'s study, the views of key stakeholders were only collected at one point prior to transition, thus not allowing for a full examination of transition when the children had begun secondary school. Consequently, the study could only report on prospective views, opinions and experiences regarding transition. Clearly, future research studies could add to the existing evidence base, and therefore, fully inform professional and local authority practice, by employing a longitudinal design and collecting data both before and after transition.

There is, therefore, a clear need to extend the current evidence base to address the questions of transition from primary to secondary school for children with an ASD more fully.

2.8 The current study

The current study investigated the transition from primary to secondary school for 15 children with an ASD in one LA and the overarching research question pursued was: What are the crucial factors impacting on the secondary transition process for these children?

This study sought to overcome the methodological limitations of previous research in several ways. First, a mixed methodology was utilised. Data were gathered to profile the autistic needs of children to allow the sample to be characterised and furthermore determine if there was any impact of intrinsic child characteristics on secondary transition. Broader, systemic influences on the transition process were also examined by directly interviewing children, parents and teachers both before and after secondary transition. Second, a longitudinal design was employed to allow the full process of secondary transition to be examined. Children, parents and teachers were seen both before and after transition, so the study did not rely solely on either prospective or retrospective data. Third, a sample of 15 year 6 children within mainstream schools were assessed and interviewed for this study – a sample size that improves significantly on those of existing studies thus ensuring that the results are more generalisable.

Children were first seen during their final term of primary school (summer 2010) directly before their transition to secondary school. At this pre-transition phase, their cognitive and behavioural profile was examined by administering standardised tests of verbal and nonverbal cognitive ability, and questionnaire measures of autistic symptoms, sensory symptoms, and trait anxiety. Such assessments provided a clear picture of the sample being represented. The questionnaires were only administered once at this pre-transition phase because it was felt they were not sufficiently sensitive to capture changes in the measured characteristics during the short-term follow-up period (3 months). For example, on the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) (Constantino & Gruber, 2005), which measures autistic symptomatology, parents are asked to rate their child's behaviour over the last 6 months, a time frame which encompassed the longitudinal time frame of the current study, and therefore would not provide opportunity to witness developmental change on this measure. The children were also interviewed about their transition to secondary school. Their parents and primary teachers were also interviewed at this time to gain their perspectives on the process prior to transition.

Children were then seen again during the first term of their secondary school year (autumn 2010), approximately 3 months later. During this post-transition phase, children and parents completed a questionnaire, which asked questions about their experience of the transition process and provided an index of transition success (based on Evangelou et al., 2008). Children and parents were also again interviewed at this time about the transition process, and a sub-sample of secondary school teachers was also interviewed.

This multi-method, multi-informant approach allowed a full examination of the primary to secondary transition process for a sample of children with ASD in one LA, to determine the potential factors impacting on the transition process for these young people. The aims of this study were threefold.

One, it aimed to determine which intrinsic child characteristics associated with ASD, if any, impact upon a successful transition from primary to secondary school. The ‘triad of impairments’, sensory symptoms, and anxiety have all been implicated as affecting these children’s transition to secondary school in anecdotal reports or position papers but the relationship between these behaviours and transition success has never been directly examined. On the basis of these reports, it was hypothesised that children with higher verbal ability; fewer autistic symptoms, fewer sensory atypicalities and lower trait anxiety would make a more successful transition to secondary school. The longitudinal design of this study allowed for the direct examination of the predictive relationship between the children’s profile pre-transition and the success of their transition to secondary school post-transition.

Two, this study aimed to elucidate the broader systemic factors that can either support or inhibit a successful transition to secondary school for students with an ASD. To address this aim, interviews were conducted both pre- and post-transition with children, parents, and teachers to gain their complementary perspectives regarding the transition process.

This research study sought to address all of the factors, both intrinsic and wider systemic factors, which can impact on the transition from primary to secondary school for children with an ASD. Therefore to sufficiently achieve these aims, the use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection was necessary. Mixed methods research provides more evidence for studying a research problem and helps answer questions that cannot be answered by quantitative or qualitative approaches alone (Cresswell &

Plano Clark, 2011, p.12). Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) outline how research methods should follow research questions in a way that offers the best chance to obtain useful answers. These authors state how many research questions and combinations of questions are best and most fully answered through mixed research solutions (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.18).

Finally, this study aimed to provide recommendations to the commissioning LA regarding future secondary transition policy and practice for children with an ASD.

This chapter outlines the sample of children with ASD and recruitment procedure, ethical considerations, quantitative and qualitative methods used, the study procedure, followed by details of the data analysis process.

3.2 Participants

3.2.1 Identification of potential participants.

The sample targeted in this research study consisted of children in year 6 during the academic year 2009-2010, who were due to change schools and move to year 7 in September 2010. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, and participants were initially identified utilising a database search which highlighted all students known to the Special Educational Needs Division in the South East of the LA, the quadrant of the LA where the researcher was employed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. To gain a spread of participants across the county, participants were also identified from a secondary ASD panel list, which sat in November 2009, and which named those children who were considered for a specialist secondary placement from September 2010. Therefore, in some cases, the families who were contacted about this research study resided in an area of the LA beyond the South East quadrant. Participants highlighted from both the database search and the panel list, were required to meet the following study inclusion criteria:

1. Had received an independent clinical diagnosis of an autistic spectrum condition (including Autistic Disorder and Asperger syndrome);
2. Had received a Statement of Special Educational Need (under section 324 of the Education Act 1996), with ASD specified as their primary need;
3. Were of Year 6 schooling age; and
4. Were educationally placed in a LA maintained primary school at the pre-transition phase of the study.

3.2.2 Recruitment

At the LA's request, it was agreed that children educated in those schools within the researcher's LA school allocation/case load would not be included within the final sample, and therefore, their family or primary school would not be sent an invitation to participate in this research. This decision was reached to avoid any potential conflict

over the dual role of the researcher who was working as a Trainee Educational Psychologist in the LA whilst also enrolled as a doctoral research student at the Institute of Education.

A total of 21 children were identified who met the research inclusion criteria. In March 2010, after ethical approval had been agreed both by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education and by the LA, all families of these children were contacted via letter (see Appendix A) to invite each child and their parent to participate. The Head teacher of each child's current primary school was also contacted to invite the child's current teacher in year 6 to be involved. In September 2010, each child's secondary school was contacted via letter to recruit a sample of secondary teachers to be interviewed in the post-transition phase of the study.

3.2.3 Final sample

There were 4 separate groups of participants for the study, including (1) 15 children who met the inclusion criteria for the study, whose family gave their informed consent for involvement, (2) 15 parents of children with ASD, (3) 13 primary school teachers, (4) 5 secondary school teachers. See Table 1 for individual details for each of the child, parent and teacher participants.

3.2.4 Children

There were 13 boys and 2 girls ranging from 10 years and 10 months and 11 years and 10 months at the pre-transition phase of the study. All children were of White British ethnicity with the exception of one child, who was of White Asian descent. All but one child participated in the interviews and cognitive assessments. This child, an 11-year-old boy with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, did not give his consent to take part in testing or interviews. Data from other informants, including his father, who completed all questionnaires and took part in an interview at both phases of the research, and his primary school teacher, have nevertheless been included in subsequent analyses.

3.2.5 Parents

One biological parent (13 mothers; 1 father) of each of the child participants took part in this research study, with the exception of the parents of one child (child 14) whose adoptive mother *and* father took part in the pre- and post-transition interviews.

3.2.6 Teachers

Thirteen primary school teachers consented to be interviewed during the pre-transition phase of the research. In the case of two children (child 2 and child 12), two members of primary school teaching staff volunteered to take part in a pre-transition interview together.

During the post-transition phase, 5 secondary school teachers consented to be interviewed. Whilst this sample of secondary teachers was smaller than anticipated, it most likely reflected the fact that secondary school teachers did not feel like they “knew” the child as they had only been in the school for a single term. The response still served to provide a range of views regarding transition, since secondary school teachers from both mainstream and specialist provision agreed to take part.

Table 1. Participant Details

Child	Age (years months)	Gender	Diagnosis (parent report)	Ethnicity	Area of Surrey Residence	Parent Participant	Primary School Participant	Secondary School Participant	Secondary Provision
1	11:4	Male	Asperger syndrome /ADHD ^a	White British	South East	Mother	Teacher	SENCo	Local Mainstream
2	11:2	Male	Asperger syndrome	White British	North East	Father	Teacher and SENCo ^e	-	Local Mainstream
3	10:10	Male	ASD ^b /ADHD	White British	North West	Mother	SENCo	-	Out of County Mainstream
4	11:9	Female	ASD	White British	South East	Mother	Teacher	SENCo	Local Mainstream
5	10:10	Male	ASD	White British	North West	Mother	Teacher	-	Local Mainstream
6	11:9	Male	ASD/ADHD	White British	South East	Mother	Teacher	-	Special (LD ^d /ASD)
7	10:10	Male	Asperger syndrome	White British	South West	Mother	Teacher	-	NMI ^f Special (Boys)
8	11:1	Male	ASD	White British	South West	Mother	Teacher	SENCo	Special (Emotional/LD/Boys)
9	11:0	Female	Asperger/ADHD	White Asian	South East	Mother	Teacher	Teacher	Special (Emotional/LD/Girls)
10	11:6	Male	ASD	White British	North West	Mother	Teacher	Teacher and SENCo	Special (LD/ASD)
11	11:10	Male	Autism	White British	South East	Mother	Teacher	-	NMI Special (Asperger syndrome/Mixed ^g)
12	11:5	Male	ASD	White British	North West	Mother	Teacher and TA ^h	-	Local Mainstream
13	11:8	Male	Asperger syndrome	White British	South East	Mother	SENCo	-	NMI Special (Asperger syndrome/Mixed)
14	11:3	Male	Autism/ADHD/ODD ^c FAS ⁱ /Dyslexia/Dyspraxia	White British	South East	Mother and Father	-	-	Special (MLD ^j)
15	11:5	Male	ASD/ADHD	White British	South West	Mother	-	-	Local Mainstream

Notes. ^aADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; ^bASD: Autistic Spectrum Disorder; ^cODD: Oppositional Defiance Disorder; ^dFAS: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome; ^eSENCo: Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator; ^fTA: Teaching Assistant; ^gNMI: Non-maintained Independent; ^hLD: Learning Difficulties; ⁱMixed: Boys and Girls; ^jMLD: Moderate Learning Difficulties

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The present study was conducted within the ethical guidelines provided by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009) and careful consideration was given to the informed consent, the right for participants to withdraw from the study at any time, confidentiality and anonymity, and debriefing of participants of the overall research aims.

Invitation letters and information sheets (see Appendix B) were sent to all parents and teachers, including a signed consent form (see Appendix C), providing them with all the information to make their decision to participate in this research. All parents and teachers were offered the opportunity to ask any questions over the telephone and the research was outlined again during the telephone conversations to set up the first meeting with participants. A 'child friendly' letter (see Appendix D) supported each child to give their informed consent. Child consent, however, was viewed as a 'continuous process' (Lloyd, Gatherer & Kalsy, 2006) and each child was asked again at the beginning of each meeting if they were happy to work and speak with the researcher. It was made clear to all participants at each stage of the research process that they had the right to withdraw consent at any time. For children, they were clearly reminded during interviews that they did not have to answer anything they did not wish to, and that they were free to leave at any time. There was no deception involved in the study and all participants were kept informed at all stages as well as being provided with full contact details for the researcher should any further questions arise. All participants were provided with an explanation of confidentiality and ensured anonymity for their views and opinions within the final written report. All children, parents and teachers were assigned an anonymous identification number to be used on all research materials and within the final written report. All participants were thanked for their participation and were informed that they would receive written feedback at the end of the research study to outline the key results.

3.4. Pre-transition measures

3.4.1 Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence

The cognitive profiles of each child within the sample were assessed using the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI) (Wechsler, 1999), which yielded verbal and non-verbal reasoning scores. The WASI is a short and reliable measure of ability, consisting of four subtests: Vocabulary, Block Design, Similarities and Matrix

Reasoning. The WASI is nationally standardised and yields the three traditional verbal, performance and full scale IQ scores, and is strongly related to the longer WISC-III. The WASI was standardised on a sample which was stratified according to education level, i.e. the number of years of school completed, however, it is not clear whether individuals with SEN or ASD specifically were included in this standardisation sample. However, the Wechsler scales are commonly used with children who have autism (Motttron, 2004).

3.4.2 The Social Responsiveness Scale

The current autistic symptoms of each child within the sample, as reported by their parent, were measured using the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) (Constantino & Gruber, 2005). The SRS is a 65-item questionnaire that examines a child's ability to engage in emotionally appropriate reciprocal social interactions in naturalistic settings. In addition to a total score, the SRS generates five subscale scores, including (1) social awareness, (2) social cognition, (3) social communication, (4) social motivation and (5) autistic mannerisms, which are suggested for use during treatment planning and treatment effectiveness. On each item, parents are asked to circle the number on a 4-point scale (1=not true to 4=almost always true) that best describes their child's behaviour over the last 6 months. Higher scores indicate greater severity of social impairment. The psychometric properties of the SRS have been tested in studies involving over 1,900 children age 4-15 years (Constantino & Todd, 2003), showing strong reliability and validity, thus suggesting that the SRS is a valid quantitative measure of autistic traits, particularly in the area of social behaviours or social responsiveness (Hilton, Graver & LaVesser, 2007). The SRS is feasible for use in research studies of autism spectrum conditions (Constantino et al., 2003).

3.4.3 The Sensory Profile

The sensory symptoms of each child within the sample, as reported by their parent, were measured using the Sensory Profile (SP) (Dunn, 1999). The SP (most appropriate for ages 5-10 years) is a parent-report 125-item questionnaire. It describes responses to sensory events in daily life and measures the degree to which children exhibit problems in sensory processing, modulation, behavioural and emotional responses and responsiveness to sensory events. On a 5-point scale (1=always to 5=never), the caregiver reports how frequently the child uses that response to particular sensory events and they are classified in comparison to how a typically developing child

responds to the same sensory output. The SP was chosen for use in this research study due to its strong psychometric properties, including reliability and validity (Hilton et al., 2007). Other identified sensory scales or questionnaires failed to match the SP in terms of these properties or level of sensitivity, such as the Sensory Questionnaire (Boyd & Baranek, 2005) or other scales were for administration to a much younger age group, such as the Sensory Experiences Questionnaire (Baranek, David, Poe, Stone & Watson, 2006). Nevertheless, the upper age range of the children in the current sample exceeded the age range of the normative population for the SP (5:0 – 10:11 years). Therefore, children's scores were not compared with norms; rather, a total score on the profile is reported for each child, which allowed for the level of sensory symptoms experienced by each child to be quantified and compared.

3.4.4 The Spence Child Anxiety Scale for Parents

The trait anxiety of each child, as reported by their parent, was measured using the Spence Child Anxiety Scale for Parents (SCAS-P) (Spence, 1999). The SCAS-P was developed to correspond closely to the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (SCAS, Spence, 1998). It includes 38 items and consists of the same six subscales as the SCAS, including panic attack and agoraphobia, separation anxiety disorder, physical injury fears, social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder. Strong psychometric properties on the SCAS-P have been established, including reliability and validity (Nauta et al., 2004).

3.5 Post-transition measure

In relation to one aim of the study, which was to determine which intrinsic child characteristics associated with ASD, if any, impact upon a successful transition between school phases, an index of "transition success" for each child was required. A questionnaire was therefore administered to children and parents in the post-transition phase of the study. The child and parent questionnaires were modified from questionnaires used in a large-scale, national transitions study, the Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) transitions sub-study (Evangelou et al., 2008). The decision was taken to use these questionnaires because (a) the questionnaires used in the EPPSE study were recently standardised on a large sample of 550 children and their parents, and (b) as many as 20% of this sample of children who completed the EPPSE questionnaires were those identified to have an SEN. Therefore, the questionnaires from the EPPSE study provided a recently standardised, ready-to-use

tool, which were robust and sensitive to the SEN population, and could therefore be usefully employed within this study.

Some minor alterations were made to the original EPPSE questionnaires when creating the post-transition questionnaires for this study. For example, items relating to entrance exams, buying resources for secondary school and racism were deemed irrelevant for the aims of the present study and were therefore omitted from the parent questionnaires. Furthermore, these items had not been included in Evangelou et al.'s (2008) factor analysis performed to determine key transition dimensions. The final questionnaires included 36 items for children and 46 items for parents. All other aspects (wording, rating scales) remained unchanged (see Appendix E for child and parent post transition questionnaires).

3.6 Interview measures

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with children, parents and teachers at both the pre-transition and post-transition phases of the study. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for use within this study for the following reasons. First, they are an appropriate method to employ when conducting exploratory studies (Willig, 2001). Second, semi-structured interviews allow a degree of structure to support the interviews' relevance to the research aims, whilst also providing enough flexibility to allow for ideas and themes to emerge which had not been previously anticipated by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews can enable the interviewer to follow the respondent's interests and concerns in a free-flowing conversation in which the ordering of questioning is less important (Mertens, 2005; Robson, 2002). Third, semi-structured interviews could be responsive to the very individual transition experiences of all participants involved in this study. Interviews were conducted face-to-face to allow the researcher to clarify any questions and encourage active participation and involvement, whilst also enabling the affective responses of the interviewee to be monitored throughout the process, so sensitive debriefing could be utilised if and where necessary.

In the pre-transition phase, the aim of the interviews with the child and parent were to uncover exactly which factors they felt could support or hinder transition and, ultimately, what a 'successful transition' would look like from their perspectives. Interviews with primary school teachers aimed to ascertain the structures and initiatives in place to support a child's transition to secondary, as well as to identify key features of a successful transition from the teachers' perspective. In the post-transition phase, new

interviews were conducted with each child and their parent. These interviews aimed to determine how the child had settled into their new school and the family's levels of satisfaction with the transition process, as well as elucidating any factors supporting or inhibitory factors to the transition process that may need consideration in future LA policy and practice. Interviews with secondary teachers aimed to understand the arrangements and adjustments made between phases and in the secondary context specifically to support transition success and accommodate the ASD child.

The actual questions used in the final interview schedules for each group of participants were mostly determined by the specific research questions and aims of this particular study. However, consideration was given to the questions used within interviews carried out in two previous studies specifically because they recruited similar groups of participants to the current study, including children with SEN, and focused exclusively on primary to secondary transition (Evangelou et al., 2008; Maras & Aveling, 2006). Interview schedules are included in Appendix F.

3.7 Piloting

The aims of the piloting process were to develop the researcher's interview and testing technique and inform the final design of interview questions. Pilot sessions were carried out with 1 family, whose child attended a primary school within the researcher's LA school allocation. A primary school SENCo was also consulted with during the piloting process. None of the data are included in the final written report.

No major changes were made to the interview questions included in the final study. The pilot sessions, however, did highlight some areas for development. First, they indicated the potential benefit of using a 'task schedule' for the pre-transition meeting with the child to clearly specify the order of tasks presented, and thus attempt to accommodate any social anxiety s/he may have, particularly when meeting the researcher for the first time. Second, the sessions informed the order in which to carry out assessment and interviews with each child during the pre-transition meeting. By engaging in the concrete, less direct assessment first, it was felt this could help to acclimatise the child to then talk about more personal matters related to transition in the subsequent interview with the researcher. Finally, the pilot sessions also informed some general revisions to the researcher's interviewing technique, including greater use of pauses and developing an understanding of which areas to pursue further during interviews with participants.

3.8 Procedure

3.8.1 Pre-transition phase

Prior to the pre-transition meeting, a 'child friendly' letter was sent to each child to introduce them to the researcher and explain exactly what they would be doing on the day of the researcher's visit, and the order of events. The pre-transition meetings were conducted during June and July 2010. They occurred at primary school in a room that was quiet and familiar to the child, with the intention of promoting the child's feelings of comfort and safety during the process. In the two cases (child 14 and child 15) where consent was not received from a primary school teacher, the pre-transition meeting with the child and parent was carried out at their home instead. For each case, the child, parent and primary school teacher were seen on the same day, but the order in which they met with the researcher varied, and depended largely on what was most convenient to both the family and school.

Great care was taken to ensure that the consent process and the pre-transition meeting itself were developmentally appropriate for this age group and population. Those children who were seen in school were given the option of their teaching assistant to be present if they wished. If a teaching assistant was present, it was stressed to the adult that they should avoid speaking for the child at all times during the session, so that only the child's view was elicited. A 'whoops' card was used by the researcher if any unforeseen circumstances had meant the order of events on the day of the visit had altered from details provided in the 'child friendly' letter previously sent. This allowed any changes to be clearly explained to the child. A carefully constructed script was used to briefly introduce the research study and the researcher and to acclimatise the child to the process. Children were shown a task schedule (see Appendix G), which outlined the exact order in which tasks would be presented

To begin, the four subtests of the WASI were administered in the order presented within the test manual, followed by the interview. The task schedule was explicitly referred to after each task to emphasise the finish and the beginning of the next task. To accommodate the children's social, communication and language difficulties, visual support was used within their interviews. This support included the use of 'face cards' when discussing feelings and simple picture cards to reinforce the verbal prompts given for some questions. A simple mind map (Appendix H) was also used with each child to support a discussion about how their new secondary school may be different from their

current primary school. The child could write their answers to this specific question on the mind map or could nominate the researcher to do so. The testing and interview took approximately 30 minutes to complete with each child. At the end, the researcher explained to the child that they would meet again at the end of the first half term of secondary school.

Interviews with parents and primary school teachers, conducted in school, lasted for approximately 30 minutes. During all pre-transition interviews with participants, carefully constructed prompts were used to allow greater exploration of meaning behind language. All interviews were recorded on a small digital voice recorder with the participant's prior consent, and these were then later transcribed verbatim.

At the end of parent interviews, the three pre-transition questionnaires relating to the child's autistic symptoms, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety were presented to parents and full completion instructions were provided by the researcher. Each parent was provided with a pre-paid envelope to return these questionnaires at their earliest convenience.

3.8.2 Post-transition phase

In the post-transition phase of the research a second meeting was arranged with each family to carry out an interview with the child and parent. Each child and their parent also completed a post transition questionnaire. An interview was also conducted with those secondary teachers who had agreed to take part in the study. All post-transition meetings with participants occurred between November 2010 and January 2011.

The post-transition interviews with each child and parent were carried out at the family home. Interviews with secondary teachers occurred in school. Similar to the pre-transition phase, in all post-transition interviews, question prompts and visual support were employed where necessary. Each interview was recorded on a small digital voice recorder so they could be later fully transcribed verbatim. The post-transition interviews with parents and secondary school teachers each lasted approximately 30 minutes. In all cases, the child was interviewed before their parent, and the child was given the choice to have their parent present in the room should they wish. The child's post-transition questionnaire was administered to them in person by the researcher prior to carrying out the child interview, with a total administration time of approximately 40 minutes with each child. The post-transition questionnaire for parents was sent by post

to the family home at the end of October 2010. Therefore, each parent returned this by hand to the researcher on the day of the post-transition meeting.

3.9 Data Analysis

3.9.1 Analysis of quantitative data

Scoring of the WASI and the three published questionnaires administered and completed in the pre-transition phase, was carried out according to the instructions in the accompanying assessment manuals. One aim of the research was to determine which individual characteristics associated with a diagnosis of ASD, if any, impact upon a successful transition from primary to secondary school. As discussed, data was collected to profile the needs of the individual children and characterise the sample as a whole. Furthermore, data was also collected from children and parents to provide an index of “transition success”. The data related to the individual profile of each child as well as data related to their transition success were input into PASW 18. This allowed the descriptive statistics for child characteristics of the group to be generated, as well as Pearson’s correlational analyses to be run to identify any relationships between these intrinsic child characteristics and overall transition success.

3.9.2 Analysis of qualitative data

The interview data for each group of participants (children, parents, primary school teachers and secondary teachers) were analysed separately using thematic analysis, a qualitative approach delineated specifically for use in psychological exploratory research, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Therefore, 6 separate thematic analyses were conducted, 2 for the child and parent interviews at each phase of the research (pre- and post-transition) and 2 for the teacher interviews, primary (pre-transition) and secondary (post-transition). This study aimed to examine wider systemic influences on the transition process by eliciting child, parent and teacher perceptions and experiences, and consider these in relation to previous literature regarding transition and ASD. Therefore, the ability to use both data driven and theoretically informed coding within a thematic analysis addressed these research aims when exploring participants’ views. A further aim of this study was to determine group trends across the data sets that may inform future secondary transition policy and practice in the LA. Thematic analysis enables the exploration of themes across a whole data set, as well as allowing salient idiographic issues to be considered and represented (Braun & Clarke,

2006). Therefore, the research aim to identify common issues raised across the data sets was well aligned with a thematic analytical approach.

Themes or patterns within data can be identified in an inductive ‘bottom up’ way or in a theoretical, deductive ‘top down’ way (Boyatzis, 1998). In this study, the questions asked were based on the specific research questions and aims, but were also linked to previous research in order to gain an understanding of whether similar issues were important for the participants, and if so, to gain further understanding of these issues. However, the process of analysis was conducted in an inductive way allowing for the identification of new themes. Thus, a ‘contextualised’ type of thematic analysis was undertaken that recognises that the social context contributes to how individuals create their own meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The thematic analysis in this study is at the latent level and attempts to identify and examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations and ideologies that shape or inform the semantic content of the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Thus, the study adopted a constructionist approach where the development of themes involved interpretative work. The themes identified reflect the researcher’s interpretation of what was pertinent and relevant to secondary transition for the children in the sample from the accounts of children, parents and teachers interviewed.

This research followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines on thematic analysis to carry out analyses of the six separate data sets from interviews with children, parents, primary teachers, secondary teachers. The same procedure described below was applied to conduct a thematic analysis for each separate data set.

Transcription of the interviews lent itself to a reasonable level of familiarisation with the data. After full transcription of every interview in one data set (e.g. children’s interviews), each transcript was read and re-read several times, with pertinent ideas and possible features being noted down each time. Next, initial codes were generated. To do this, significant features of the data were coded in a systematic manner across the data set and data relevant to each code was collated. Rather than a line-by-line analysis, transcripts were coded in ‘units of meaningful text’. This approach was adopted due to the researcher’s awareness that the meaning of a statement might only become clear with reference to further or later responses.

Transcripts and codes were then taken to supervision and shared with an experienced researcher, and the next stage involved the two researchers searching for themes. The codes were organised into potential themes, drawing together all the coded extracts within the identified themes. Mind maps were used to support both researchers to think about the relationships between codes, themes and main themes and sub-themes. At this stage, some initial codes were extended and some were discarded. The themes were then reviewed by both researchers to ensure that the data within a theme was correctly placed and that all selected extracts formed a coherent pattern. If extracts did not fit, the theme was investigated further to ensure that it was not the theme itself that was inadequate. At this stage of analysis, themes were refined, created or discarded accordingly and extracts were moved as appropriate. Once both researchers agreed that the themes captured the coded data, the entire data set was re-read by the primary researcher to ensure that the themes worked across all of the data. Any additional data that was missed in earlier coding was also incorporated at this point. Once the thematic maps that were produced were deemed to represent an appropriate reflection of the data set, the next stage of analysis was undertaken.

The final phase involved defining, refining and naming the themes in a data set. At this point, supervision was used to engage in extensive discussion about the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis told, whilst exploring alternative interpretations of the data, to ensure clear definitions and names for themes were generated and finalised. Themes for each data set were generally broad and were comprised of a number of smaller sub-themes.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents both the quantitative analysis of the assessment and questionnaire data and the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with children, parents, primary teachers and secondary teachers.

4.1. Quantitative results

4.1.1 Descriptive statistics: pre-transition phase

Table 2 shows the mean scores for the entire sample on the WASI, the SRS, the Sensory Profile and the SCAS-P, and Table 3 shows the children's individual scores on each measure. The results from each measure will be discussed in turn.

Table 2. Mean performance for all child participants on measures of IQ, autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety.

Measure	M	SD	Range
WASI			
Verbal IQ	92.50	13.33	67-112
Performance IQ	92.07	15.55	67-119
Full IQ	91.71	14.53	70-116
SRS			
Social Awareness subscale	13.27	4.23	6-22
Social Cognition subscale	21.40	5.59	11-30
Social Communication subscale	37.73	10.55	13-51
Social Motivation subscale	18.80	6.45	5-27
Autistic Mannerisms subscale	22.93	7.20	7-35
Total Raw Score (out of 195)	114.13	30.00	42-163
SP			
Total Factor Raw Score (out of 625)	244.80	49.33	192-358
SCAS-P			
Panic Attack & Agoraphobia subscale	4.40	2.85	0-9
Separation Anxiety subscale	6.50	3.10	1-15
Physical Injury Fears subscale	4.07	2.96	0-9
Social Phobia subscale	7.80	2.21	4-12
Obsessive Compulsive subscale	3.80	2.60	0-9
Generalised Anxiety Disorder subscale	7.27	3.56	2-14
Total Raw Score (out of 114)	33.80	12.53	18-59

4.1.1.1 Cognitive Ability: WASI

Overall, children's full scale performance on the WASI ranged from well below the average (2nd percentile) to well above the average range (86th percentile) (see Table 3) indicating wide variation in individual performance in general cognitive ability. There were also distinct differences across individual performance on the verbal and non-verbal subtests, with 7 children achieving a higher verbal IQ score than performance score and 7 children achieving a higher performance IQ than verbal score (see Table 3). In 6 cases, the difference between verbal and performance IQ was statistically significant at $p=.05$ (see Table 3). This discrepancy made the use of full scale scores less reliable. Therefore, in further analyses verbal scores were used, based on the expectation that verbal ability could impact on social interaction, thus influencing transition success.

4.1.1.2 Autistic behaviours: SRS

On the SRS, a total T score of 76 or higher represents a result in the severe range and is strongly associated with a clinical diagnosis for an autistic spectrum condition (Constantino & Gruber, 2005). The mean SRS total raw score is shown in Table 2. The highest mean score across the five SRS subscales was for social communication. Thirteen of the children in the study sample showed elevated scores on the SRS, and well within the "severe" range. Two children showed lower scores on the SRS (child 12 and child 4), indicative of individuals with mild to moderate autistic spectrum conditions.

4.1.1.3 Sensory features: SP

The mean total factor raw score on the SP is shown in Table 2. The large range in total scores for each of the children on this measure showed there was a wide variation in the level of sensory symptoms they experienced, illuminating the heterogeneity of the sample.

4.1.1.4 Trait anxiety: SCAS-P

As per the authors' guidelines, the scores on the 38 items of the SCAS-P were summed to form a SCAS-P total score for each child. These were compared to SCAS-P norms (separate for age and gender). For a male child aged 6-11 years a total score of 16.0 (SD=11.6) or lower on the 38 questionnaire items is indicative of a child without

anxiety difficulties, with a total score of 15.9 (SD=9.0) or lower being the case for girls. Scores suggestive of anxiety difficulties are 31.4 (SD = 12.9) and 33.0 (SD = 13.5) or higher for boys and girls respectively.

Children in this study (see Table 3) scored well above the scores usually found in the typically developing population. The two subscales of the SCAS-P showing the highest mean scores across this sample (n=15) were social phobia and generalised anxiety, suggesting it was these specific aspects that contributed most to children's trait anxiety levels. Nine of the 15 children within the sample had a SCAS-P total score within the range suggestive of high anxiety levels (see Table 3). Even in the 6 children who did not reach the threshold for high anxiety, their scores were above that which is representative of typically developing children, suggesting somewhat elevated levels of anxiety in all of the children.

Table 3. Scores for all child participants on measures of cognitive ability, autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety

Child	Gender	Age (years: months)	WASI ^a Verbal IQ	WASI Performance IQ	Significant Difference VIQ ^b & PIQ ^c	WASI Full IQ	SRS ^d Total Raw Score	SRS Total T Score ^h	SP ^e Total Factor Raw Score	SCAS-P ^f Total Raw Score	Secondary Provision
1	Male	11:4	91	86	-	87	122	>90	220	38	m/s ^g
2	Male	11:2	-	-	-	-	122	>90	202	49	m/s
3	Male	10:10	88	112	p =.05	100	106	85	244	18	m/s
4	Female	11:9	98	88	-	92	42	58	358	18	m/s
5	Male	10:10	90	97	-	93	115	89	309	36	m/s
6	Male	11:9	109	119	-	116	134	>90	212	32	special
7	Male	10:10	109	111	-	112	122	>90	192	43	special
8	Male	11:1	88	102	p =.05	95	132	>90	212	45	special
9	Female	11:0	109	89	p =.05	100	101	>90	196	19	special
10	Male	11:6	67	79	p =.05	71	100	82	283	25	special
11	Male	11:10	86	91	-	86	135	>90	223	44	special
12	Male	11:5	84	77	-	78	61	63	313	23	m/s
13	Male	11:8	87	72	p =.05	77	130	>90	237	33	special
14	Male	11:3	77	67	-	70	163	>90	252	25	special
15	Male	11:5	112	99	p =.05	107	127	>90	219	59	m/s

Notes. ^aWASI: Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence; ^bVIQ: Verbal IQ; ^cPIQ: Performance IQ; ^dSRS: Social Responsiveness Scale; ^eSP: Sensory Profile; ^fSCAS-P: Spence Children's Anxiety Scale for Parents; ^gm/s: mainstream

^hA total SRS T score of >76 is strongly associated with a clinical diagnosis for an autistic spectrum condition

4.1.2 Relationship between behavioural measures

Correlational analyses were carried out to examine the inter-relationships between scores on the questionnaire measures. Children’s verbal ability (as indexed by the WASI) was not significantly correlated with any measure (see Table 4). There were, however, significant associations between the total scores on the SCAS-P and the Sensory Profile, $r(13) = -.52$, $p < 0.05$, and between the Sensory Profile and SRS, $r(13) = -.69$, $p < 0.01$. Where a child experienced a high level of sensory symptoms, as measured by the Sensory Profile, this was associated with a higher trait anxiety score on the SCAS-P and a higher score on the SRS measuring autistic symptomatology (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Pearson correlation coefficients between measures of verbal cognitive ability, autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety (n = 15).*

Measure	WASI verbal raw	SRS total	SP total	SCAS total
WASI verbal raw	-			
SRS total	-.07	-		
SP total	-.32	-.69**	-	
SCAS total	.27	.50	-.52*	-

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

4.1.3 Successful transition: post-transition phase

One of the primary aims of this study was to examine the predictors of a successful transition process for children with ASD. To address this aim, an index of ‘transition success’ was derived from the parent and child post-transition questionnaires based on the analysis of Evangelou et al. (2008) in their transitions study. As discussed in Chapter 2, Evangelou et al. (2008) defined ‘successful transition’ as a multidimensional construct made up of five underlying factors: developing friendships and confidence, settling in school life, showing a growing interest in school and work, getting used to new routines, and experiencing curriculum continuity (see Table 5). It was not possible to perform factor analysis in the current study due to the small sample size. To facilitate comparison with Evangelou et al. (2008) and to construct a ‘successful transition’ factor, factor scores were derived in the current study using the same items identified by Evangelou et al. (2008) for

each of the 5 dimensions (see Table 5). Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics for each of the 5 factors.

Table 5. *Post transition questionnaire items used to derive factor scores to define successful transition (Evangelou et al., 2008).*

Underlying Dimensions of a Successful Transition	
Developing Friendships and Confidence (1=less, 2=same, 3=more)	
1.	Compared with Y6, child's school friends (source: parent question 35d)
2.	Compared with Y6, child's self esteem (source: parent question 35e)
3.	Compared with Y6, child's confidence (source: parent question 35f)
4.	Compared with Y6, child's motivation (source: parent question 35g)
Settling in school life (1=not at all to 4=very well/much)	
1.	Child settling in (source: parent question 34)
2.	Satisfaction with the process of transition (source: parent question 43)
3.	Not having felt concerned about child when first moved on (source: parent question 31a)
4.	Not feeling concerned about the child now (source: parent question 32a)
5.	Child settling in (source: child question 14)
Showing a growing interest in school and work (1=less, 2=same, 3=more)	
1.	Compared with Y6, child's interest in school (source: parent question 35a)
2.	Compared with Y6, child's interest in school work (source: parent question 35b)
Getting used to new routines (1=very difficult to 4=very easy)	
1.	Having many different teachers (source: child question 17a)
2.	Changing classrooms between lessons (source: child question 17b)
3.	Behaviour and discipline (source: child question 17d)
4.	Not being with same pupils in all lessons (source: child question 17e)
Experiencing curriculum continuity (1=not at all to 4=very)	
1.	English in Y6 helped cope with Y7 work (source: child question 20a)
2.	Maths in Y6 helped cope with Y7 work (source: child question 20b)
3.	Sciences in Y6 helped cope with Y7 work (source: child question 20c)

Table 6. *Descriptive statistics for each of the 5 factors of a successful transition (Evangelou et al., 2008)*

Factor	Mean	SD	Range
Friendship (max. score = 3)	1.93	.78	1 – 3
Settling (max. score = 4)	2.80	.38	2 – 3.40
Interest (max. score = 3)	1.97	.67	1 – 3
Routines (max. score = 4)	2.66	.70	1 – 4
Curriculum (max. score = 4)	2.61	.98	1 – 3.67

As shown in Tables 5 and 6, for some of these items, participants were asked to rate their response on a 3-point scale (e.g. 1=less to 3=more), while for other items they were asked to rate their response on a 4-point scale (e.g. 1=not at all well to 4=very well). To enable

comparisons across items, individual items were first transformed to z scores, thus placing all of the items on the same scale. The z scores of the items within each individual factor (cf. Evangelou et al., 2008) were then averaged to yield a factor score for each of the 5 factors.

Correlational analyses were then performed on the 5 factor scores to determine the “coherence” of these 5 factors. Pearson correlation coefficients are presented in Table 7. Significant associations were found between three of the factors: ‘developing friendships and confidence’, ‘settling in school life’, and ‘showing a growing interest in school and work’. There were also several correlations that approached significance, including between the ‘getting used to new routines’ factor and ‘settling in school life’ and ‘showing a growing interest in school and work’ factors (see Table 7). Children who had begun to develop friendships and confidence in their new school were those who were more settled in to secondary school life and who were also showing more interest in school and work.

Table 7. *Pearson correlation coefficients between all five z score factor scores (five dimensions underlying a successful transition) (Evangelou et al., 2008) (n = 15).*

Factors	Settling	Friendships	Interest	Routines	Curriculum
Settling	-				
Friendships	.62*	-			
Interest	.62*	.56*	-		
Routines	.52	.36	.53	-	
Curriculum	-.04	.21	.33	-.14	-

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Contrary to Evangelou et al.’s (2008) study on typically developing and SEN children’s transition, however, the ‘experiencing curriculum continuity’ factor was not significantly associated with any of the other four factors in this sample of children with autism (see Table 7). Given the lack of relationship between this factor and the other four factors in this sample of children with autism, the ‘curriculum continuity’ score was not included in the study’s overall ‘transition score’. Instead, this continuous variable was derived by averaging the scores of the four factors that showed significant interrelationships.

4.1.3.1 Pre-transition predictors of successful transition

Correlational analyses were then performed to investigate relationships between the overall transition score and individual differences in children’s scores on the WASI Verbal Scale

(to index verbal ability), SCAS-P scores (which measured trait anxiety) SRS scores (which assessed children’s degree of autistic symptomatology), and Sensory Profile scores (which measured degree of sensory symptoms). Unexpectedly, Pearson correlation coefficients revealed no significant associations between any of the intrinsic child characteristics and successful transition (see Table 8). The lack of relationships did not appear to be attributable to the small sample size as none of the correlations approached significance, and furthermore, there were significant associations between scores on measures of child characteristics.

Table 8. *Pearson correlation coefficients between verbal raw scores, autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms trait anxiety and transition z scores (n =15).*

Measure	WASI verbal raw	SRS total	SP total	SCAS total
Transition z score	-.05	.20	-.11	-.10

4.1.3.2 Within-group differences

One issue that arose during the course of the study was the provision to which children transitioned. Notably, 7 of the 15 children in the sample transitioned to mainstream secondary schools, whilst the remaining 8 transitioned to specialist provision (see Table 9 showing the final secondary school placement for each child). This ‘natural divide’ presented a further opportunity to examine post-hoc whether there were any differences on pre-transition measures and transition success between children who transitioned to mainstream and those who transitioned to specialist provision. To examine group differences, one-way ANOVAs were performed on scores measuring children’s cognitive, behavioural and perceptual characteristics (pre-transition) as well as their overall post-transition score.

No significant differences were found between the children who transitioned to special or mainstream secondary school in terms of their verbal ability $F(14) = .34, p = .57, ns$, non-verbal ability $F(14) = .20, p = .66, ns$, degree of sensory symptoms $F(14) = 2.86, p = .12, ns$, and trait anxiety $F(14) = .03, p = .86, ns$. Interestingly, however, there was a marginally significant difference between the two groups in terms of autistic

symptomatology, $F(14) = 3.87$, $p < 0.07$, suggesting that those children who transitioned to mainstream schools experienced fewer autistic symptoms (as indexed by the SRS) than those children who transitioned to specialist provision.

Furthermore, there were no significant differences between the two groups of children in terms of their transition success $F(14) = .00$, $p = .97$, ns, suggesting that transition success was not dependent on which type of secondary provision the child transitioned to, either special or mainstream.

Table 9. *Final secondary school placements for child participants following the transition from primary school.*

Child	Secondary provision offered by the local authority at the pre-transition phase	Secondary provision child attended at the post-transition phase
1	Local Mainstream	Local Mainstream
2	Special (LD ^a /ASD ^b)	Local Mainstream due to child refusal to transition to special provision
3	Special (LD/ASD)	Out of County Mainstream due to tribunal appeal - won by the family
4	Local Mainstream	Local Mainstream
5	Local Mainstream	Local Mainstream
6	School placement not confirmed until mid July	Special (LD/ASD)
7	School placement not confirmed until late July	NMI ^d Special (Boys) due to tribunal appeal - won by the family
8	Special (Emotional ^c /LD/Boys)	Special (Emotional/LD/Boys)
9	Special (Emotional/LD/Girls)	Special (Emotional/LD/Girls)
10	Special (LD/ASD)	Special (LD/ASD) until December 2010. Home tuition from January 2011 due to students challenging behaviour and anxiety in school
11	School placement not confirmed until late July	NMI Special (Asperger syndrome/Mixed ^e) due to tribunal appeal - won by the family
12	Local Mainstream	Local Mainstream
13	School placement not confirmed until late July	NMI Special (Asperger syndrome/Mixed) due to tribunal appeal - won by the family
14	School placement not confirmed until early July	Special (MLD ^f) due to tribunal appeal - won by the local authority
15	Local Mainstream	Local Mainstream

Notes. ^aLD: Learning Difficulties; ^bASD: Autistic Spectrum Disorder; ^cEmotional: Emotional Difficulties; ^dNMI: Non-maintained Independent; ^eMixed: Boys and Girls; ^fMLD: Moderate Learning Difficulties

4.2 Qualitative results

As discussed in Chapter 3, 6 separate thematic analyses were carried out to analyse the interview data from the children, parents, primary teachers and secondary teachers (3 at each phase of the research). Children and parents were interviewed at both the pre-transition and post-transition phase of the study. However, it became evident during the analysis of the parent interview data that many themes recurred across both the pre-transition and post-transition interviews. For this reason, the parent themes are presented together, representing the data collected for both interviews carried out with each parent. The children's themes are presented separately according to the 2 phases of the research study. The primary teachers' themes represent the data collected from interviews with these participants at the pre-transition phase of the research. The secondary teachers' themes represent the data collected from interviews with these participants at the post-transition phase of the research. Therefore, the interview data will be presented under the 4 broad subheadings related to each group of participants

Under each main theme for each participant group, a figure is presented to visually represent the theme and subthemes discussed within the narrative. The bold lines within the figure link the main subthemes to the overall theme, whereas the dotted lines represent the links between subthemes. In addition, in order to illustrate the themes, some example quotations have been included within the narrative for each theme.

4.2.1 Children's themes: pre-transition phase

There were 2 themes identified from the children's pre-transition interviews.

4.2.1.1 Theme 1: Already Finding School Challenging

"I don't know what things I like about primary school...I hate school" (Child 12)

The message that came across powerfully from half of the children interviewed in the pre-transition phase of the study was how they were already experiencing difficulties within primary school. These children spoke of their negative experiences and perceptions of school, predominantly related to the social difficulties that they faced within the primary setting. This theme encapsulates how it was the marked difference in both the social competence and social lived experience of this group of vulnerable children that most

strikingly set them apart from their ‘neurotypical’ peers in primary school. The 7 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) feeling unhappy at school; ii) exposure to bullying; iii) social isolation; iv) importance of friends and peers; v) social difficulties and lack of specific support; vi) difference / feel different; and vii) bullying and manipulation.

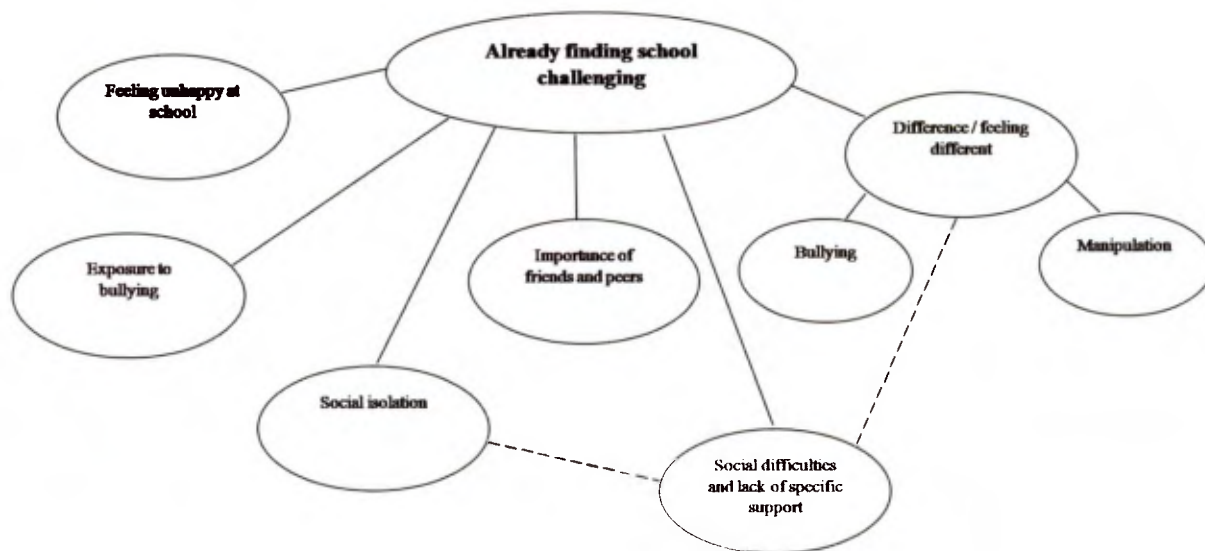


Figure 1. *Children’s pre-transition theme 1*

Seven of the 14 children communicated how they felt they did not enjoy anything at school and this ranged from teachers to curriculum work and homework tasks. The relationships that 3 of these children had with teaching staff were apparently strained, and they explicitly used words to suggest how they felt teachers were overly ‘strict’ and how they felt this impacted on them negatively. It was clear that appropriate differentiation within the curriculum could be difficult for primary school teachers to achieve, without the children perceiving school tasks as identifying them as ‘different’ from their peers. School work and homework tasks were referred by some of the children as activities they did not want to engage with. There was an overall sense from these 7 children that they were already experiencing some level of disaffection towards school, and that the forthcoming prospect of going to secondary school was difficult for them to face. For example, as 1 boy said:

“I don’t want to talk about school. It is hurting my feelings because I don’t like school. It is upsetting me going to a new school.” (Child 10)

Six children spoke about situations they had been exposed to which they had experienced to be bullying, such as name calling or being excluded from playground games with their peers. The descriptions they gave were, in some cases, explicitly linked to feelings of unhappiness, loneliness and isolation within school.

“I don’t like bullies at primary school. That’s why I am a recluse in the playground ... I don’t talk to many people until I know them.” (Child 8)

Three children referred specifically to being overtly excluded from games with their peers during play times, and their comments seemed to highlight their lack of personal skills in actively involving themselves in social situations to avoid being on their own. There were several children who talked about their friendships in primary school as being something they liked, and it was evident that these children had formed friendships and were beginning to learn the life skills of social interaction. However, it was apparent that these children generally showed a level of immaturity and some difficulty in their social skills, and so they appeared to have developed friendships that were not necessarily of a reciprocal nature or with children of a similar chronological age to them. For example, Child 9 said:

“I like being with my friends and I’ve got loads of year 3 and 4 friends that I like to help.”

Even in those cases where the children had been successful in forming friendships with peers, the circle of friends available to them was small and they could often recognise this. One boy showed a clear awareness of how he lacked the personal capacity to socialise effectively, and he specifically referred to his desire for assistance to improve his skills in this area.

“I wish people would help me because I need a lot more friends than I am getting.” (Child 8)

Some children spoke about feeling that teachers were not able to provide them with appropriate guidance to support them in school. In situations where children had explicitly sought the assistance of a teacher following an altercation, there was a sense of hopelessness that the steps they had taken had not provided an effective resolution to their concerns, like Child 3 who said:

“...because if I do tell the teacher then the other people [children] just come in and tell them about it.”

There were children who directly reflected on how they felt different and how they believed their own personal difficulties could make them susceptible to bullying from others in school.

“Yeah [I get] worried a bit about the bullies. They always try and pick on me because I have difficulties...like my ADHD and autism, they just find out about it.” (Child 15)

This notion of being different from a ‘neurotypical’ child also seemed to place these vulnerable children as victim to social manipulation and exploitation, which was not always understood or acknowledged by teachers. For example, 1 boy spoke of being dared to do something by a peer which had later resulted in him being told off by an adult.

4.2.1.2 Theme 2: Anxious Anticipation / Change and Coping

The second theme identified in the children’s interviews in the pre-transition phase highlights how the children had concerns that could be expected from any child – autistic or not – contemplating moving on from primary school. The 8 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) size; ii) geography of school; iii) homework and curriculum; iv) being new; v) making friends; vi) bullying; vii) change/fear; and viii) leaving childhood behind.



Figure 2. Children’s pre-transition theme 2

“Well it’s a bigger than this school and I am afraid I could get lost in it because it’s a very big school. It’s got really loads and loads of children.” (Child 4)

Nine children spoke explicitly about the size of their next school, demonstrating their awareness that the organisation would present on a much larger scale, in terms of larger buildings, more rooms, and a greater number of students and teachers. They suggested how for them this could instil a sense of feeling scared, nervous or apprehensive, in relation to the geography of the school and navigating themselves around, as well as being surrounded by increased numbers of students and those who were older. Whilst some children described their excitement about access to improved facilities, the majority of the children appeared to find the overall prospect of a bigger school quite daunting, like 1 boy who asserted:

“What I like about my primary school is it is not such a big school.” (Child 5)

Seven children referred to the differences in the curriculum they would experience in secondary school, predominantly in relation to homework. They spoke about the increased difficulty of curriculum work and greater amounts of homework to be so overwhelmingly different, almost unmanageable. However, the children tended to be largely preoccupied with the social differences they would face when leaving primary school. The prospect of being a new student was a concern for some, and this particularly seemed to be the case for those children who were moving to a secondary school without access to established friendships or familiar peers from their primary school. Linked to this, was the realisation that forming new friendships could be potentially quite difficult in a new, less familiar environment. There were children who voiced how they thought playtimes would be difficult, mostly because it would take them time to make friends. Whilst many of the children spoke of their upset at the separation from their primary school colleagues, there was evidence of mixed feelings towards transition and anxious-anticipation and hopefulness towards forming new peer relationships.

“I don’t want to leave and I am sad about leaving my friends, but I might make some new friends.” (Child 11)

For other children the excitement of making new friends was marred by the belief that they would also have new negative relationships to contend with.

“The amount of people will be different, my class, new school mates, new bullies to sort out...hmmm great!” (Child 15)

Some of the children suggested they really did not want to change schools or they did not feel ready to do so. This seems to illuminate how the transition to secondary school can impact directly on the most significant area of disability for an autistic child, who by the very nature of their condition can show a desire and insistence on sameness and a resistance to change. For these children, the thought of changing schools was directly linked to feelings of fear. They spoke of feeling unprepared to make this next natural step in their academic career, and in some cases they talked of their strong opposition towards growing up.

4.2.2 Children’s themes: post-transition phase

There were two 2 identified from the children’s post-transition interviews.

4.2.2.1 Theme 1: Loss of Familiar Relationships, Routines and Systems

This first theme identified in the post-transition interviews with the children outlines how the loss of familiar relationships, routines and systems to which they had become accustomed had a significant impact on them when they changed schools. The 5 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) making friends in the secondary context; ii) sensory stressors; iii) feeling unsafe; iv) not settling in; and v) rejecting special identity.

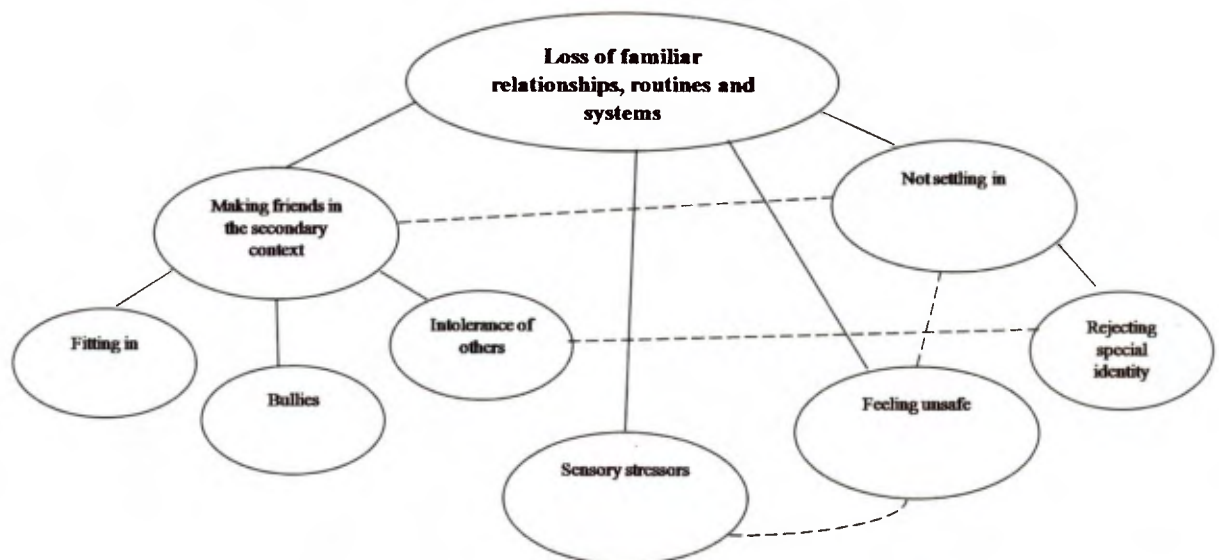


Figure 3. Children’s post-transition theme 1

“Well because the teachers are different from my old teachers and I feel sad because I miss my old teachers...It is really different to my old school because my old school is primary school and I don’t have any friends. I don’t want to talk about it.” (Child 10)

Seven children who were interviewed at least half a term after beginning at their new school referred explicitly to missing teachers at their primary schools, as well as friends who had transferred to a different school. Often, the loss of friendships was referred to as being the most difficult aspect for the children when changing schools, particularly when the children had been learning in a class with the same group of students for a number of years. For some children, becoming used to changes in routines was still something they were coming to terms with during their first term in a new school, as Child 9 discussed:

“I miss how near my primary school was and mum taking me to school. It takes half a millennium to get to my new school.”

Four children spoke specifically about their struggle to make friends in the secondary context, delivering the message that they currently found themselves in a situation where they had fewer friends than before. This could mean they often did not have anyone to be with at playtime. Child 7 referred specifically to his difficulty in securing new friendships because he was not consistently with the same pupils in all of his lessons, thus illustrating how the different structures and systems within the secondary context were having an impact on him. Furthermore, the secondary context seemed to present new challenges for 4 of the children in terms of the sensory stressors within a larger, busier, noisier environment. Child 5 referred to the increased number of people moving around in the corridors at his new school and he described how this made it both difficult and uncomfortable to successfully navigate his way around the school. Three children referred specifically to their sensitivity to noise in the secondary school context, and they described how they felt this impacted on them, like Child 3 who said:

“The hardest thing about moving to my new school is just the noise in the classrooms, I just can’t handle it...it’s just uncomfortable...I am trying to learn and listen to the teacher and some people like just talk around me and I can’t really concentrate...well in geography I am ok, it is a bit quieter, but it makes me worry.”

For these children, their sensitivity to noise was not only the cause of stress and anxiety for them in their new school, but it also caused them physical discomfort and pain.

“The noise hurts my ears...I say hurt...it hurts more than getting bullied.” (Child 8)

Five children spoke of feeling insecure within secondary school and this seemed to be linked to new experiences related to transition, such as being in a school with older children or being required to take transport to school. Others spoke of feeling vulnerable in the playground, and some children spoke of explicitly seeking out safe places of refuge. As Child 6 highlighted, it was evident that not feeling safe in school could have a negative impact on settling into a new environment:

"I don't feel safe in school, I don't know why, I just don't. No way do I feel safe in the playground. I would feel safer if I went to a different school."

It was very clear that 2 children were far from accepting being at their new school, and that different, higher expectations, such as being given permission to use the toilet less often, were fuelling their desire to go elsewhere or back to their primary school.

"I don't want to go back to [refers to secondary school by name] tomorrow because I keep reacting to it. [directed at his mother] I am really reacting to the school, don't you realise? I am not supposed to be there. It's a bad school for me." (Child 10)

A powerful message communicated by 3 children who had transferred from mainstream primary to secondary specialist provision was their rejection of their new 'special identity'. Four children spoke of finding their new peers annoying and intolerable. It appeared that being taught with children who also had difficulties was not only difficult for them to manage but they also found it hard to accept having any association with these other children. Underlying this, was a sense of frustration and questioning by the children as to why they had not transferred to their local school with their 'mainstream' peers, who over time they had related to and moulded their sense of personal identity alongside. It seemed that now they found themselves within a setting where they could not relate themselves to being like the 'special' peers around them.

"All the boys are nice at my school, but I don't mean this to be offensive, but there are some that are pretty 'koo koo'. What I mean by that is [child X] he's a bit of an insanity...the mad man, he is very controlling. I prefer my brother than [child X] any day...he is just a bit too controlling. He takes my games. It is really frustrating. Sometimes I really want to swear at him." (Child 8)

In contrast; however, the interviews with 3 other children, 2 of whom had transferred to mainstream secondary schools were equally as revealing. These 2 children referred to

themselves as ‘weird’ or a ‘nerd’, suggesting how they perceived themselves to be different from their mainstream peers. These children spoke of measures they had taken to secure friendships in school, such as helping other students with directions and how to use computers, seeming to emphasise their desire to fit in. Furthermore, it was evident from 4 of the children that bullying was a concern or an issue for them in their new school, and in certain cases it was appearing ‘different’ or not fitting that was judged to lead to the potential of being more susceptible to torment, as child 15 said:

“I am not settling in the best, I mean I have got bullies being a pain!...I don’t get help with my work but I don’t want it that’s why. It gives people fuel and they use it and tease me...the other children still tease me for it and so I refuse them to help me write.”

4.2.2.2 Theme 2: Adjusting to a New Organisation

The final theme that was identified from the post-transition interviews with the children highlights the difficulties that many of them experienced in acclimatising to life in a new school that placed different demands on them compared to their previous primary school. This seemed to be particularly apparent for those children who had transferred to a mainstream school. The 5 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) curriculum demands; ii) homework; iii) discipline and expectations; iv) getting lost; and v) lots of teachers.

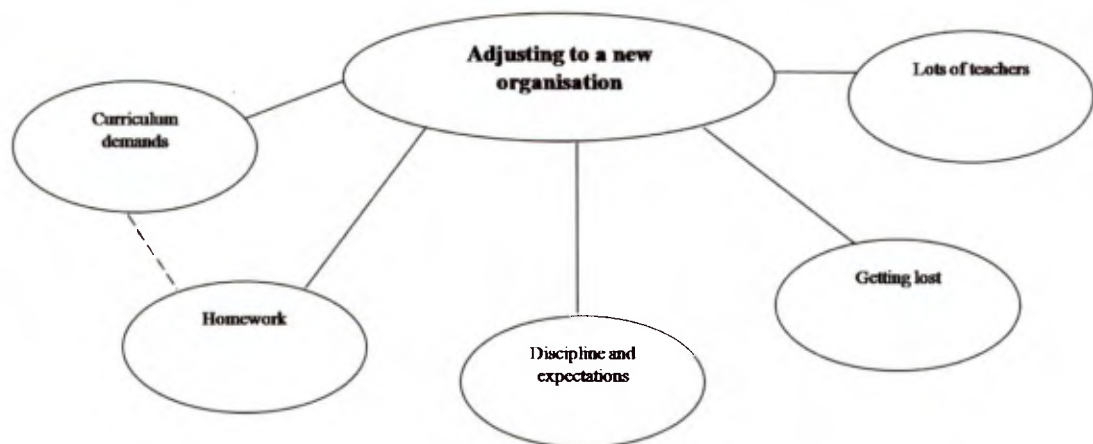


Figure 4. Children’s post-transition theme 2

“I am struggling with homework. I just keep forgetting my homework book. When the teacher says have you done your homework and I say which homework?” (Child 3)

The struggle to cope with the increased demands of the curriculum was clear. 3 children spoke of this, particularly in relation to the increased emphasis on recording their work in writing. 3 children also spoke of the pressures of homework, suggesting they found this difficult to organise, alongside other aspects of school, such as managing their personal equipment and resources. Many of these children described how they had received detentions, highlighting the different level of expectations and discipline they were experiencing within secondary school.

“Secondary school is more strict because they have got higher standards like– work, uniform, behaviour, all sorts. You can get a detention for uniform like ties, make up all sorts...shirts hanging out. (Child 15)

Three children referred explicitly to the organisational discontinuities between primary and secondary school, which related to the final two subthemes. Specifically, the children experienced difficulties with negotiating and moving around a much bigger building and also the requirement to change classrooms for different lessons. Linked to this, was coping with having contact with an increased number of teaching staff across the school.

However, 8 children did refer to systems and structures within their secondary school that they felt helped them when beginning at their new school. These included, diaries, timetables and planners to help the children organise their homework and know which lessons to go to; student buddies and teachers to show them around the building to help them navigate their way around the school, and finally social skills groups and ‘circle of friends’ (Newton, Taylor & Wilson, 1996) to support the children with friendships and social interaction.

4.2.3 Parents themes: pre-transition and post-transition phases combined

There were 6 themes identified from the interviews with parents.

4.2.3.1 Theme 1: Impact of Late Decision

“I think that’s the hardest thing. I want to stop fighting now. I want to be able to put my feet up and concentrate on my other children instead of dreading a phone call that it’s the school and I am going to have to go up. Or you know, to be able to relax a bit.” (Parent 6)

Speaking with the parents about their child’s transition, it was raised by 5 of them how they felt they had experienced a struggle and a battle to get their child’s needs met within educational provision for some time. Some of these parents spoke of their child having attended more than one primary school to achieve this, and others reflected on their dissatisfaction with their experiences of the educational system so far. Where parents appeared more confident and relaxed about their child’s forthcoming transition to secondary school, they tended to be those families who felt they had received sufficient early intervention to meet their child’s needs or could talk about positive experiences of support for their child within primary school. Five families within the sample had been involved in an appeals process with the LA regarding an appropriate secondary school placement for their child. The issue that was prominent for these parents was the impact that this had on naming a school in sufficient time for an effective transition process and preparation for their child to actually occur. The 6 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) part of on-going battle to get needs met; ii) uncertainty causes ASD child anxiety; iii) stress for parents; iv) misses out on transition; v) treated less favourably; and vi) bureaucracy.

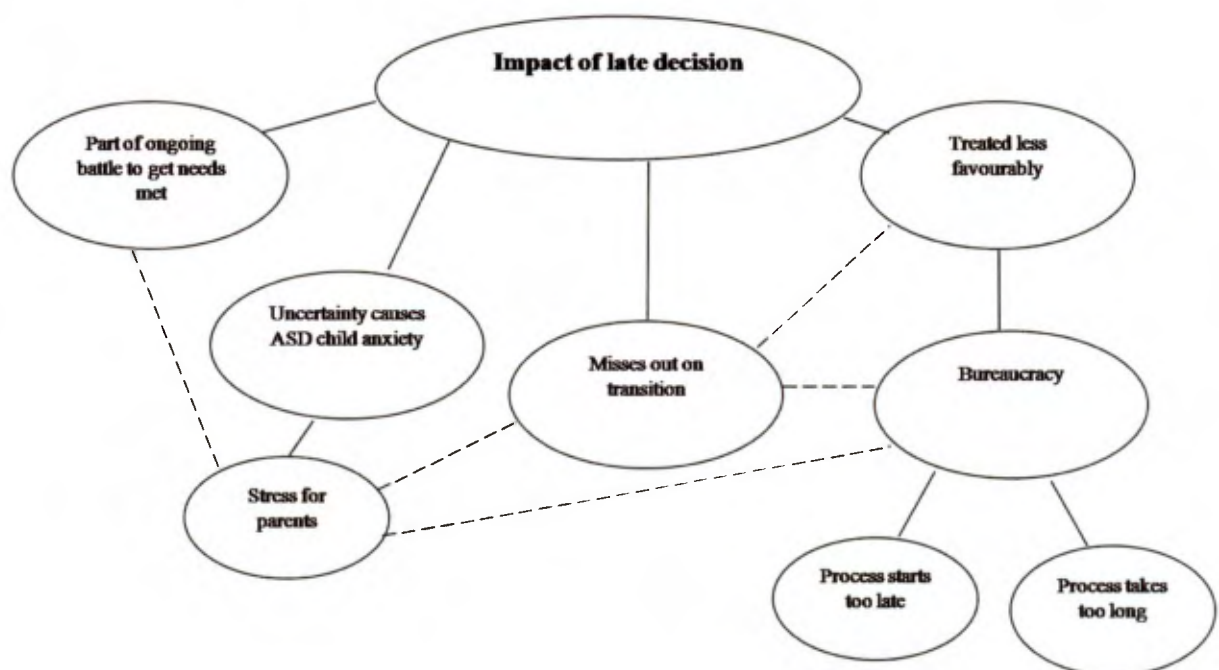


Figure 5. Parent theme 1

Two parents spoke specifically about how not knowing which school their child was going to caused their child undue misery and worry, particularly when their peers knew which

schools they were going to and visits to new provision were well underway. This obviously had immense knock on effects for parents, and 4 of them spoke of the stress they experienced in not being able to provide their child with definite information and explanations regarding schools, coupled with feelings of helplessness at their inability in being able to begin preparing their child for the next step. Two parents spoke about how their child had completely missed out on transition visits because their school was named so late in the day. Other parents communicated how delays in confirming a school place had resulted in rushed transition visits during the very final weeks of year 6, well behind in time to the visits that other children had received. Parents described how the sheer process of securing an appropriate specialist placement for their child left them feeling that their child had been treated badly, almost inferior to other children, causing these already vulnerable youngsters to feel distressed, isolated and unhappy during their final term at primary school.

“Well because of his special needs it has been a rocky ride and because we were not sure which school he was going to, therefore [child’s name] wasn’t sure where he was going to, and it made for his year 6, particularly over the last term, he was very unhappy...and his peers knew exactly where they were going, it didn’t help...and the appeal process is so long and convoluted.” (Parent 14)

A clear message from these 5 families was that the whole process of admissions into specialist provisions was too bureaucratic, with too many panels, too much paper work and unrealistic time-scales. This meant that sufficient and appropriate transition arrangements were compromised, with the child and family paying the cost in terms of their emotional well-being and overall satisfaction with the transition process.

4.2.3.2 Theme 2: Lack of Provision for ASD Needs

A prominent message delivered by 6 of the parents was that there was not enough secondary provision in county and evenly across the county to meet their child’s ASD needs. As well as there being too few schools and limited available places, the fact that schools were situated in only certain areas of the county was an issue. For some families this had significant implications in terms of the distance their vulnerable child would be required to travel to reach an appropriate secondary school. One parent spoke of feeling lucky that her daughter had been awarded one of a very limited number of places in local specialist provision, and described how their family were almost unable to contemplate

their predicament if this had not been the case. The 3 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) catering for the range of needs; ii) square pegs round holes; and iii) school not able / willing to meet needs.

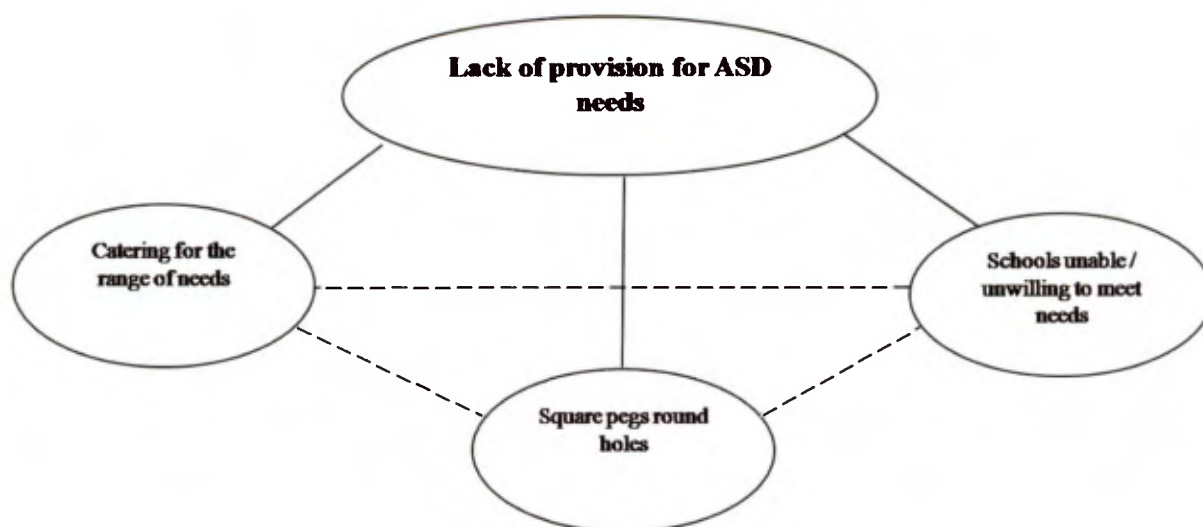


Figure 6. *Parent theme 2*

Two parents spoke passionately about their frustrations regarding current local maintained provision not being sufficiently resourced environments to meet the holistic needs of their child, beyond their academic needs, for example, in terms of access to therapy for their language, sensory and mental health needs. One parent described how the specialist provision her son was now accessing, whilst being both a nurturing and supportive school, was not actually fully appropriate or able to meet his wide ranging individualised needs. This parent reflected on how such a situation was very upsetting and difficult to accept.

Two parents also spoke of how their child did not fit the profile or mould of the specialist provisions that the LA have to offer secondary aged students with an ASD. For example, they described how schools were geared towards children with ASD needs and learning difficulties, meaning they were inappropriate for their sons who were of average academic ability. However, they clearly felt their children would be unable to cope with a mainstream environment and that they desperately required holistic intervention and support.

“What I think is hard with a child with ASD, they think they are going to fit in this box, he is not going to be able to do this or that, and they are not the same. Every child with ASD is

different and I think with all [LA name] maintained schools they have to fit in to this little box... ” (Parent 6)

Four parents described how they had either been turned away from numerous schools because their child did not fit criteria, or they had received overt messages from schools, both mainstream and specialist providers, that they would not be able to cope with their child or meet their needs. Obviously, for the parents this could be an anxiety provoking message to hear. One parent described how their family had approached over 10 different schools, who each for their own reasons had advised that they could not best meet their son’s needs (Child 13). By very late July, the family had yet to secure a school place for their son. This parent described how a non-maintained independent school was really the last hope or chance for their son to be educated within a school setting come September.

4.2.3.3 Theme 3: Tensions with LA

“I think the process of getting special school places should change or improve somehow. It is a very difficult thing, and it is a lot of money I’m asking for, I appreciate that, however, my son is the most important thing in the world to me so I am going to fight for the right school.” (Parent 11)

Conflicts with the local authority were very apparent when talking to 6 parents. The 8 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) parents feeling bullied to accept LA decisions; ii) lack of choice; iii) recognising financial imperatives for LA; iv) own child’s needs over ride; v) battling for your child; vi) bureaucracy; vii) lack of communication; viii) not feeling there is partnership with parents.

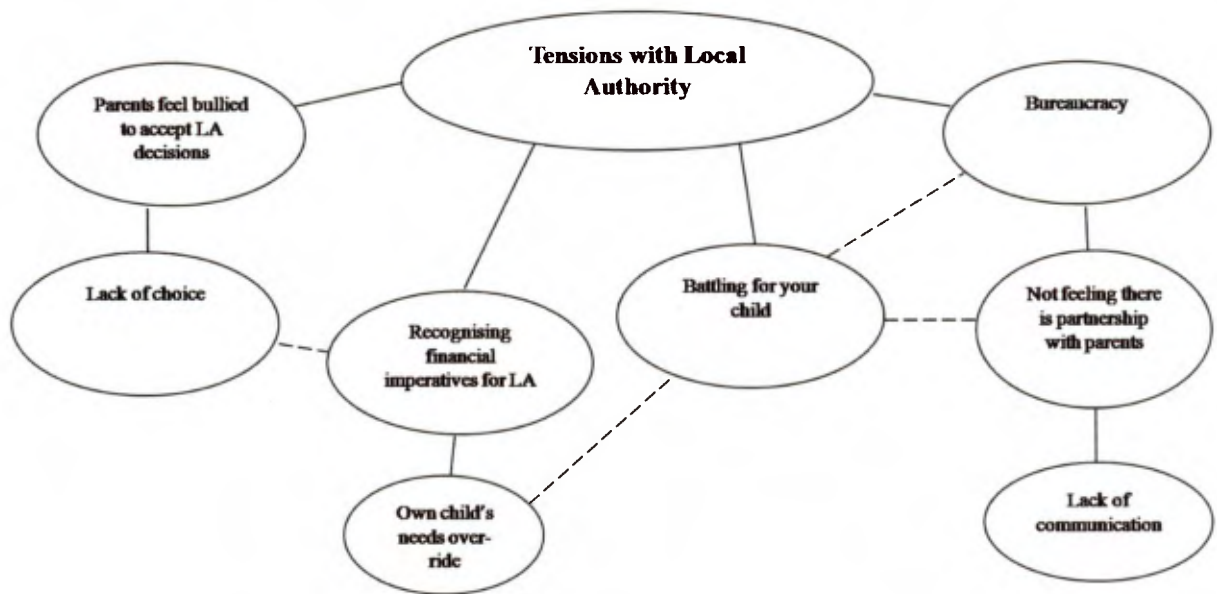


Figure 7. *Parent theme 3*

The hostility evident from the parents was in relation to the lack of choice for them over secondary provision, largely due to the limited appropriate provision available in county. This appeared to result in these families feeling in bitter opposition to the LA. One family described how they had been backed into a corner by the LA to accept the school offered to them against their own better judgement, and they spoke of knowing they were into a losing battle when they discovered there were such limited options available to them in terms of schools for their son.

Whilst parents talked of being very aware of the financial constraints the LA were under and the considerations that ultimately needed to be given to funding, they spoke highly emotively about how their child was the overall priority in their disagreements with LA decisions. The powerful language that these parents used served to highlight their heightened emotions, and in some cases unrelenting persistence, to fight to the bitter end to ensure the very best possible outcomes for their child.

The parents talked of the bureaucracy surrounding admissions processes to access local specialist provision, and 1 family referred to the numerous panels and confused decision making processes that they felt had failed their child numerous times. Many of the parents alluded to the poor communication channels with the LA and the lack of two-way partnership, which often meant that they themselves were left to chase and sort things out to

keep a process moving or get things done. Again, the parents spoke with high emotions as they described the complexity of an appeals process being enough for them to manage, to be only intensified further by a lack of information and communication about exactly what was going on at each stage of the process. One family spoke of feeling the LA was set against them and was withholding information, signalling a clear lack of collaboration between the two parties. Despite feeling they knew their child the best, the parents described feeling unheard or not listened to, resulting in them feeling very alone and unsupported.

4.2.3.4 Theme 4: Pressure on Parents

The fourth theme that was identified from the parent interviews highlights the high levels of pressure that many of the families were under during the secondary transition process. This theme describes the concerns of the 'unknown' that parents felt in relation to the process, in particular the LA decision making regarding schools to determine the future for their child. It also presents the sheer difficulties experienced in family life, only exacerbated further by changing schools. The 7 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) everyday life is hard enough; ii) worries about the future; iii) school placement; iv) lack of experience of the process; v) child and parent in conflict over choice of new school; vi) impact of placement decisions on parenting and child; and vii) behavioural impact of transition stress on the child and family.

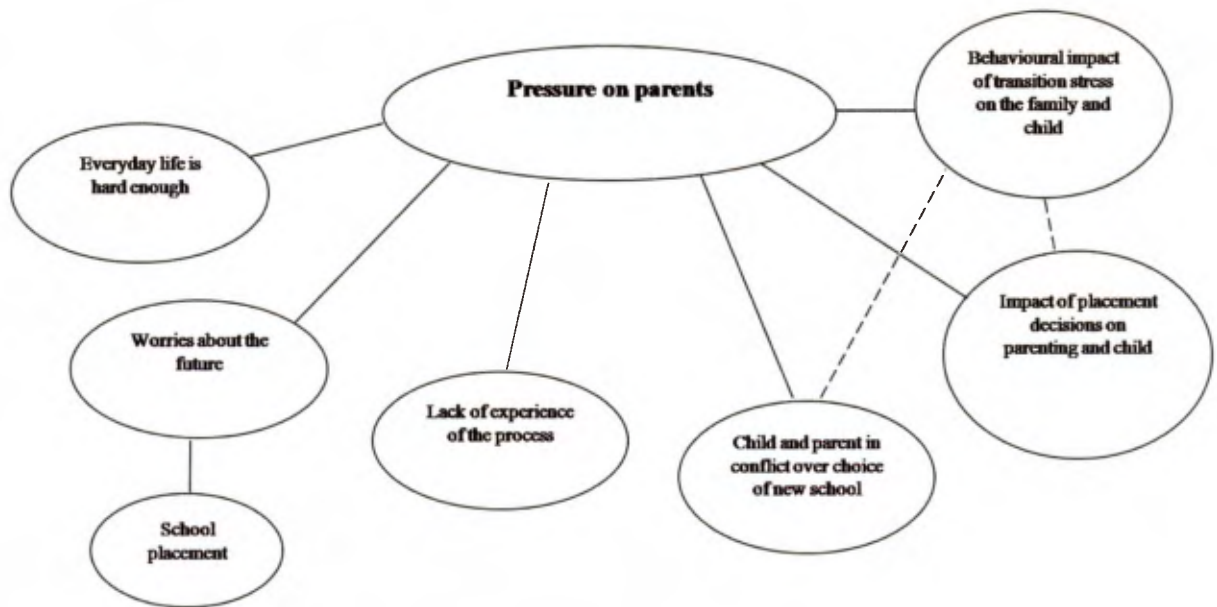


Figure 8. *Parent theme 4*

“You get used to it, and it is every day. Every day you just take it as it comes.” (Parent 6)

Four parents shared the difficulties they encountered in bringing up a child with autism. They spoke of their day to day struggles in managing a job and general daily life tasks in the home, alongside the exhaustion of raising a child with special needs. They described, for example, how their child’s challenging behaviour and sensory sensitivities had such a significant and on-going impact on family life. Two parents openly discussed the trauma and struggle they experienced in coping with their child’s mental health issues associated with their autism. They described horrific and harrowing events, where their child had absconded from school or attempted to take his own life.

The parents spoke of their worries for the future of their child following transition to secondary school. Three parents specifically raised concern for whether their child would actually cope, giving consideration to the daunting prospect of home tuition should they not and the secondary school give up on their child. Five parents raised their fear of not knowing how their child would manage life in a secondary school. They tended to relate this to their own personal memories of going to secondary school, or in some cases, their other children without autism and the difficulties they had encountered. Others reflected on what they had noted on visiting their child’s new school which had led them to doubt that their child could survive and deal effectively with the dramatic change. Linked to this, 4

parents suggested that their worries were only exacerbated by the fact that this was the first time they were going through such a major change for their child.

“I mean I am doubting my choice of school because he has sort of swayed my judgement and you know I love him, and he is begging me you know [to go to local mainstream instead of a special school].” (Parent 2)

Eight of the parents described the difficulties they had in making the decision about secondary provision. Whilst it was clear that they were keen to choose the school that they as parent felt comfortable with and confident could best meet their child’s needs, they described the turmoil and uncertainty they experienced in doing this when they took into consideration their child’s opposed view. For those parents considering a specialist placement for their child, the conflicts that were raised by their child in going to a different school to their mainstream peers were particularly prominent. The parents experienced emotional confusion when trying to balance the educational needs of their child with the potential negative trade off on their child’s well-being that could ensue should they send them to a school that would demarcate them as ‘different’ and ‘not fitting in’ with their mainstream peers.

Finally the impact of the stressful transition process on both effective parenting and the child’s behaviour at home was very evident in the interviews with parents. Two parents explicitly referred to how the pressure over confirming school placements with the LA directly impacted on their ability parent their child. They described their difficulties in remaining calm and effectively prioritising their child’s needs amongst the commotion of the appeals process. Alongside this, 6 parents described the impact of transition stress, both before and after changing schools, on the child’s behaviour at home. Much of the challenging behaviour described was in the form of verbal and physical aggression directed towards parents, or a child’s behavioural outbursts and self harm were in relation to accepting their new school and coping with their new environment.

“His behaviour at home has been unbelievable...I think he holds it all in at school and it’s got to come out. It can’t stay inside him all the time. He’s got to have this explosion.” (Parent 5)

4.2.3.5 Theme 5: Holistic Education

The fifth theme evident from parent interviews was linked to parental desire for their child's happiness and independence both at secondary school and in the future.

Furthermore, parents communicated how they were keen for secondary schools to focus on their child's holistic needs in order to ensure positive future outcomes. The 9 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) more than academic; ii) happiness; iii) future life skills; iv) social skills; v) mental health; vi) depression; vii) anxiety; viii) living with being different; and lack of mental health support.

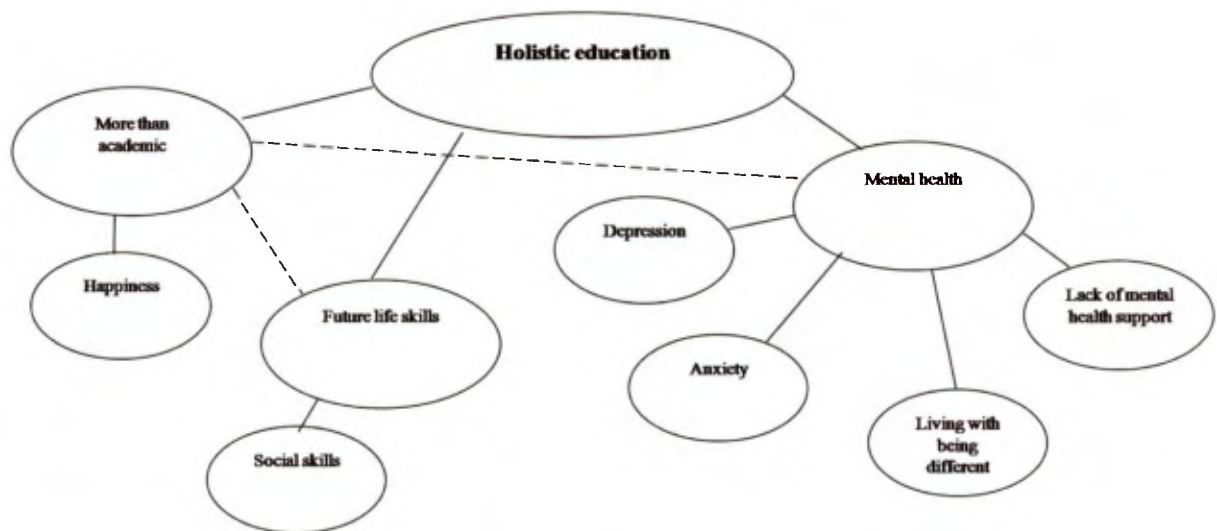


Figure 9. Parent theme 5

Six parents spoke about wanting their child first and foremost to be happy at secondary school, with concerns for academic achievement coming second to this, or felt to be more possible once their child was settled and happy. To achieve this contentment, and therefore, later academic success, parents spoke of wanting their child to be able to cope with the social and organisational differences in secondary school. They were also keen for their child to develop some life skills and social skills. Many of the parents were already thinking about the longer term outcomes for their child, in relation to their independent living and capabilities as well as job prospects. Therefore, parents were keen for their child to begin working towards a positive future for themselves within secondary school.

"I mean he's academic, but I don't care about academic. That's the last thing on my mind at the moment. College he can do that later or he can do something later. As long as he can be happy. And well, his life skills. Understanding why he feels the way he does and

understanding the way he behaves and why he can't tolerate noise and what to do when he finds himself in the situation where he can feel it building and he doesn't know what to do, they can teach him what to do or try and explain." (Parent 6)

Six parents spoke of the difficulties their child experienced in terms of their social skills, which they felt had a direct impact on their success in secondary school. They spoke of their child not understanding the 'norms' of social interaction, or their child being immature or inappropriate socially. These social difficulties were suggested by parents to have the potential to impact or were already impacting on their child's secondary school experience. So much so, in the post transition interviews, 6 parents raised issues or concerns for their child in not yet having successfully formed friendships within their new school.

Five parents spoke of their concerns for the mental health of their children, mostly in relation to anxiety and depression. They spoke of their child's difficulties with transition, such as adjusting to a new school, and how they were concerned this had the potential to exacerbate anxious and depressive tendencies and lead to chronic issues in the future.

Three parents spoke specifically about how their child had been referred to mental health professionals, and generally the family had found this experience unhelpful and unsupportive, in particular due to the lack of ASD specialism of professionals.

4.2.3.6 Theme 6: Getting the Placement Right

The final theme that was identified from parent interviews highlighted the difficulties that many parents experienced in securing a placement that both they and their child felt was right. The 8 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) separation from peers; ii) awareness of difference; iii) intolerance of peers; iv) personal identity; v) refusing to transition; vi) special may be very special; vii) fitting the profile of the school; and viii) inflexibility / unresponsive to individual needs.

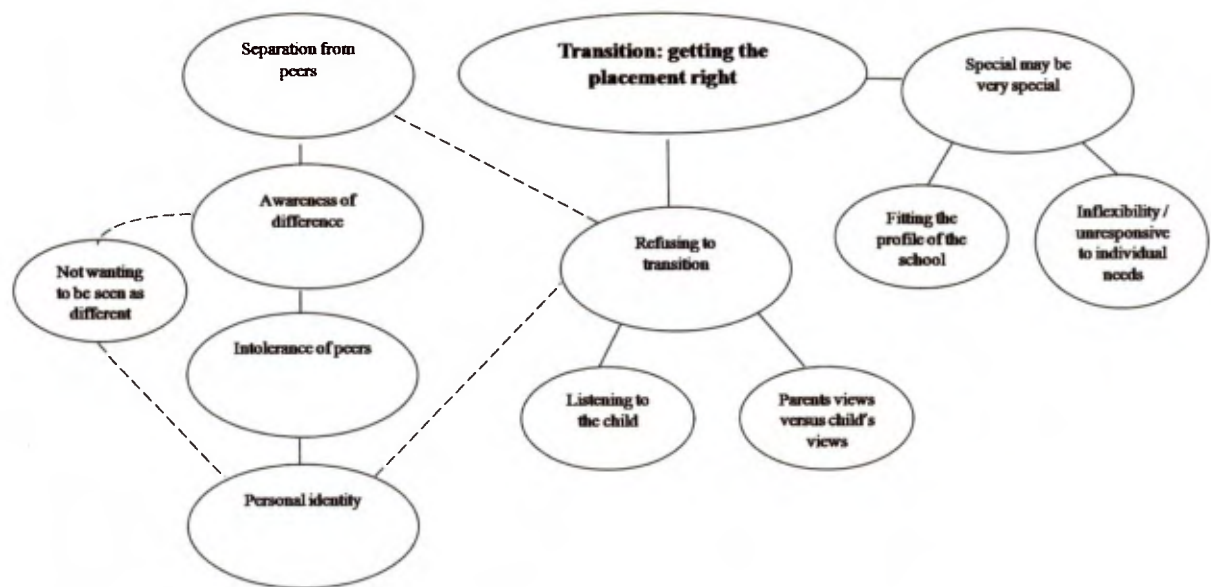


Figure 10. *Parent theme 6*

Three parents spoke about the difficulties their child experienced in moving to a special school that was different from their primary peers. The parents acknowledged that the transition to any school was likely to be problematic due to their child's difficulties and associated anxiety with change. However, parents were struggling with situations where their child had specifically voiced wanting to go to the same school as peers they were familiar with. One parent spoke of how she felt her son would not have experienced the same level of objection to his transition had he gone to his local mainstream school with his friends, but as a parent she knew he would just not have coped with this.

"He is quite vulnerable...he's quite different...he's desperate for it to be successful, absolutely desperate. He's pinned all his hopes on this will be the school where he makes all his friends, which is obviously quite a worry." (Parent 15)

In the post-transition interviews, 4 parents whose child had moved on to a mainstream secondary school talked of how their child was very conscious to not be seen as different from their peers. This related to how comfortable the child felt with the arrangements made by the new school to support their transition. For example, the parents highlighted the resistance of their child to engage with support that could make them stand out as needing extra help, or an adjustment to their curriculum to help them cope in their new school, such as eating lunch in a designated room or accessing a TA. This subtheme also highlighted the potential impact of peer pressure on young adolescents, with one parent describing how she

felt that by her son not dressing in the same way as other children, this could emphasise his disparity from them and impact on him forming friendships in the future.

“He thinks the other children are silly and they are all idiots, so he has got a very negative view of other children which isn’t really going to help him make friends. That does tend to be what he does, where he thinks everybody else is in the wrong, rather than he has to put the effort in. He has already said that there isn’t even anybody that he wants to be friends with.” (Parent 13)

Seven parents discussed how their child’s intolerance of their peers appeared to create a barrier towards successful transition. This intolerance was described by some parents to be related to their child being educated with a class group where other children also presented with significant additional needs, and this had led their child to have disagreements with peers or become frustrated. Other parents spoke of how their own child’s autism seemed to impact on their child’s personal resources to show patience or forgiveness towards other people, linked to their own child’s problems in understanding how to appropriately and effectively interact with others.

“I have noticed when we see other disabled children out and about, he sort of looks a bit like ‘oh, why are they behaving like that?’...” (Parent 11)

Two parents whose children had transitioned to secondary special commented how they felt their child’s personal sense of identity may have had an impact on them settling into a setting where there were many other children who presented with individualised needs. These parents reflected on how, separate to and prior to the transition process, there had been occasions when their child had viewed other people with special needs in a mildly prejudiced way. This subtheme suggests the possibility that for some of the children, being sent to a special school caused confusion and conflict to the personal identity they had formed of themselves over the years growing up in an inclusive primary environment.

Linked to the ‘separation from peers’ and ‘personal identity’ subthemes, 4 parents talked about how their child was engaging in behaviour that outwardly communicated their refusal and feelings of discomfort in transitioning to their new school. One parent talked of the physical behaviour her son was engaging in that displayed his opposed feelings, such as absconding from school and wearing his blazer over his head during the first weeks at his new school. One parent described the immense difficulty they had encountered in physically transporting their child to the open day visits at his new school during his

summer term of year 6. It transpired that in September, at the final hour, the family were forced to decline a special school place and instead send their child to his local mainstream school.

The last subthemes within this theme related to how some parents reported feeling that special schools were almost too exclusive in terms of their admissions criteria. They felt that secondary schools showed an inability, or in some cases, reluctance to tailor provision to the individual child. Despite giving high praise to the special schools in the LA, one parent spoke of how she felt her son did not fit into the profile of child for which the secondary school usually catered. This parent described how a teacher from the receiving secondary had outwardly verbalised concerns about whether the school would be able to accept her child and meet his needs. A number of other parents also spoke of similar experiences with secondary school staff.

The final subtheme relates to parents experiencing a lack of responsiveness by some specialist provisions in meeting the individual needs of their child. One parent talked of the on-going communication she had pursued with her son's new school to rectify the difficulties he was experiencing at playtimes and in making friends. She highlighted the resistance she had faced from the school to find solutions to her son's personal difficulties. She described the response she had received from the school. The school spoke of systems they had in place which they felt would be effective in supporting her son's needs since they had previously been effective for other children with similar needs. However, as a parent, she clearly felt these already established structures were not effectively supporting the individualised needs of her own child.

"My whole general feeling is they are not looking individually enough at each child because I almost get the sense there that you have to break through a barrier of 'this is the [school name] way, this is a tried and tested way, we find this works here for our children'..." (Parent 7)

4.2.4 Primary teacher's themes: pre-transition phase

There were 6 themes identified from the interviews with primary teachers.

4.2.4.1 Theme 1: Child's Identity

The first theme identified from the interviews with primary school teachers highlighted the growing knowledge that the children had of their personal difficulties and their struggle and desire to be treated in the same way as their peer group. The teachers described how they had experienced the children's attitudes to be a barrier within primary school. The teachers reflected on how this may impact on the success of the forthcoming transition, particularly if the child's receiving placement was different from what the child hoped for. The 4 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) awareness of difference; ii) wanting to be treated the same as peer group; iii) child's attitude is a barrier; and iv) cognitive dissonance.

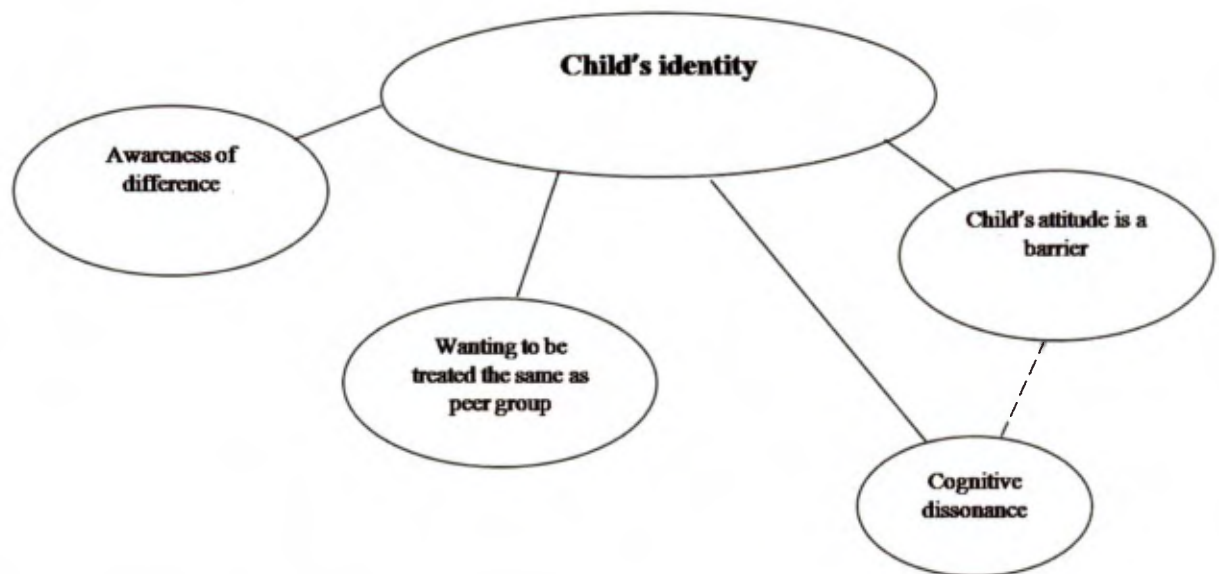


Figure 11. Primary teacher theme 1

Three teachers spoke about how they had directly encountered situations to suggest that the children were developing more awareness of being different from their counterparts, and this was evident when the children were given different curriculum tasks, or they had got things wrong in class. The teachers described how the children could react negatively if they were to consciously realise they were behind academically at secondary school. In fact, it was evident that some of the children were already questioning the work they were expected to complete in primary school if they perceived it to be 'easier' than the work set

for their peers. This behaviour was interpreted by the teachers as the children communicating their desire to be treated the same as others. Three teachers explained how children had been reluctant to work or become disruptive if they did not want to complete a particularly activity or did not enjoy a particular subject, demonstrating how already in primary school the child's own attitude could create barriers to learning.

"I think that if [child's name] gets it in his head that he doesn't want to go and that he is not going, you know [that could be a barrier]. He needs to be persuaded that it is the right place for him." (Primary Teacher 13)

Furthermore, 3 teachers commented that a successful transition to secondary school would involve the child accepting they were moving on and having a positive attitude towards changing schools. If this was not the case, then the teachers felt the child's own attitude could be the barrier to a smooth transition. One teacher referred to how the child in her school would require lots of support and opportunity to talk through transition and hear about all the positive aspects of his new school. This was particularly because he would be going to a special school, which his teacher felt was not the type of secondary placement he had been expecting or anticipating having been in a mainstream primary school. This appears to link with the social psychological theory of cognitive dissonance, first proposed by Festinger (1957), and explains the experience of an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding conflicting ideas when there is a discrepancy between something new and something already believed.

4.2.4.2 Theme 2: Secondary is a very different context

This second theme related to the organisational discontinuities between primary and secondary school. The teachers described the differences in terms of the context, mentor relationships and their associated levels of support, which the children would face on changing schools. The primary teachers also spoke of the social difficulties that many of the children presented with in primary school, and they reflected on the type of provision that secondary schools would be required to consider to cater for these. The 8 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) dependence and reliance on one to one; ii) relationship with TA; iii) projecting differences in size and support systems as potential problems; iv) social skills and social needs requirements; v); playtimes vi); needs being understood by others; vii) empathy; viii) and friendships.

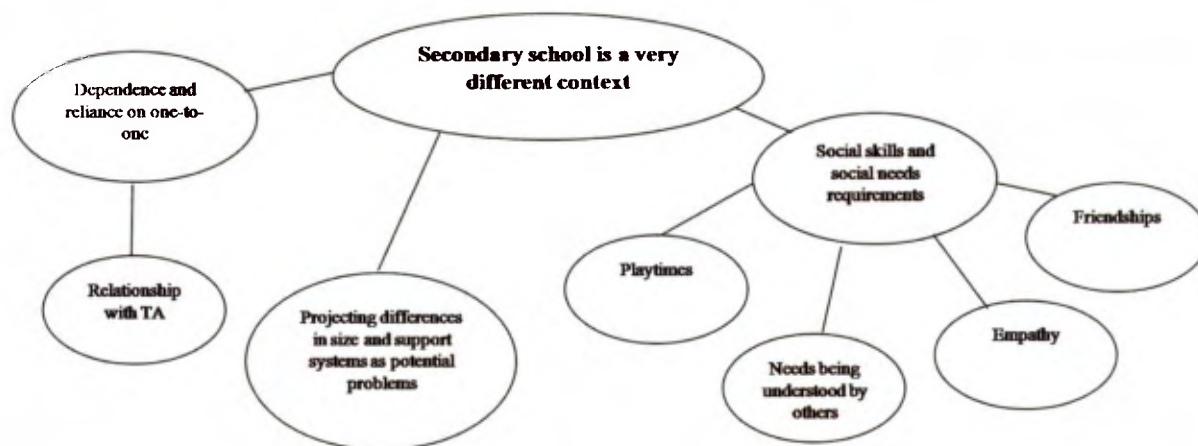


Figure 12. *Primary teacher theme 2*

“I think the thing he is going to find hardest is to make the transition from one teaching assistant and one teacher and his own classroom, and he knows them all well. I think his biggest issue is going to be around the number of people who have access to him...”
(Primary Teacher 1)

Six teachers talked about the high level of adult support that the children required to allow them to access the curriculum and less structured times of the day. Some teachers spoke of the usefulness of the teaching assistant in providing the initial scaffolding of an activity, or to provide intermittent encouragement to keep a child on track throughout a lesson.

Whereas, other teachers reflected on the heavy reliance that some of the children had on their teaching assistant to complete school work. Three teachers highlighted the strength of relationship between the child and their teaching assistant, often describing how it had been consistently the same adult who had worked with the child throughout primary school, and continuously every day in close proximity to them. It was this level and consistency of support in primary school that 6 teachers referred to as being very different in secondary school. There was the view that the children would not get nearly as much support and this was perceived to be a potential challenge for the child and detrimental to them academically, as well as emotionally in terms of the loss of a key relationship that had been formed over time. Other potential transition issues raised were in relation to the sheer size of secondary schools, as well as the number of teaching staff that the child would come into contact with.

Two teachers made reference to the level of structure and type of strategies that had been required in primary school to support some of the children at playtimes, including

timetabled activities, monitor jobs and training for lunch time staff. Four teachers described how the children's social needs would require consideration and full understanding on transition to their new school to avoid them getting themselves in to trouble and also to support co-operative group work.

"His friends are lovely to him, but he will probably need a lot of support in building friendships...and understand the value of how he has to compromise...that isn't in his vocabulary." (Primary Teacher 2)

Three teachers highlighted the children's difficulties in taking on the perspective of other people and referred to the importance of social skills support in secondary school. One teacher described how this type of support had been paramount and ongoing in primary school to support the child's reaction to other children and his social issues. Structured support to encourage the initial formation of friendships, as well as the longevity of relationships moving forward, was viewed by 7 teachers as an area that was going to be an important focus for secondary schools.

"I think he finds it hard...he doesn't know how to make friends. So if you put him in a room he will just stand there, he doesn't know how to go up and introduce himself, you know, he just doesn't know how to do that." (Primary Teacher 5)

4.2.4.3 Theme 3: Anxiety and Stress

The teachers spoke about the impact of transition anxiety and stress on the children's learning and behaviour in primary school. They discussed the potential impact of anxiety in reducing the chances of the children accomplishing a positive transition to their new school. The 3 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) reducing chances of success; ii) learning; and iii) behaviour.

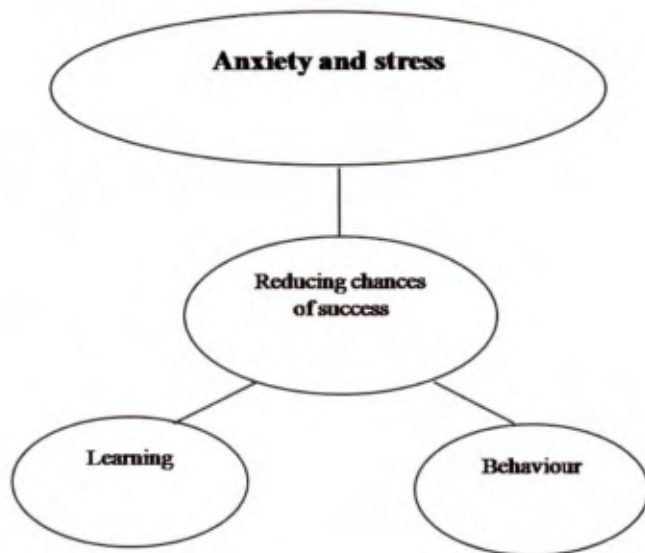


Figure 13. *Primary teacher theme 3*

Two teachers spoke of being aware how the children's worries towards transition were impacting negatively on their behaviour, whilst 2 other teachers described the impact of transition stress on learning. One teacher described how the imminent transition was impacting on a child's ability to remain focused within lessons. The school were allowing ad hoc opportunities for the child to be withdrawn from class to talk through concerns with a trusted adult, to minimise the impact of transition for the remaining time in primary school.

"That would be the big one...that his anxiety was under control, because I think unless his anxiety can be managed...we don't know whether the anxiety he had around the time he came to us was to do with the move or to do with other things, so unless his anxiety is controlled he won't be able to learn." (Primary Teacher 8)

Three teachers spoke explicitly about how a child's anxiety would need to be managed to provide the best chance for a successful transition to secondary school and not hinder future opportunities available. One teacher spoke of anxiety needing to be controlled to allow a child to cope in their new school, and another spoke of anxiety being a potential threat to social opportunities available in the secondary context because the child may withdraw themselves.

4.2.4.4 Theme 4: Delay affects transition support

Four primary school teachers spoke about the negative impact on those children who had not yet received a confirmed secondary school very late in the summer term of year 6. The 4 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) uncertainty; ii) being treated differently to peers; iii) no transition support; and iv) getting off to a poor start.

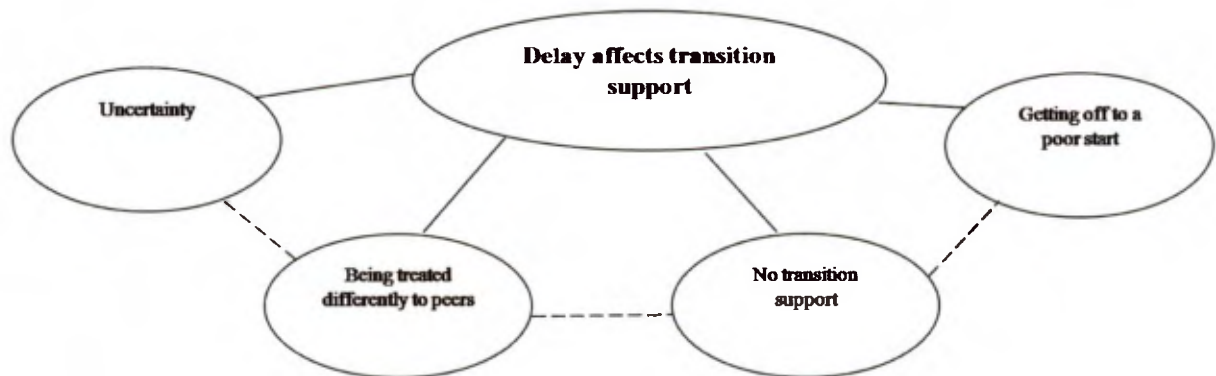


Figure 14. Primary teacher theme 4

“There has been a lot of anxiety for him when his peers have been talking about this school or that school and him not knowing. I think that has added to his anxiety and possibly may impact on his ability to access the work there because he will start stressed. Not knowing where he is going and the expectations, he has got very caught up in those feelings...so I think that anxiety will be very difficult to overcome.” (Primary Teacher 13)

The teachers spoke about the uncertainty for the children around not knowing which school they were going to, and they highlighted the anxiety and stress that this had caused. They spoke of how this had led to the children being treated differently to their peers. Other children had been able to benefit fully from visits to their future schools, as well as in-house primary transition support to prepare them for their move. In contrast, due to the uncertain future circumstances for 4 children, the impact on transition planning was significant. In such cases, the teachers described how they had been unable to engage in the usual transition arrangements or communicate with prospective secondary schools as they would routinely do. As a result, the children were described as feeling very unsettled, and the teachers were concerned these children would begin their new school feeling extremely unprepared and with heightened anxiety. In some cases, this was predicted to have a devastating effect on the children being able to make the best possible start to their secondary school career.

4.2.4.5 Theme 5: Importance of Relationships

Many of the primary school teachers spoke of the key relationships the children had secured in their primary school and they described how they felt this would be an important element to ensure success for the children moving on to secondary school. The 7 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) different quality peer relationships; ii) immaturity / younger peers; iii) underlying difference ; iv) facilitators; v) tolerance; vi) building relationships; and vii) key person.

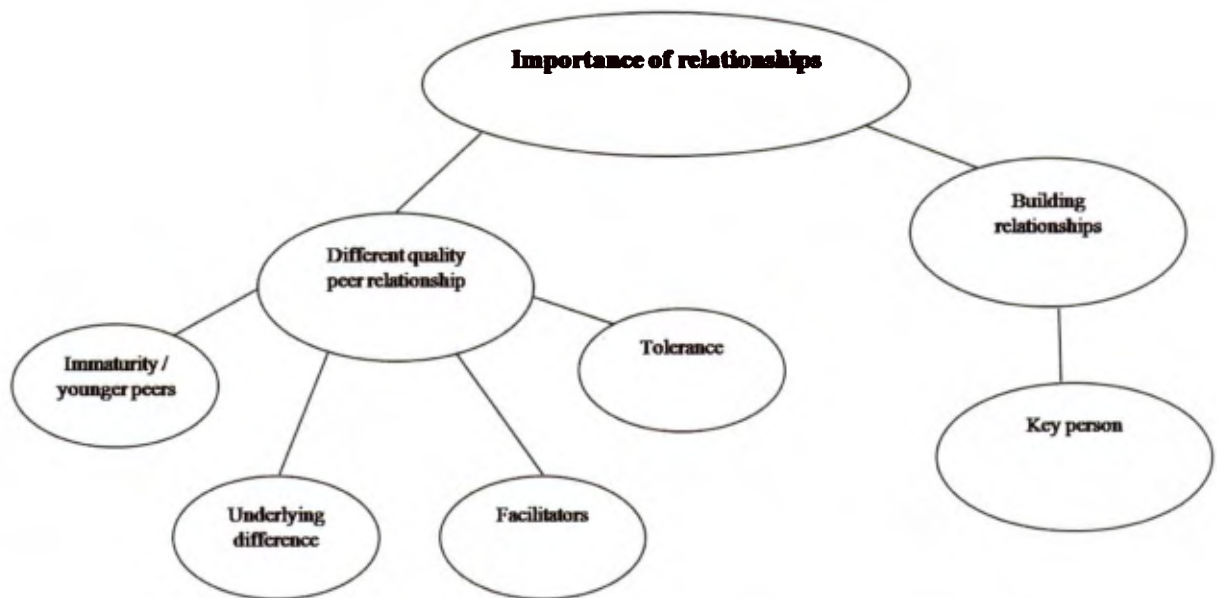


Figure 15. Primary teacher theme 5

Three teachers spoke of how the children showed immaturity in the peer relationships at primary school and how they tended to be friends with children of a younger age. It was also evident from teacher interviews that these children had formed peer relationships that were of a different quality to peers in their class. Five teachers described how the children's peers were generally very supportive to them, mostly because they had known them for a long time. They explained how the peer group had an understanding that these children were 'different' and their peers showed acceptance and patience towards their individual needs. Three teachers described the lenience that the peer group demonstrated, explaining how in many cases the peers would assume a facilitative role by being supportive, nurturing and encouraging towards these children. However, it was apparent

from 2 teacher's comments, how being a friend to these children could often demand a high level of tolerance and compassion.

"I think it is down to a relationship. If he can build some good relationships with adults or children he'll be fine. If he can't then he is going to withdraw into himself and he's going to switch off and I think it hinges on that." (Primary Teacher 5)

Three teachers spoke of how the children had benefited from having trusting relationships with key adults and peers in primary school, and they suggested that later success in secondary school would be largely determined by whether the children had on-going access to this level of support in their new context. Four teachers described how the children were likely to need high levels of support in their first weeks of secondary school. They suggested how regular contact with a familiar and dependable mentor, that the child respected and was comfortable with, was likely to be paramount during this time and beyond in the new school.

4.2.4.6 Theme 6: Resistance to Change

The final theme identified from primary teacher interviews encapsulated the children's difficulties with change and unfamiliar routines and systems. This theme highlights the preparation and processes that the teachers felt would need to be in place to enable the children to make a smooth transition to their next school. The 7 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) mixed feelings towards transition; ii) fear of the new; iii) needs structure and consistency; iv) different pedagogy; v) responding to sensory needs; vi) systems and structures; and vii) managing the process of change.

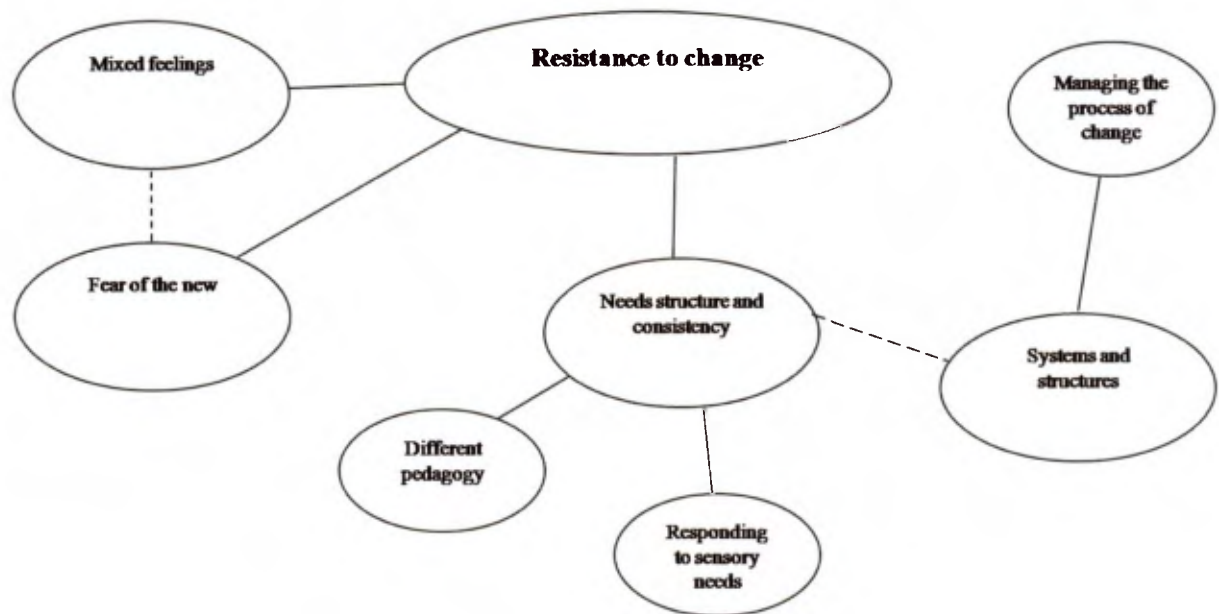


Figure 16. *Primary teacher theme 6*

“He doesn’t do change very well full stop, and this is probably the biggest change he has been through in his living memory. Whilst he is excited, very excited, he is also extremely worried, and rightly so because what he has known for the last four years is about to change dramatically.” (Primary Teacher 1)

Three teachers spoke of how the children, whilst anticipating their move to secondary school, also felt anxious and worried because they knew things would be different and they were unsure of what to expect. Two teachers highlighted the children’s fear of change and things that were new, not knowing routines, lack of familiarity, or not knowing how new people might react, would all be aspects of transition that would really concern the children.

Two teachers spoke about how clear and explicit structure and routine had allowed the children to feel comfortable and secure in primary school. One teacher highlighted how the child she taught found it very difficult to adjust to the teaching styles of different members of staff. Differences in secondary school pedagogy, as well as numerous subject teachers, were aspects of the transition that were highlighted to be potentially problematic for these children. Four teachers discussed systems that would be imperative in the new school to support transition success, such as a clear timetable, a designated safe space in school, support for playtimes, as well as for making new friends. Four teachers explained how their primary school had made adjustments to take account of children’s sensory sensitivities, such as coping with noise and the different textures and temperatures that can

be related to wearing a school uniform. An on-going consideration of the children's sensory sensitivities in secondary school was raised as an area of importance.

Finally, 9 teachers referred to how it was crucial for the children to have familiarity and know the new environment they were transitioning to. Many referred to the importance of plenty of opportunities for visits to new schools, to experience what things would be like first hand and for the children to gain as much information as possible to help them manage the process of change. Other teachers spoke of how they felt that a gradual introduction to the new environment would be the best way to prepare the children for their imminent move.

4.2.5 Secondary teacher's themes: post-transition phase

There were 3 themes identified from the interviews with secondary teachers.

4.2.5.1 Theme 1: In-reach and outreach to plan for transition

The first theme identified from interviews with secondary teachers highlighted how they felt there was a need for greater liaison between the two school phases. They suggested this would be beneficial to really prepare children for the stark differences they would face in the secondary context, and to ensure that children were both socially and emotionally prepared for their transition. The 3 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) challenges of the curriculum and context; ii) different expectations and ethos; and iii) social and emotional preparation for change.

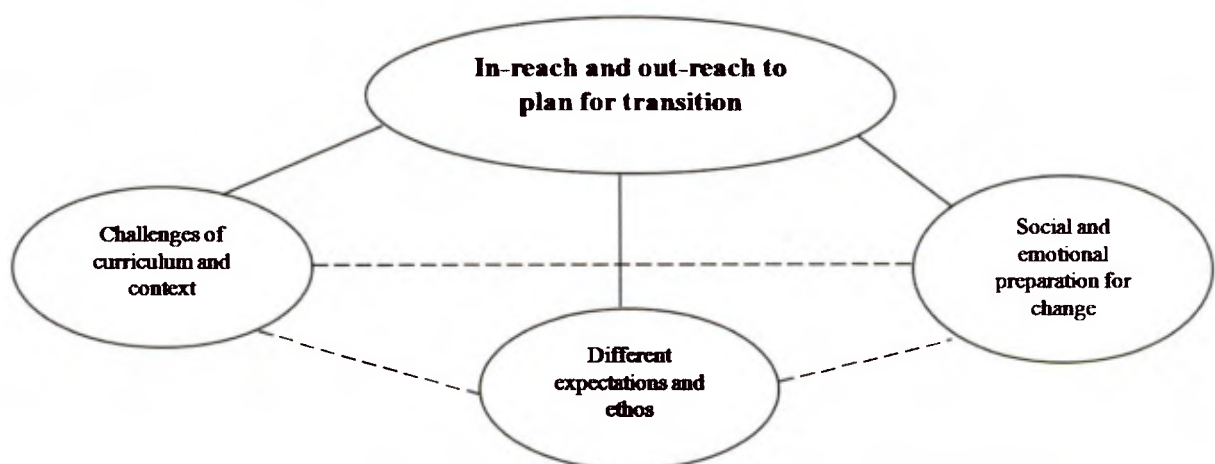


Figure 17. Secondary teacher theme 1

“[The primary school] said ‘do you want to come and see this child in person at primary school?’ and I said ‘no you can come and see what they are coming to because actually that is where the difference will be.’ I don’t need to see that he is absolutely fine because his teacher loves him and he sits in a little place that is safe and is there at lunchtime. I know all that and in an ideal world we would provide that...” (Secondary Teacher 4)

One teacher’s comments clearly emphasised how she believed that primary teacher’s were not always fully aware of the huge differences in the organisational and institutional set up of secondary schools that the transitioning children would be confronted with. Three teachers spoke of how, as well as secondary teachers going into primary schools, they could see the advantages of primary teachers visiting the secondary context with the children prior to their transition. They spoke of how improved liaison and in-reach visits could help primary schools to thoroughly prepare their youngsters prior to changing schools. They felt this would give their primary school counterparts a clearer insight into what the children would face come September and increase primary teachers’ knowledge to enable them to provide fully informed support and preparation activities to children pre-transition. Despite the possible logistical challenges of such an idea, this switching of teaching staff had occurred in one of the secondary schools, and this experiential planning for primary schools was suggested to have been a valuable process.

“Because we are encouraging folk to be as independent as possible, so nobody is going to help him on with his socks. You know, we would write his homework down for him but we are not going to do it for him.” (Secondary Teacher 1)

Three teachers spoke of the differences in expectations at secondary schools to prepare young people for adult life, such as learning to deal with a wide variety of different people. They described how the structures within secondary provision were deliberately geared to enable students to develop these skills, such as having to deal with a larger number of teaching assistants across subjects rather than being attached to just one adult across the curriculum. This raised discussion around the deployment of teaching assistants in primary school and how there may not be enough preparation within the final term of year 6 to support a child to become less dependent on just one key adult they may have become familiar with and reliant on for many years.

“They need to be backing off and creating and developing some independent skills, but being there obviously as support. So suddenly he has gone from having a TA velcroed to his side, who has done everything for him, to being in a class of 10 children with one teacher and one TA. He has found that very difficult.” (Secondary Teacher 10)

Two teachers explicitly highlighted the psycho-social challenges that certain children had faced on transition to secondary, in terms of forming new friendships, and this was again an aspect that they felt required more fore-thought and preparation in primary school prior to transition. This was a particularly pertinent issue for 1 child who had been held back a year and educated out of his chronological age year group since the beginning of primary school. This had meant that he had made the transition from year 5 straight to year 7, and highlights a situation where his primary schooling may not have fully prepared him both socially and emotionally for the move to secondary school.

4.2.5.2 Theme 2: Importance of child participation in transition decisions

This second secondary teacher theme emphasises the importance of the child view with regards to their transition and secondary school placement. The secondary school teachers discussed the impact of family anxiety around transition and the impact of parental dissatisfaction with secondary placement on the child's acceptance and ability to settle into their new school. The 3 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) parental acceptance; ii) child feels needs will be met; and iii) anxiety / dissatisfaction impacts on settling.

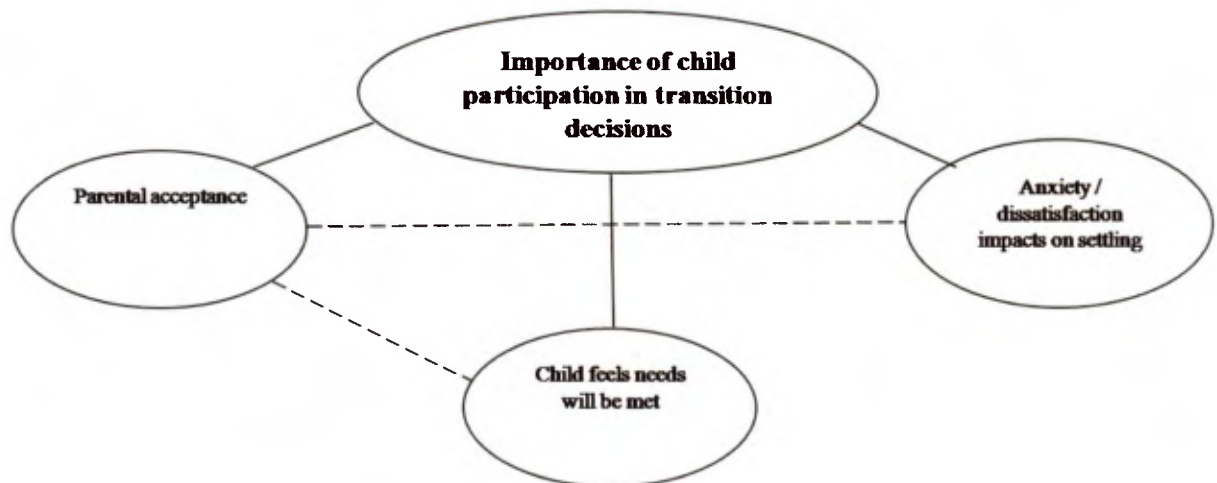


Figure 18. *Secondary teacher theme 2*

“Everybody is singing from the same hymn sheet. Mum wants her to be here, parents are happy for her to be here, which makes [child’s name] happy to be here. Presumably her brother is happy here, dad came, he was happy, we’re happy. She feels she is in the right place.” (Secondary Teacher 4)

One teacher highlighted how she felt it was very valuable for the child to be involved in transition visits and open discussions with their parents and new secondary school about their move as early as possible. This teacher spoke of how this open communication between all parties seemed to be supportive to the whole family in coping with moving on. From the outset, it helped to set up effective channels of communication, so that any aspects of the transition that the child or parent perceived may be challenging could be addressed in supportive discussion and joint solution finding with the school.

Another teacher spoke of the impact of family acceptance and satisfaction with placement decisions on successful transition for the child. This teacher described how where the parents were pleased and positive towards the secondary school placement that they had secured for their child, this supported a ‘working together’ ethos with secondary schools to ensure a smooth transition and the best possible scenario to occur. This was suggested to support the anxiety levels of the child by communicating to them that placement decisions were going to work, allowing the child to feel they were in the right place and could be successful once at secondary school.

The message from the secondary teachers was that when parents felt anxious or anticipated any difficulties with the transition, these feelings could be transferred to the child and could impact on the school being able to work effectively with the family. It was also apparent from these interviews that where a child’s view had not been taken into account at all or where a family had not engaged in open discussions with their child at an early stage in preparing for transition then problems often arose. Such a situation was felt to impact negatively on the child’s levels of anxiety once at their new school and hence their overall acceptance of their secondary placement to allow them to settle in.

4.2.5.3 Theme 3: Understanding the needs of the child in a new context

The secondary teachers spoke of the importance of contact and liaison between the primary and secondary phases to support the children’s transition to secondary school, as well as effective communication within the secondary context once the children had started in their

new school. They also spoke of the previous experience and knowledge of staff being crucial in helping to meet the needs of these young people once at secondary. The 2 subthemes that were identified within this theme were: i) communication systems within wider school; and ii) utilising experience and expertise.

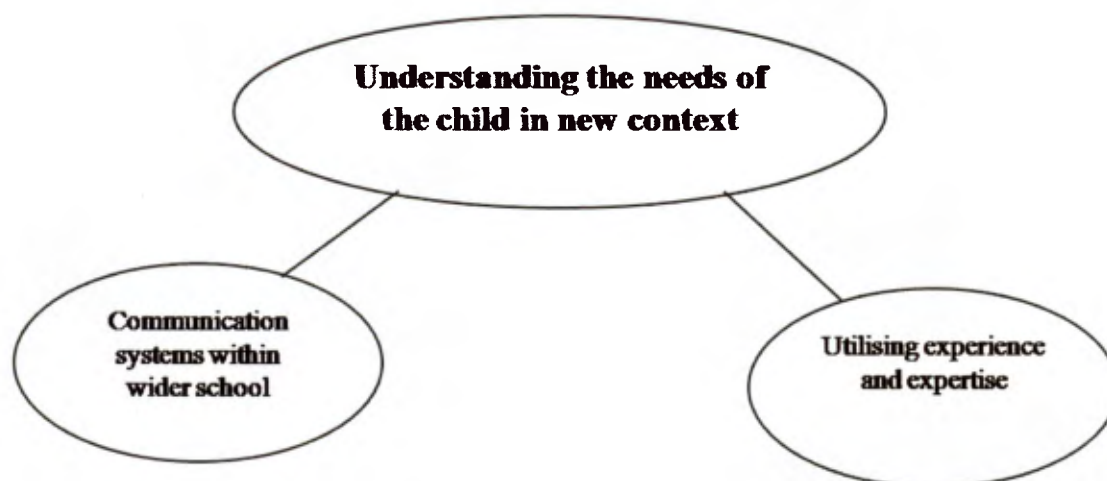


Figure 19. *Secondary teacher theme 3*

“We often have more TAs [on open day visits] so that they can take notes and observe the girls...what is upsetting them, what they are enjoying, what they notice about their behaviour, who they are getting on with, those sort of things so that we can keep a good eye on them as they are going round and get to know more about them.” (Secondary Teacher 9)

The secondary teachers spoke of the good practice that was in place to support secondary school staff in getting to know the individual children before they transitioned in September. The discussed the sharing of child files with primary schools and careful observation of children during open day visits. Following transition, the secondary teachers highlighted the importance of documents, such as an Individual Education Plan, in providing teachers with information about a child, as well as liaison and discussion between staff working with them to build knowledge specific to the individual child in their new context.

Two teachers also spoke of feeling that the quality of secondary staff, those who had a good awareness and understanding of autism and previous experience of working with children with these specific needs, was both an essential and helpful component in supporting successful secondary transition for these children.

“The TAs that work with them, they have quite often been in the year 7 class before, so they know what works.” (Secondary Teacher 8)

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study aimed to provide the first systematic investigation of the transition from primary to secondary school for children with an ASD. Specifically, the study examined both the intrinsic characteristics of the child associated with ASD, and broader systemic factors, to determine their supporting and inhibitory impact on secondary transition.

This chapter presents a discussion of the main results of this study. It begins by summarising the main findings, followed by a thorough discussion of these findings and the implications they have for professionals working with this population of children, their families and schools.

The main findings of this study indicated that wider systemic factors had a more significant impact on transition than the intrinsic characteristics of the child. Specifically, the study found that there were systemic factors which were unique to those children transitioning from mainstream primary school to specialist secondary provision, resulting in the process of change being extremely difficult for those particular children. These inhibitory factors were related to three broad areas, including, the child's acceptance of transferring to special provision and their identity within their new school, tensions between the child and parent regarding choice of secondary placement, and the delay in LA decision making processes for families to obtain special provision.

5.1 Which individual characteristics predict a more successful transition to secondary school in children with ASD?

Unlike previous studies, this study directly examined the behavioural and cognitive characteristics of children in the sample in an effort to determine whether individual differences in these intrinsic characteristics were associated with transition success. Within the existing literature, anecdotal reports, position papers and some studies directly reporting the voice of the secondary ASD child, have all implicated the 'triad of impairments', sensory symptoms, and anxiety as affecting secondary transition for ASD children (Harrison, 1998; Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Jackson, 2002; Williams, 1996). On this basis, it was therefore expected that children with higher verbal ability, fewer autistic symptoms, fewer sensory atypicalities and lower trait anxiety would make a more successful transition to secondary school.

This prediction was supported somewhat by the qualitative component of this study. There was evidence derived from the interviews conducted to indicate how the children already experienced difficulties in primary school related to social competence (autistic symptomatology), anxiety and sensory symptoms, and furthermore, explicit reference to how these intrinsic characteristics created problems for some children upon transition was made.

In pre-transition interviews, many children spoke of already finding primary school challenging, largely due to the social difficulties they faced in securing friendships and being vulnerable to bullying. The primary teachers indicated how the quality of friendships that these children were capable of was different in nature to usual peer relationships. These teachers described how the ASD children demanded high levels of tolerance from peers and ongoing support to ensure their social needs were met in school and peer relationships were facilitated. Post-transition interviews with both children and parents, revealed how the children experienced difficulties in forming friendships at secondary school, providing evidence to indicate that any social difficulties had only been intensified by the larger, more complex context of secondary school.

Primary teachers referred to the direct influence of transition worries on the children's anxiety levels, and how anxiety impacted on their learning and behaviour in the last term of primary school. Some teachers were very concerned about the impact of children's anxiety on secondary transition success. Some primary teachers made reference to the children's sensory sensitivities. In post-transition interviews, children themselves described how the larger, busier, noisier secondary school context proved challenging as a result of their sensory difficulties.

This interview data indicates implications for professional practice regarding the management of the social competence and difficulties, sensory sensitivities and related anxiety of ASD children in both primary and secondary settings. However, despite these issues being raised within interviews, when they were directly examined in this study, no significant associations were found between intrinsic child characteristics and overall transition success.

There are several possible explanations for these unexpected findings. First, although the number of children assessed in this study far surpassed those of previous studies (e.g. Jindal-Snape et al., 2006), the final sample included 14 children. A failure to identify possible sources of variability in children's transition success could therefore be related to the modest sample size. Yet, none of the correlations between individual characteristics and transition success even approached significance suggesting that the lack of associations found was probably not related to sample size.

Second, it is possible that the failure to find significant relationships between children's pre-transition intrinsic characteristics and subsequent transition success might be due to limitations of the specific measures used. However, as reported in Chapter 3, the measures used to profile the cognitive ability (as indexed by the WASI, Wechsler, 1999) of the children as well as their autistic symptomatology (as indexed by the SRS, Constantino & Gruber, 2005), sensory symptoms (as indexed by the Sensory Profile, Dunn, 1999) and trait anxiety (as indexed by the SCAS-P, Spence, 1999) were all standardised measures that have been widely used within other research studies with children with autism and have been shown to be both valid and reliable with this population. Similarly, the questionnaires used to determine transition success at the post-transition phase of the study were recently standardised in a UK-wide study that yielded responses from a large population of children, including 20% of children within the sample who were identified to have a SEN (Evangelou et al., 2008).

Third, the questionnaires used to measure autistic symptomatology, sensory symptoms and trait anxiety experienced by the child were all based on parental report with the possibility that parents were under reporting symptoms since they were not directly experiencing themselves. There is a possibility that measuring these symptoms directly in children would have been a more reliable procedure which may have identified significant relationships between intrinsic characteristics and transition success.

Fourth, there is the possibility that the measurement of other intrinsic ASD characteristics would show significant associations with transition success. For example, a cognitive theory of autism discussed by Rajendran and Mitchell (2007) relates to deficits in executive function to explain rigid, inflexible behaviour and resistance to change. The lack of executive function is suggested to explain the cognitions of autistic individuals who do not

appear future orientated and can have great difficulties with impulsivity, self-monitoring and self-reflecting (Ozonoff, Pennington & Rogers, 1991). Problems in executive skills of individuals with autism may well relate to difficulties with secondary transition and responding flexibly to change. If this study had tested children's executive skills, using developmentally appropriate tests, then it is possible that a relationship between such difficulties and transition success would have been identified. Arguably, tests that measure cognitive processes and the root causes of behaviour may have had increased sensitivity to detect relationships between intrinsic characteristics and transition. However, overall, the intrinsic characteristics of the child that were measured in this study showed no associations with transition success.

It is possible, however, that other co-morbid conditions could impact on children's transition success. In their assessment of 112 10-to-14 year-old children with autism, Simonoff et al. (2008) found that more than one quarter (28.2%) of their sample also met diagnostic criteria for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) suggesting that ADHD might be commonly co-morbid with autism. In the current study, parents reported that 6 children had a co-morbid diagnosis of ADHD, and one child (Child 14) was reported to also have a diagnosis of foetal alcohol syndrome, oppositional defiant disorder, dyslexia and dyspraxia, in addition to his autism. Many of the behaviours and symptoms of ADHD have been linked to a variety of outcomes for children, including lower academic achievement, as compared to their typically developing peers (e.g., Merrell & Tymms, 2001). Furthermore, a recent American research study indicated a negative longitudinal association between having ADHD with a co-existing disorder and academic achievement (Barnard-Brak, Sulak, & Fearon, 2011). These authors suggested how practitioners concerned with the educational outcomes for children with ADHD must view the presence of co-existing disorders not only as an issue relating to more severe and/or compounded symptoms, but also as an issue relating to educational achievement. Since this research indicates that additional attention difficulties can have a negative impact on learning, one might also assume that they could adversely affect the secondary transition process. The current study did not directly measure the impact of other disorders co-morbid with ASD on the transition success of the children within the sample. Future research should therefore

examine the potential mitigating effects of additional attention difficulties on the primary to secondary school transition for children with autism.

One interesting finding that emerged in this study was related to the construct of 'transition success' in children with ASD. In a previous study of secondary transition for typically developing children and children with SEN, Evangelou et al. (2008) defined successful transition according to 5 interrelated factors: developing friendships and confidence; settling into school life; showing a growing interest in school and work; getting used to new routines, and experiencing curriculum continuity. In the current study, using the same questionnaires as Evangelou et al. (2008) to measure transition success in children with an ASD, three of these factors (developing friendships and confidence, settling into school life, showing a growing interest in school and work) were significantly associated, and a fourth factor (getting used to new routines) approached significance with other factors. Yet, in contrast to the findings of Evangelou et al. (2008), the 'experiencing curriculum continuity' factor was not significantly associated with any of the other 4 factors in this study sample. This finding suggests that having a successful transition was not dependent on the curriculum for these children with an ASD.

One possible explanation for this unexpected finding relates directly to Evangelou et al.'s (2008) study. Although these authors included SEN children in their sample, they failed to perform separate analyses on SEN children and typically developing children in their study when considering transition success. If they had done so, the study may have found, like in the present study, that for SEN children in general, curriculum continuity is not a significant factor in determining transition success. Future research would be beneficial to examine this issue further.

Second, it is possible that the questionnaire designed by Evangelou et al. (2008) was not appropriate for use with children with an ASD and their parents. It could be that for the children, retrospective questions regarding primary curriculum work to support secondary learning were difficult for them to answer with good memory. Additionally, their parents may not have been fully informed on the school curriculum to answer questions in relation to curriculum continuity across phases with complete knowledge and accuracy. However, arguably, any child with an SEN could experience such difficulties, not ASD children

alone, and this was not an apparent difficulty for the SEN children who responded to questionnaire in Evangelou et al.'s study. Indeed, it was, in part, for this reason why the same questionnaire designed by Evangelou et al. (2008) was deemed appropriate for use within the current study.

A third, and potentially more likely explanation, is that at this stage in transition the curriculum was not the most important factor to the ASD children and their families in relation to secondary transition. Rather, their most pressing concerns in determining transition success were related to the social, organisational and contextual aspects of changing schools, and these were obstacles that needed to be tackled first. Indeed, the qualitative data appeared to support this possible explanation.

A number of parents described how their child's happiness at secondary school was of utmost priority to them, over-riding concerns for their child's academic achievement, and previous research has found a similar theme. Whitaker (2007) highlighted how an ASD child's happiness in school was a very high priority to their parents, particularly for those parents who were 'dissatisfied' with provision, as it implied to them that their child's needs were not being adequately addressed in school.

Some parents in the current study commented how they felt academic success would be much more achievable once their child was settled and able to cope with the organisational and social differences of secondary school. Many parents were keen for their child to develop life skills and social skills, over and above academic success, to support their independence and success in secondary school and beyond. Again, previous research has showed a similar theme. Across all parents surveyed by Whitaker (2007), those both satisfied and dissatisfied with their child's school provision, the further development of their child's social skills was a very high priority to them all. Whitaker's study illuminated parents' frustrations with what was perceived as a narrow focus on academic, as opposed to social outcomes by schools.

Generally, the children themselves in the current study were more concerned with the social and organisational aspects of changing schools, rather than the curriculum work they would encounter at secondary school, although some did raise worries about homework tasks. However, the interviews conducted in the current study do strongly indicate how the

curriculum was not a factor determining transition success from the perspective of the ASD child and their parents in this study.

Overall, this study found a lack of association between intrinsic child characteristics and an index of transition success, indicating how for these particular children their individual profile of needs associated with their ASD condition was not the most significant factor determining their secondary transition success.

It is possible that the construct of 'transition is so complex, and the result of multiple factors including intrinsic child related factors but also wider, external systemic factors (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Noyes, 2006). Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that this study failed to find any significant associations between intrinsic characteristics and transition success. Certainly, the findings of this study indicated that factors at a much wider level, beyond intrinsic child difficulties, had an incredibly strong influence on the process of secondary transition for the children.

5.2 What are the systemic factors that can either support or hinder a successful transition to secondary school for students with an ASD, from the perspective of the child, parent and teacher?

To determine the existence of wider factors that could influence the secondary transition process for children with ASD, this study sought directly the views and experiences of the child, parent and teachers. Furthermore, it sought these views both before and after secondary transition to examine the entire transition process, overcoming the limitations inherent in previous studies which have only gained prospective views on transition (Jindal-Snape et al., 2006; Maras & Aveling, 2006). Previous research has suggested how the process of transition for any child can be incredibly complex and influenced by numerous factors at a systemic level (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Noyes, 2006). Consistent with an eco-systemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) on transition, this study identified factors at the level of the child, family, school and local authority, which had a significant influence on the secondary the transition process for the children in this sample.

5.2.1 Individual level: the child's identity

Previous research has suggested how psychosocial processes at the level of the child can impact on secondary transition experiences and the ultimate success of the process (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). In line with this assertion, the qualitative data collected in this study found evidence for difficulties for the children on transition, beyond their intrinsic ASD characteristics and associated anxiety, but at the psychosocial level of the child. Interviews with the children, parents and teachers indicated how the child's own sense of identity was a factor that could inhibit a successful transition to secondary school. This factor related specifically to 'fitting in' within their new peer group and secondary school context. In fact, pre-transition interviews with primary school teachers indicated how many of the children could already perceive and showed a growing sense of awareness of the differences between themselves and their peer group. Within primary school, some of the children were already engaging in behaviours in an attempt to not appear different from their peers, such as refusing to be withdrawn from class or to engage in learning tasks specifically differentiated for them. In post-transition interviews, some children who went to mainstream secondary schools described and named themselves in ways to suggest they felt different from their peers. A similar theme of 'difference' was identified by Humphrey and Lewis (2008), who elicited the voice of autistic children attending mainstream secondary settings. They found that some pupils described themselves and their Asperger syndrome using negative connotations such as being a 'freak', a 'retard', having a 'bad brain' or being 'mentally disabled'.

Some of the children in the current study who transferred to mainstream settings engaged in behaviours which appeared to emphasise their attempts to 'fit in' with their peer group, such as helping other students around school or refusing extra help from teaching assistants. This finding is in parallel to that of Humphrey and Lewis (2008) who found that the 'visibility' of additional support provided in school often made autistic pupils feel that their negative differences were accentuated. This view found in the current study and by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) links to the theme of masquerading suggested by Carrington and Graham (2001).

The current findings, however, extended those of previous studies to show that those children who went to special school following secondary transition also struggled with their

personal sense of identity, but this was in a different way to those who transitioned to mainstream schools. A number of the children who went to special schools found it difficult to tolerate their new peer group who also presented with idiosyncratic difficulties related to a SEN. Interviews with these children suggested they were attempting to disassociate themselves with the 'special identity' attached to transitioning to a special school. Some of the children spoke of their 'special' peers in a way to suggest that they perceived these other children to be unusual or different, highlighting their own sense of struggle and questioning of the reasons for their placement within a special school given their previous placement in a mainstream school.

This theme of the child's identity alludes to difficulties in relation to secondary transition that are dependent on the type of secondary provision in which a child is placed. In fact, it is noteworthy that almost half of the sample transitioned to special provision, while the other half transitioned to mainstream schools. Therefore, further analyses were carried out in this study to examine whether children's transition success was dependent on the type of receiving placement. This analysis indicated that there were no group differences in the transition success of children who transitioned to mainstream or special secondary school. Nevertheless, the qualitative data seemed to suggest otherwise.

The interviews with children, parents and teachers highlighted how for the children who transitioned to special school there existed tensions and systemic difficulties that were unique to this group because of their receiving secondary placement. There were two key factors identified in this study that appeared to directly influence the transition experience of those children who moved to a special school specifically, and these factors were at the level of the family and the local authority. These were related to, firstly, the family choice of secondary school, and secondly, the decision making processes undertaken by the LA to allow a family to obtain a specialist secondary school place for their child. Therefore, the study found that, arguably, for those children who transitioned to special school, the process of changing schools was much more difficult, subject to tensions and delays that affected the quality of their transition.

5.2.2 Family level: tensions over school choice

Some previous research studies have suggested the potential for disparities in the views and opinions of a child with SEN and their parent towards the choice of secondary school placement (Maras & Aveling, 2006). However, until now, these possible tensions have not been further examined within the existing literature, specifically for children with ASD. This study found that for those families considering a specialist placement at secondary level, the conflicts between parent and child over school choice were particularly prominent, as discussed by some of the parents in their interviews. These parents reported how their children were quite strongly opposed to going to a special school. Many of the children suggested to their parents that they wanted to go to their local school with the children from their primary school. These were peers who they knew and with whom they were familiar. In fact the quantitative data collected in this study showed that friendship was a factor that significantly determined transition success. Across the entire sample, those children who had begun to develop friendships and confidence in their new school were those who were more settled in to secondary school life and who were also showing more interest in school and work. In contrast, some of the children who went to a special school, who subsequently lost their mainstream peer group, were the children who experienced difficulties and challenges on transition to their new school.

The interviews with parents and secondary teachers highlighted the children's intolerance of their new 'special' peer group, and as discussed this was a theme also identified from interviews with children themselves. In some cases, there were children whose challenging behaviour demonstrated their rejection of their 'special identity' and their new school, through an overt refusal to transition. For example, one child who was due to go to a special school actually transferred to his local mainstream school in September. This was due to his complete refusal to attend any induction days at his potential specialist placement in the summer term before transfer, as a direct result of his adamant desire to transfer to his local mainstream secondary school with his friends. Two other children who did transfer to a special school were found to present with extremely challenging behaviour in their first half term at secondary school. For one of these children, by the end of the first term in secondary school, the researcher was informed that the child had been taken out of school by his family to be home tutored, since the situation in school had become so difficult.

Notably, the quantitative analysis in this study revealed a marginally significant difference between those children who transitioned to special schools compared to mainstream in terms of their autistic symptomatology. This suggested that those children who went to special schools experienced a higher severity of autistic symptoms than those who went to mainstream secondary schools. Those children who went to special schools may have had a stronger desire for sameness and higher resistance to change as a result of the severity of their autism, which could have therefore contributed to their difficulties with their transition. The data collected from interviews with secondary teachers, provided another alternative explanation.

A key theme identified in secondary teacher interviews was around the importance of child participation in transition decisions. It was revealed that where a child's view had not been taken into account at all or where a family had not engaged in early discussions with their child about their secondary school in sufficient time to prepare them for their move, this had quite an impact on the child's acceptance of their secondary placement, and thus their anxiety levels and ability to settle in. Indeed, a parent whose child's special secondary placement had broken down specifically told the researcher how, in hindsight, the family had realised they should have discussed transition with their child much earlier and taken their child's views into account when viewing prospective secondary provisions to make a decision on placement. This issue clearly has significant implications for professional practice around preparing a child for transition and being an advocate for the child to elicit their views and discuss these with their family, in particular when the child is transferring from mainstream to special school at secondary level.

5.2.3 Local Authority level: delay in placement decisions

A number of parents interviewed in this study, who were considering a specialist placement for their child at secondary transition, highlighted that there was a lack of provision across the county to meet their child's specific ASD needs. Previous literature suggests this is a national issue, and not unique to the LA in which this research study was conducted (Batten, 2005; Batten et al., 2006). However, the interviews also revealed how parents felt there was also a limited range of provision in county, meaning for some families, their child did not meet the criteria for many of the special schools *within* the LA. As a result, these families were repeatedly turned away from schools that were approached as potential

receiving placements by either themselves or an LA panel. In addition to this, a number of the families who took part in this study had lodged tribunal appeals against the LA regarding school placements offered for their child. Previous literature highlights how the adversarial relationship that can ensue between a family of an autistic child and an LA to obtain a secondary placement that the family feel is most appropriate for their child is sadly not uncommon (SENDIST, 2010; Tissot, 2011; Tissot & Evans, 2006). The dominant theme identified from the interviews with parents and primary school teachers was the delay in placement decisions for those families who were considering special school placements for their child and were involved in tribunal appeals. The parents spoke of the stress and anxiety this caused them and they were also aware how this was transferred to their child. Primary teachers spoke about the impact this delay had on arranging transition arrangements in sufficient time during the summer term before transfer. Similar issues were highlighted in a previous study by Jindal-Snape et al. (2006) which found that parents and teachers desired a more proactive and earlier approach to making placement decisions. However, the extensive interviews which were carried out with a range of participants in this current study provided a much richer picture of the impact of delay on the child and their family than Jindal-Snape et al.'s study.

These interviews revealed how the uncertainty over which secondary school they were going to, not only caused distress for their child, but actually lead to them being treated differently and less favourably to their peers going to mainstream schools. In some cases, transition visits were extremely rushed in the final days of the summer term, for others, they completely missed out of transition visits altogether. This resulted in those children, who were arguably the most autistic, being left very insufficiently prepared for their move to a new school. These situations are in sharp contrast with the 'good practice' guidance on effective secondary transition for young people with ASD. Guidance explicitly promotes how transition requires forethought and should be extensively planned so that the child is thoroughly prepared to move schools (Ennis & Manns, 2004; Konza, 2005). The majority of primary teachers interviewed in this study consistently referred to familiarity with a new school environment and a gradual transition being crucial for children with an ASD. Yet, for those children whose families experienced delay in confirming secondary placements this did not happen, and some parents poignantly described how they felt their child had been treated as inferior to their counterparts by a lack of transition support. These

unfortunate situations experienced by children have clear implications for future decision making and special school placement processes at a local authority level.

Overall, the qualitative data collected from child, parent and teacher interviews suggested the existence of wider systemic and process issues that were unique to those children transitioning to special secondary placements. These issues seemed to exacerbate further an already difficult process of change. In contrast, those children with ASD who transferred to mainstream schools appeared to have more supportive structures in place to help them make the move to their new school. These children tended to have a planned transition and opportunities to visit their new school a number of times during their summer term of year 6. The lead up to changing schools was reported as a less anxious time for their families as they were not in conflict with the LA over obtaining a school place. The children going to mainstream tended to move with some friends or children they were familiar with from their primary school, and so they had an existing social support network when they arrived at their new school during the first few weeks in year 7. Finally, they were not faced with the psychological challenge of coming to terms with moving from mainstream to special provision. The change in personal identity attached to transitioning from a mainstream to a special school, was a difficult issue for a number of the children who made this type of move.

In this study, there was a final key finding in relation to a systemic factor that could impact on the successful transition for the many of the children, both those transferring to mainstream and specialist provisions. This was at the level of the school, and the liaison between the two school phases.

5.2.4. School level: lack of primary preparation and in-reach

Early transition literature indicated a lack of primary and secondary school liaison to explain the difficulties experienced by students following secondary transition, such as a dip in academic progress (Galton, Morrison and Pell, 2000). Other research has highlighted how transition documentation and activities are often initiated by secondary schools, but primary schools do also play a role, by adapting the curriculum and classroom practice of year 6 to be 'more like secondary' in the summer term before transfer (Evangelou et al., 2008).

In the current study, secondary teachers suggested how they often felt children with an ASD were not socially and emotionally prepared by primary their counterparts for changing schools. Interviews revealed how secondary teachers believed that primary teachers were not fully aware of the differences in the organisational and institutional context of secondary schools. In contrast, the primary teachers suggested they were aware of the differences the child would face on moving to secondary school, including differences in context and the lower level of adult support following transition. In itself, this disparity in the views of the teachers from the two school phases indicates a potential lack of clear and thorough communication and liaison, which has implications for future transition practices.

A strong message from many primary teachers was that some children were very dependent on adult support from a consistent adult and these teachers were acutely aware that this level of support would not continue for the children once they reached secondary school. However, there seemed to be limited evidence across the primary schools of any formal structures in place to prepare children for the social and emotional changes they would experience on transition to a larger, more complex environment. This lack of formal support has implications in terms of primary school practice prior to a child's transition.

Summary of Key Recommendations for EPs to Support Secondary Transition for Children with ASD

1. Attend year 5 transition annual review meetings to provide home and school consultation and the consideration of needs and provision early on.
2. Elicit the child's view regarding secondary transition.
3. Facilitate early transition discussions between home and school to ensure a proactive, preventative, personalised transition plan is designed and implemented well in advance of transfer.
4. Support transition plans involving both secondary out-reach and primary in-reach.
5. Work collaboratively with Specialist Teachers and other professional services to disseminate ASD specific transition guidance to families and schools.
6. Provide direct intervention and work systemically in primary and secondary schools to support teachers in managing and meeting the needs of the ASD child within the educational context.

Figure 20. *Implications from this study for the practice of Educational Psychologists*

5.3 *Implications for professional practice*

The findings of this study have clear implications for the practice of Educational Psychologists and other professionals working with this population of children, their families and schools. Furthermore, there are direct implications for the LA in terms of decision making processes surrounding secondary placements.

First, the presence of the Educational Psychologist (EP) at the ASD child's year 5 transition annual review meeting would seem crucial to facilitate consultation between the child, parent and school. This study indicated that a number of parents chose specialist provision for their child at secondary transition due to the pedagogical, organisational and institutional demands of large mainstream schools that they perceived would be challenging for their child. However, this study also showed that children transferring from mainstream primary to secondary specialist provision could encounter psychological difficulties in adjusting to their new 'special' identity. Therefore, listening to the voice of the child at this transition annual review would seem imperative. The Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994) talks about the right of children to have their opinions heard and this is also reflected

in UK legislation and guidance which outlines the duty to ascertain children's wishes (The Children Act, 2004). The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) devotes a whole chapter to eliciting pupil views and states that "children and young people with special educational needs have a unique knowledge of their own needs and circumstances and their own views about what sort of help they would like to help them make the most of their education" (DfES, 2001, p.27). The recent SEN Green Paper (2011) recognises how when EPs "work directly with families, this can help parents to understand their child's needs and the support that will enable the child to fulfil his or her potential" (SEN Green Paper, 2011, p. 105). Therefore, at the year 5 annual review meeting to consider secondary transition, EPs need to not only consult with parents, but are also well placed to encourage the child voice to be elicited and heard regarding their views about secondary placements and transfer. Within this forum, the EP could work alongside the child, parent and school to encourage and facilitate open discussions. Doing so should increase parental awareness of any conflicts their child may have with their decisions on placement from the outset. This would provide the opportunity to begin planning involvement and arrangements that could prepare the child psychologically for moving on, as well as providing opportunities for the child to become physically familiar with their new school throughout year 6. The position of the EP within the LA allows them to work across primary and secondary, mainstream and specialist settings. Therefore, the EP could work with the family and schools proactively and preventatively to ensure a thorough and personalised transition plan for the child, thus supporting primary schools and receiving secondary schools to be clearly aware and fully prepared in advance for any potential difficulties the child may encounter.

Second, stronger collaboration between EPs and specialist teachers to support schools and families with transition packages should be possible. There already exists within the LA a strong infrastructure of specialist teachers as well as those teachers who have been assigned to lead roles specifically related to transition and ASD pupils. These professionals are not only aware of the good practices within schools across the county regarding secondary transition for ASD children, but they also have access to a wealth of information from local and national services and charities that could be disseminated to families and schools. By 'working together', the good practice regarding transition that does exist within the LA could be more accessible and more widely implemented across schools within the county.

The SEN Green Paper specifically outlines the government's desire to "encourage greater collaboration between local professionals and services" (SEN Green Paper, 2011, p.94).

Third, there appears to be an ongoing role for EPs to work with primary and secondary settings to support intrinsic ASD child difficulties in the context of school through direct interventions and at a systemic level. The longitudinal nature of this study was able to reveal how many of the children presented with social difficulties, sensory difficulties and anxiety in both school phases. These were difficulties associated with their condition and exacerbated by the transition process. The SEN Green Paper specifically outlines how EPs working in schools "can help to develop the skills of teachers and other professionals working with pupils with SEN" (SEN Green Paper, 2011, p.105). Again, by working collaboratively with specialist teachers and other professionals, the EP plays a key role in strengthening the advice and support that is provided to schools to manage the educational, social and emotional needs of children with an ASD. The EP can offer therapeutic services to schools, such as individual or group level Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) interventions to reduce anxiety. The EP can also play a central role in supporting schools with their provision mapping and the consideration of psycho-social needs within Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

Fourth, there appears to be a need for more effective liaison between the primary and secondary school phases to specifically consider the transition for children with ASD. This study found evidence to suggest how primary schools may need to do more to prepare children for the social and emotional changes they can face on transition to a larger, more complex context. Increased levels of primary teacher in-reach into secondary schools to allow direct, experiential knowledge of what the children will encounter when they move to secondary school could be beneficial. Again, there may be a role for EPs and specialist teachers to signpost school staff to cluster or confederation meetings where there may be opportunities for them to share and learn good practice regarding transition packages. At the very least, this would simply increase the level of liaison between key staff responsible for transition within schools.

Finally, the LA needs to give consideration to earlier panel dates for ASD children requiring specialist placements at secondary level. When a family had lodged a tribunal appeal, a number of children in this study received very little transition support or missed

out on this completely due to the delay in securing and confirming their secondary school placement. Therefore, the process of decision making regarding specialist placements needs to begin much earlier as a result of the year 5 annual review. Should any conflicts between a family and the LA occur, these can still be resolved in time, thus allowing a child a sufficient package of preparation and induction to their new school. This support and intervention is not only required but also rightfully deserved.

5.4 Strengths and shortcomings of this research study

There are a number of key aspects of this study, which were implemented to overcome limitations inherent in previous research regarding secondary transition for children with an ASD. First, the study followed a representative sample of 15 children making the move between school phases, a sample size, which is significantly larger than that of any previous research study within the existing literature.

Second, the study employed a mixed methodology to allow not only the impact of intrinsic child characteristics associated with ASD on secondary transition success to be examined, but also the influence of wider systemic factors on the process. The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data resulted in ‘completeness’ of data collection, supplying all of the information needed to allow a comprehensive investigation and analysis of the overarching research question pursued.

Third, the study employed a longitudinal design, following individual children through the transition process and conducting interviews with these children, their parents and teachers on two occasions, both before and after transition. Multiple interviews with participants provided good corroboration of the findings. Furthermore, ‘triangulation’ of data collection through interviews with children, parents and teachers achieved a rounded, multilayered understanding of secondary transition (Yardley, 2000). The longitudinal nature of this study provided the opportunity to detect different patterns in transition experiences as a direct result of the family’s secondary provision choice.

One shortcoming of this study is in relation to the amount of data that could be collected within the scope of the research. The study lacked a comparison group of typically developing children or children with other SEN. However, the inclusion of comparison groups was beyond the remit of this study.

This study highlighted tensions between parents and the LA regarding the shortfall in specialist provision specific to ASD needs at secondary level, as well as the process of obtaining such placements. However, the opportunity to collect data to elicit the view of LA officials regarding these matters was beyond the scope and remit of this study. Clearly, there may be issues with regards to finite budgets, as well as LA policy on decision making, which are related to the tensions raised by parents in this study. A possible avenue for future research would be to gain an LA perspective regarding the concerns parents have in securing the appropriate provision for their child. Such research could be insightful and could support the LA in improving their partnership with parents. It could also support parents in considering their choices of placement at secondary level and the implications of their choice on their child. Previous government legislation (Excellence for All Children, DfEE, 1997) acknowledges the minority of ASD children who require specialist provision, but indicates that the majority should be able to have their needs met within mainstream schools. Therefore, should there be more specialist provision available? The findings of this current study may well suggest that mainstream with appropriate levels of support works best, since the change in personal identity and loss of peer group attached to moving from mainstream to special provision were difficult issues for a number of children to overcome.

5.5 Conclusions

The main aim of this study was to examine the factors impacting on the secondary transition process for children with an ASD. Using a mixed methodology the study investigated the impact of intrinsic child characteristics associated with ASD on transition success, as well as examining the influence of wider systemic factors on the process through interviews with children, parents and teachers.

Overall, the study found that transition success is significantly influenced by systemic factors rather than the intrinsic ASD difficulties of the child alone. The difficulties associated with the autistic condition, inevitably, mean that moving schools can be a very difficult change for these vulnerable children to accomplish. However, it is the influence of process factors, such as families obtaining specialist secondary placements for their child, as well as children moving from mainstream to specialist provision, which can further exacerbate the difficulties of changing schools for these children and their families.

As professionals, we must continue to work with children and families to support and manage the difficulties associated with the autistic condition within schools and specifically in relation to transition periods. Furthermore, it is clearly our duty to strive to 'work together' and minimise any weaknesses and pitfalls within both school and LA structures and systems to ensure that all children with an ASD are provided with a transition support package they are entitled to.

This research clearly demonstrates how the voice of the child must be heard throughout the transition process. This research also indicates the need for better planning, preparation and communication by schools and LA professionals to ensure that all ASD children and their families experience a smooth secondary transition.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter to families

Dear Parent X,

Your family is invited to be involved in a research study examining the *transition from primary to secondary school for children with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)*, which I will be conducting as part of my training for a Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at the Institute of Education, London.

If you decide to take part in this project, your child would be seen during their final term of primary school and again during their first term of secondary school. In the first session, your child would take part in a brief assessment of their language and reasoning abilities, followed by a few questions to explore their thoughts and feelings surrounding their move to secondary school. In the second session, your child would be asked a few questions to understand their transition experience after having begun secondary school.

As the child's parent, you would be asked to take part in a short interview (approximately 30 minutes) regarding your perspectives surrounding school transition, and to complete three brief questionnaires about your child's social communication, his/her "sensory symptoms", and any worries or anxiety he/she may experience. A second interview would be completed again once your child has made the move to secondary school. The answers you give may help us to understand the critical factors that contribute to a successful school transition. You have the option to omit answering any questions you feel you do not want to answer, and all information collected would be kept strictly confidential.

We would also like to invite your child's current year 6 teacher and new secondary teacher to participate in an interview. School teachers play an important role in the transition process, and so we are keen to hear their thoughts on the transition of your child.

This research study provides your family with the opportunity to influence local provision and initiatives to support young people on the autistic spectrum within the LA. There is a consent form enclosed for you to sign if your family would like to take part. If you sign the form, you are still free to withdraw at any time, without having to provide a reason. A decision to withdraw or to not take part will not affect your child's education in any way.

If you have any further questions about this research please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Chantelle Gumaste

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Focus on Transitions Project

Why is this research being done?

Without appropriate support, the transition from primary to secondary school can be difficult for many young people and it can be particularly challenging for those with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). This research study aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ASD, and their parents and teachers, in order to understand any issues that either help or hinder their transition from primary to secondary school. This project provides a direct opportunity for the voice of your child and family to be heard.

Who is conducting this research?

Chantelle Gumaste will be conducting this research and she is currently employed by X County Council as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. Chantelle has extensive experience working with children and in schools, having previously worked as a mainstream primary school teacher. This study will be conducted by Chantelle in her role as researcher for the Institute of Education. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education and also within X County Council.

What will happen to the results of this research?

At the completion of the study, you will be sent a brief report regarding the findings of the research. Individual results will not be disclosed and all information collected will be kept strictly confidential.

What should we do next?

If your family would like to take part in this study, please complete the enclosed consent form and return it to Chantelle Gumaste in the envelope provided.

Thank you for your interest in this research

Appendix C: Consent Form

Consent form

Parent/guardian copy - Please keep this copy for your own records.

I have read the letter about the research and my child and I are happy to take part in this research study.

(please tick)

I understand that participation is voluntary and that we are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my child's education being affected in any way.

(please tick)

I understand that I can contact Chantelle Gumaste by email (Chantelle.Gumaste@X) or by telephone on X to discuss this research study at any time.

(please tick)

My child and I will be available to take part in the research study in their current school during the summer term (May-July 2010) and at their new secondary school during the autumn term (October-December 2010).

(please tick)

My child has a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder.

(please tick)

Name of child: _____ (Male) (Female)
(Forename) (Surname)

Date of Birth: _____ School: _____

Contact email and phone: _____

Name of parent/guardian (please print): _____

Signature: _____ Today's date: _____

Appendix D: Child Letter

Dear Child X,

My name is Chantelle Gumaste and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist.



I am interested in how pupils learn and what they think about school. I work with pupils, teachers and families to find ways to help pupils learn. Sometimes I work with their teachers and parents, sometimes I work with pupils or just watch them in class.

I will be visiting you at school to find out about your learning and to talk to you about going to secondary school in September. This is what will happen during my visit:

- I will come to your school on X to meet with you, your mum and your teacher.
- I will meet with your mum at X. I will speak to you mum about your learning *and* your new school. Then I will come to your classroom just after X to meet you.
- We will then go to a quiet room in school and I will ask you to sit at a desk to work with me. Your Teaching Assistant can come with us, if you like.
- I will ask you to complete 4 tasks. In some tasks, I will ask you about some words, what they mean and how they go together. In another task, I will ask you to look at some pictures to work out how a pattern makes sense. You will also make some patterns using red and white blocks. Some pupils find these tasks difficult. You will probably find them easy because your mum tells me that you are good at learning in school. I will tell you what to do so you won't get stuck.
- When you have finished doing these tasks I will ask you some questions about how you are feeling about going to your new secondary school. If there are any questions that you don't want to answer, then you can tell me and that will be OK.
- When we have finished talking about you new secondary school you may leave the room and go back to your classroom. You should have finished by X although it

may take a few minutes more or a few minutes less. If it does, that is OK. You will leave a few minutes before or after X.

- After you have left the room I will speak to your teacher and then I will go home.

When you start at your new school in September I will come to visit you and your mum *again* to talk to you about your new school. This will be in your first term at your new school. If you have any questions about me coming to see you then you can tell your Mum and she can telephone me.

See you soon.

Chantelle Gumaste
Trainee Educational Psychologist
South East Team

P.S. If there are any changes to this I may use an OOPS card. I will then tell you the new instructions when I see you at school to explain what will happen if there are any changes. The OOPS card looks like this:



Appendix E: Child and parent post-transition questionnaires

Post Transition Children's Questionnaire

Child ID Number:

Date:

Administrator: Chantelle Gumaste

BEING PREPARED FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

1. When you were still at primary school, were you excited about going to secondary school?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Both
 - I can't remember

2. Did your Y6 teacher talk to you about any of these things before you went to secondary school?
 - Having more than 1 teacher
 - Changing classrooms between lessons
 - Lunch system
 - Behaviour in school
 - Having new subjects
 - Not being with same pupils in all lessons
 - Anything else?

3. Did teachers from your secondary school ever visit your primary school?
 - Yes
 - No

4. If they did, what did they do?
 - Talk in an assembly
 - Talk to you on your own
 - Talk to the class/small group
 - Watch your class working
 - Teach your class
 - Anything else?

5. Did you visit your new secondary school before you started?
 - Yes
 - No

6. If you did, who did you visit with?
 - Parents

- Primary school teacher
- Friends/class
- On your own (added)
- With other children you didn't know (added)
- Anything else?

7. How many times did you visit your secondary school? times

8. If you visited, who did you meet and what did you do?

- Met the head teacher
- Met other teachers
- Met other children
- Had a tour
- Saw a class working
- Had a lesson
- Was free to wander around
- Had lunch
- Did not visit
- Anything else?

9. How did you feel when you visited your secondary school?

- Excited
- Nervous
- Both excited and nervous
- Not bothered
- I can't remember
- Did not visit
- Anything else?

10. Did you feel welcome at your new school?

- Yes
- No

Why do you think this was?

NOW THAT YOU ARE AT SECONDARY SCHOOL

11. Did you feel prepared/ready for moving to secondary school?

- Yes
- No

12. Did your secondary school help you to settle in?

- It helped me a lot
- It helped me a little
- It did not help at all

13. How do you feel now that you have spent half a term at secondary school?

- Excited
- Happy
- Nervous
- Both excited and nervous
- Worried
- Anything else?

14. How are you settling in?

- Very well
- Quite well
- Not very well
- Not at all well

15. Do you feel safe when you are...

- Travelling between home and school
- In school
- In the playground

16. Now you have been at your secondary school for half a term, which routines do you know really well?

- Registration
- Clubs and activities
- Lunch time
- Using school equipment
- PE kit
- School uniform
- Getting to lessons on time (where to go)
- Who to ask for help

17. How easy or difficult has it been to get used to the routines in your new school?

	Very easy	Easy	Difficult	Very difficult
Having many different teachers				
Changing classrooms between lessons				
Lunch system				
Behaviour and discipline in school				
Not being with same pupils in all lesson (this may not be the case in your school)				

18. Have you joined any lunch time or after school clubs/teams?

- Yes
- No

19. If yes, which ones?

COMPARISONS WITH YOUR PRIMARY SCHOOL

20. How much do you think the work you did in the following subjects in Y6 helped you to cope with the work you are doing in Y7?

	Very helpful	Helpful	Not helpful	Not helpful at all	Did not do it in Y6
English					
Maths					
Sciences					
History					
Geography					
Design & Technology					
ICT					
Art & Design					
Music					
PE					
RE/PSHE					
Languages(this may not be the case in your primary school)					

21. Compared to the work in year 6, how easy or difficult do you think work is in year 7?

	A lot easier	Easier	More difficult	A lot more difficult	Did not do it in Y6
English					
Maths					
Sciences					
History					
Geography					
Design & Technology					
ICT					
Art & Design					
Music					
PE					
RE/PSHE					
Languages(this may not be the case in your primary school)					

22. Compared to primary school, in secondary school do you have...

- More friends
- Less friends
- The same number of friends

23. Compared with primary school, in secondary school are your teachers

- More strict
- Less strict
- The same

YOUR SECONDARY SCHOOL

24. Which is your favourite subject at this school?

25. How interesting do you find the work in Y7?

	Very interesting	Interesting	Not interesting
English			
Maths			
Sciences			
History			
Geography			
Languages			

26. Does your secondary school teach any of the following skills to help you with your work? Please say how helpful you find them.

	I have not done this	Helpful	Quite helpful	Not helpful at all
How to take notes when people speak				
How to make notes e.g. from textbooks				
How to use acronyms				
How to write an essay				
How to revise				
How to use reference sources e.g. dictionaries, atlases, internet				
Other				
.....				
.....				

27. On a normal school day, how long do you spend doing your homework?

- Under 30 mins
- 31 mins to 1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- Over 2 hours

28. Do you get any help with your work at secondary school?

- Yes
- No

29. If yes, who helps you?

30. Do they help you all the time?

31. Do you have an older brother or sister at this school?

- Yes
- No

32. How many of your friends from primary school came to this school?

- None
- Only a few
- Most of them

33. Have you made new friends?

- Yes
- No

34. Are the children in your class...

- Very friendly
- Friendly
- Not friendly
- Not sure

35. Are the older children at your school...

- Very friendly
- Friendly
- Not friendly
- Not sure

36. Are the teachers at your school...

- Very friendly
- Friendly
- Not friendly
- Not sure

Post-Transition Parents Questionnaire

Child ID Number:

Name of Individual Completing Questionnaire:

Relationship to Child:

Date:

CHOOSING A SECONDARY SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD

1. When did you start thinking seriously about which secondary school your child would go to?

- Before Y3
- Y3
- Y4
- Y5
- Y6
- Not sure

2. What type of school(s) did you consider?

- State schools
- Private school
- Both State and Private schools
- Mainstream Schools
- Specialist Provision
- ASD Specific Provision
- Mainstream and Specialist and ASD Specific Provision

3. How many schools did you consider as serious possibilities for your child?
(Please write below)

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.....
.....

4. How many schools did you apply to and which category, as defined above, did they fall into? e.g. 2 mainstream, 1 special. (Please write below)

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.....
.....

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ONLY APPLY TO THE SCHOOL THAT
YOUR CHILD IS CURRENTLY AT

5. Did you go to the open day/evening before you made up your mind?

- Yes
- No

6. If so, was your child invited to go with you?

- Yes
- No

7. Did the open day/evening include any of the following?

- Opportunity for individual discussion with Head teacher
- Opportunity to meet other teachers
- Opportunity to meet pupils

8. Did the visit include any of the following?

- Watched a lesson
- Tour the buildings
- Free to wander
- Other (please write below)

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9. Did you feel welcome in the school?

- Yes
- No

10. Please describe below what made you feel this way?

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11. From the open day visit, what was your impression of the school's... (please tick)

	Very Good	Good	Average	Weak	Very Weak
a.Emphasis on academic results					
b.Emphasis on working with parents					
c.Emphasis on school's pleasant atmosphere / ethos					

d.Emphasis on discipline and behaviour in school					
e.Emphasis on non-academic activities					
f.Quality of the buildings and facilities					
g.Emphasis on the child as an individual					
h.Quality of teaching staff					
i.Friendliness of teaching staff					
j.Safety within school					
k.Provision for students with SEN					
l.Experience of supporting students with ASD					

12. How important were the following school characteristics in your decision to send your child to this school? (please tick)

	Very Important	Important	No Important at all	Not applicable
a.Distance from home				
b.School in partnership with child's primary school				
c.Parent's association available				
d.School's atmosphere/ethos				
e.Good pastoral care				
f.Is a church/faith school				
g.Is a mixed school				
h.Is a single sex school				
i.Is a small school				
j. Is a large school				
k.Is a selective school				
l.Is a private school				
m.Specialist school for particular curriculum area e.g. science, sports, languages				
n.6 th form available				
o.Good vocational opportunities				
p.Buildings in good order				
q.Good facilities e.g. art, music, IT, sports				
r.Availability of after school clubs				

13. How important were the following in your decision to send your child to this school? (please tick)

	Very Important	Important	Not Important at all	Not applicable
a.Has a good reputation for				

behaviour and discipline				
b.Head teacher				
c.Good exam results				
d.Has a reputation for a high standard of teaching				
e.Ofsted reports				

14. How important were the following pieces of information in your decision to send your child to this school? (please tick)

	Very Important	Important	Not Important at all	Not applicable
a.Recommended by friends/relatives				
b.Recommended by child's primary school				
c.Brothers/sisters already at the school				
d.Child's friends go/going to school				
e.Child wanted to go there				
f.School's brochure				
g.School's website				
h.Open day/visit to the school				

15. Please write the 3 most important reasons for choosing to send your child to their current secondary school from the 3 QUESTIONS ABOVE (question 12, 13, 14): for example 12b 13a and 14c

- 1st most important
- 2nd most important
- 3rd most important

16. How much did you and your child agree about the final choice of your child's secondary school?

- Strong agreement
- Agreement
- Some agreement
- No agreement

APPLYING TO SECONDARY SCHOOLS FOR YOUR CHILD

17. How easy was it to understand the admissions policy for the school that your child is attending?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Not easy
- Not easy at all
- Not sure

18. Getting hold of this information about the school was?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Not easy
- Not easy at all
- Not sure

THE FOLLOWING QUESTION APPLIES ONLY TO THE SCHOOL THAT YOUR CHILD IS CURRENTLY AT

19. How easy were the forms to fill in?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Not easy
- Not easy at all
- Not sure

YOUR CHILD'S SECONDARY SCHOOL: OFFERS AND APPEALS

20. Think of the school your child goes to now. Which choice was this? (please tick one)

- 1st choice of school
- 2nd choice of school
- 3rd plus
- Not my/our choice at all, just allocated

21. If you did not receive an offer for your first choice, did you appeal?

- Yes
- No

22. If yes, was the appeal successful?

- Yes
- No

23. If no, what reasons were you given for this? (please tick all that apply)

- Distance from home
- School oversubscribed
- Faith
- No reasons were given
- Other (please write below)

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24. If your appeal was unsuccessful, what did you do?

- Go to a different state school
- Got to a private school
- Move catchment area
- Keep him/her at home
- Other (please write below)

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PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

25. How satisfied were you with the way your child's primary school prepared them for secondary school?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Not satisfied
- Not satisfied at all

26. Did you go to any meetings at primary school to find out more about your child's move to secondary school?

- Yes
- No
- Not offered

27. If yes, how helpful did you find these meetings?

- Very helpful
- Helpful
- Not very helpful
- Not helpful at all

28. Did your child need help with any of the following in the last term of primary school and/or during the summer, in preparation for secondary school? (please tick all that apply)

- The journey to school
- Talking about their feelings
- Remembering books and equipment

- Making new friends
- Homework
- Using the computer or internet
- Other (please write below)

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29. Did your child's secondary school do any of the following things to prepare your child for moving on whilst they were in primary school? (please tick all that apply)

- Joint events (i.e. sports, social)
- Mentors assigned
- Visit the secondary school for special lessons
- Saturday lessons
- Mentors assigned
- Evening meetings (for parents and children)
- Other (please write below)

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30. If a day time visit to the secondary school was offered, do you know if any of the activities listed below took place?

- Meeting the new form tutor
- Lunch
- Tour of school
- Joining in lessons
- Not offered

NOW THAT YOUR CHILD IS AT SECONDARY SCHOOL

31. How did you feel when your child first moved on to secondary school?

- Not at all concerned

- A bit concerned
- Concerned
- Very concerned

Can you describe the reason(s) for this?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

32. How do you feel now?

- Not at all concerned
- A bit concerned
- Concerned
- Very concerned

Can you describe the reason(s) for this?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

33. Which, if any, of the following things do you worry about?

- Amount of freedom
- Amount of homework
- Level of work
- Adjusting to having many teachers
- Safety
- Travel to school
- Sustained friends
- Making new friends
- Bullying
- Understanding school procedures
- Understanding school rules
- Other (please write below)

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34. How do you think your child has settled in?

- Very well
- Quite well
- Not very well
- Not well at all

35. Compared with last year at primary school would you say your child now shows or has:

	More	The same	Less
Interest in school			
Interest in school work			
Interest in out of school activities			
School friends			
Self-esteem			
Confidence			
Motivation			

36. Has your child ever refused to go to his/her new school or tried to get out of going?

- Yes
- No

37. If yes, please write here why you think they did not want to go.

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.....
.....

38. As far as you are aware, has your child had any problems with bullying at his/her new school?

- No problems
- Some problems
- A lot of problems
- I don't know

39. On a normal school evening, how long do you spend helping your child with their homework?

- My child does not want help
- My child does not need help
- Under 30 minutes
- 30 minutes
- 45 minutes

- 1 or more hours
- My child is very reluctant to do homework
- My child will not do his/her homework
- My child is not given homework to do

40. Compared with the last year at primary school, would you say your child now has an average: (please tick if your child is given homework)

	Much more	More	The same	Less
Amount of homework				
Interest in homework				
Challenged by homework				
Different types of homework				
Different patterns of homework				

41. How satisfied are you with the amount of contact with the school? (please tick)

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Not satisfied	Not at all satisfied
Telephone contact				
Newsletters				
Personalised letters sent home				
Parents evening				

42. Do you receive enough feedback from the school about your child's progress and behaviour?

- Yes
- No

43. How satisfied are you with the whole process of your child's moving on to secondary school?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Not satisfied
- Not at all satisfied

44. Do you feel that your child's primary school could have done anything better to help your child moving on to secondary school? (please write below)

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45. Do you feel that your child's secondary school could have done anything better to help your child moving on from primary school? (please write below)

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46. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your child's move to secondary school? (please write below)

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Appendix F: Interview schedules

Children pre-transition interview schedule

Introduction

Hello my name is Chantelle and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. This means that I work with lots of different children in different schools and I am interested in their learning and how they feel about school.

(Show and refer to the original child friendly letter I sent to the child featuring my photograph)

I would like to see how well you are getting on with your learning and I've brought along some games for us to work on together today (introduce assessment tasks).

I would be really interested to ask you some questions about this school and about the new school that you will be going to in September. If you don't want to answer any of the questions that I ask you then you can just tell me and that will be ok.

1. What things do you like about your primary school? (show happy face visual)
2. Is there anything you don't like about your primary school? (show sad face visual)
3. How do you think your new secondary school will be different from this school? (visual prompt - school building, classrooms, lessons, timetable, homework, teachers, friends) Thought bubble ideas.
4. How are you feeling about going to secondary school? (show face cards – excited, happy, calm, scared, sad, worried)
5. What things do you get excited by? (prompt - I get excited when it's my birthday...)
6. Is there anything that you are excited about at secondary school? (show excited face card)
7. Do you get worried about anything at the moment? (prompt - I get worried when I have lots of work to do)
8. Is there anything you are worried about at secondary school? (show worried face card)
9. Is there anything that could help you feel less worried about going to secondary school?
10. How can your mum or dad or teachers help you with changing schools?

Thank you for helping me with my work. I have really enjoyed speaking to you. I will be meeting you again after you have started secondary school to see how you are getting on.

Parent pre-transition interview schedule

Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me today. As I said in my original letter, I am carrying out a research study to examine the transition from primary to secondary school for young people on the autistic spectrum. All the information you give me will remain anonymous and will be kept in strict confidence. The information will only be used for the purposes of this research study. You are free to omit answering any questions that I ask.

Parents questions

1. How are you feeling about your child's transition?
2. How do you think transition to secondary school will affect your child? (prompt positively and negatively – school context, curriculum, social)
3. What do you feel will ensure and support a successful transition to secondary school for your child?
4. What do you think may be the main obstacles or barriers to a successful transition for your child?
5. How is your child being prepared for transition by school?
6. Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see made to the current transition arrangements that are in place?
7. What has influenced your choice and decisions around secondary school for your child?
8. Looking to the future, can you describe how will you know that your child has made a successful transition to secondary school? Can you describe what a successful transition for your child would look like?

Before we finish, is there anything else you wish to say or share that we haven't already covered. Is there anything you wish to ask me at this stage? Thank you very much for your time, it is greatly appreciated!

Primary teacher pre-transition interview schedule

1. What support has child X required in primary school? (prompt – at a curriculum, social level)
2. What do you feel will help to ensure a smooth and successful transition to secondary school for child X?
3. What do you feel may be the main obstacles or barriers to a successful transition for child X?
4. What support do you feel child X will require at secondary school? (prompt – at a curriculum, social level)
5. What transition arrangements are in place within your school for child X, who is a child on the autistic spectrum?
6. Do you feel the transition arrangements for child X could be improved, and if so, how?
7. Looking to the future, can you describe how will you know that child X has made a successful transition to secondary school? Can you describe what a successful transition for child X would look like?

Exploratory questions to be used with all participants to probe responses in more detail, if felt appropriate:

What did/do you think about...?

How did/do you feel about...?

Could you say a bit more about that?

Can you tell me more about this?

That's really interesting, can you explain this further?

Children post-transition interview

1. What things were important to you about secondary school? (PROMPT friends, teachers, lessons, clubs, playtime, homework)
2. What things you were excited about at secondary school? (refer back to pre transition interview if needed)
3. Were you worried about anything at secondary school? (refer back to pre transition interview if needed)
4. Are you still worried about anything now you are at secondary school?
5. Has anything or anyone helped you with these worries?
6. Did you feel ready for moving to secondary school? If yes, who helped you and what did they do? (PROMPT teacher/parents – lessons, homework, building, friends, lunchtime, playtime)
7. Have your secondary school help you to settle in? How? (PROMPT doing work, making friends, building-finding way around, homework)
8. Is there anything that could help you more?
9. What has been the easiest thing about moving to your new school? (same prompts as above if needed)
10. What has been the hardest thing about moving to your new school? (same prompts as above if needed)
11. What do you like about your new school?
12. What do you not like about your new school?
13. Have you made new friends? What has helped you to make friends?
14. Is there anything really good about being in year 7?
15. Do you miss anything about your primary school?
16. What could make changing schools easier for you or other children?

Parent post-transition interview schedule

1. What support did you and your child receive to prepare for their transition to secondary school?
2. Can you describe the mechanisms/structures that have been put in place to support your child to settle in to their new secondary school?
3. Has your child's new school done anything specifically to accommodate the specific (autistic) needs of your child (e.g., introduced a "safe zone" or turned down the fluorescent lights in the class etc.)?
4. Does your child have any TA time allocated to them as part of their statement and what impact do you feel this has had on teaching and learning for them?
5. In your opinion, what have been the key features that have supported your child to transition as successfully as possible to their new school? (what has gone well)
6. In your opinion, what have been the main obstacles and barriers to a smooth and successful transition for your child? (what has not gone so well)
7. Are there any specific features of your child's autistic spectrum condition that you feel may have impacted on their transition to secondary school? Can you describe how/in what ways? (PROMPT: anxiety, IQ, severity of autism/social communication difficulties, sensory symptoms)
8. Do you know how your child's transition to secondary school is evaluated?
9. Can you describe how external services in the LA (health, social and education) have supported you and your child in managing the transition, if at all?
10. What did they do well?
11. What did they do not so well?
12. What more could they have done?
13. Overall how do you feel your child's transition to secondary school has gone?
14. Is there anything that you feel could have been done differently for your child to support their transition to secondary school?
15. Do you feel anything may need to change to support other children with an autistic spectrum condition (and their families) transferring to secondary school in the future?

Secondary teacher post-transition interview schedule

1. How is transition generally organised in your school for young people on the autistic spectrum?
2. What support did child X and his/her family receive to prepare for transition before they transferred to your school?
3. Can you describe the mechanisms and structures that have been put in place to support child X to settle in to your school?
4. Have you and your school done anything specifically to accommodate the specific (autistic) needs of child X (e.g., introduced a “safe zone” or turned down the fluorescent lights in the class etc.)?
5. Does child X have any TA time allocated to them as part of their statement and what impact do you feel this has had on teaching and learning?
6. In your opinion, what have been the key features that have supported child X to transition as successfully as possible to your school?
7. In your opinion, what have been the main obstacles and barriers to a smooth and successful transition for child X?
8. Are there any specific features of child X’s autistic spectrum condition that you feel may have impacted on their transition to secondary school? (PROMPT: anxiety, IQ, severity of autism/social communication difficulties, sensory symptoms).
9. How is child X’s transition to this school evaluated?
10. Can you describe how external services in the LA (health, social and education) have supported your school in managing the transition for child X?
11. What did they do well?
12. What did they do not so well?
13. What more could they have done?
14. Overall, is there anything that you feel could have been done differently for child X to support their transition to secondary school?
15. Do you feel anything may need to change to support other children with an autistic spectrum condition transferring to secondary school in the future?

Appendix G: Task schedule

Transitions Research



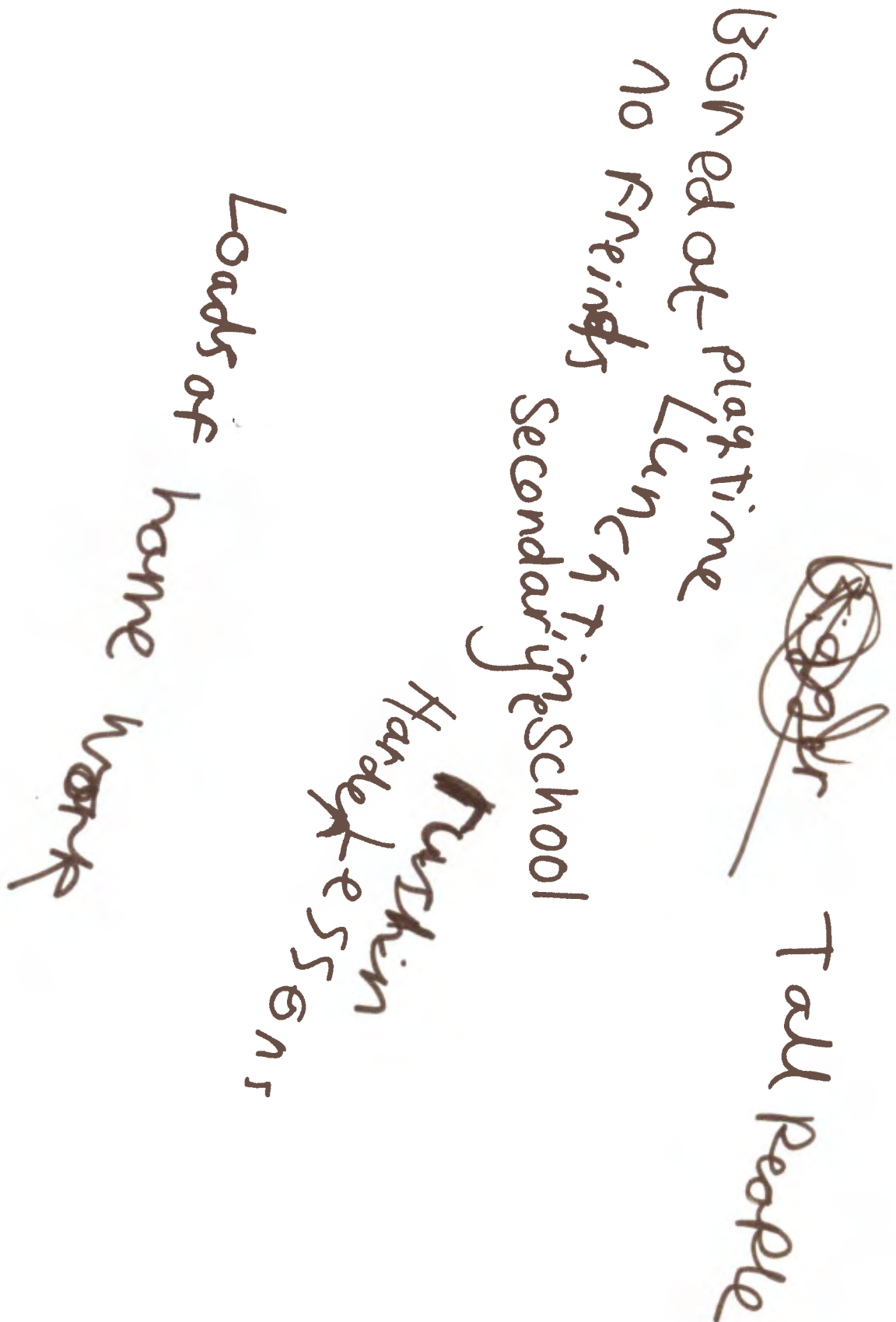
Name:

Date of birth:

Date today:

Tasks	✓ / ✗
1. Vocabulary	
2. Block Design	
3. Similarities	
4. Matrix Reasoning	
5. Talk about School	

Appendix H: Example mind map



Appendix I: Example coded transcript

Interviewer: What things do you like about your primary school?

Respondent: Well we've got a massive field⁹. We've got loads...um...well I've got loads and loads of friends¹. And I like the school meals. My favourite is meatballs and spaghetti and then we get chocolate sponge for pudding.

Interviewer: Ok

Respondent: We are having loads of parties⁹ when we play games at the end of term and the end of the school year.

Interviewer: Great! Is there anything you don't like about your primary school?

Respondent: I sometimes get bullied and some people laugh^{3/7} and some people care. I don't like it when people call me wussy because when I scrape my leg. I cry sometimes⁴.

Interviewer: Mmm ok. How do you feel about that?

Respondent: Um...it can make me feel sad and a bit lonely.⁵

Interviewer: Yes I am sure, ok so how do you think your new secondary school will be different from this school?

Respondent: Well it has tons more children and it has loads more playgrounds and it has loads more rooms¹⁰. Because we only have like twelve or thirteen and you have like forty eight in each building and more teachers¹⁷. And they call their canteen room a canteen and we call ours a hall. Do you have lunch in a hall there because we have ours in the hall?

Interviewer: Well you are right, quite often in secondary school there is a separate hall and canteen.

Respondent: There will be lots more children at my new school¹⁰.

Interviewer: Yes I think you are right there will be more children. How are you feeling about going to secondary school?

Respondent: Well I feel happy because I am going with some of friends but I also feel sad because I am leaving some of my friends. Yeah so I feel happy and sad I suppose, sort of scared and excited at the same time¹³.

Interviewer: Ok, can you tell me anymore about how you are feeling?

Respondent: I am scared about all the children just gathering around when we have assembly¹⁰ and I am going to be squished. I think, well I think I am going to be surprised by all the children and all the playgrounds and all the teachers¹⁰.

Interviewer: Yes

Respondent: But I am excited about seeing the new school canteen and there will be loads of food. You have like one meal where there is chicken curry and then there's another one where there is spaghetti and you have like different menus.

Interviewer: What things do you get excited by?

Respondent: Food and um, my birthday and the food I have on my birthday.

Interviewer: Ok, well you have already told me some things, but is there anything that you are excited about at secondary school?

Respondent: I am excited about playing on the astro turf for football. That picture kind of looks like [secondary school name] you know.

Interviewer: Do you get worried about anything at the moment?

Respondent: Um well...I don't think so.

Interviewer: Well ok, I know sometimes I get worried when I have lots of work to do.

Respondent: I am not sure really.

Interviewer: Is there anything you are worried about at secondary school?

Respondent: I feel worried about loads of children¹⁰ and maybe getting a bit bullied¹¹ because I've got...You know like when your first teeth come out and people call you goofy...

Interviewer: Ok

Respondent: That's what I get afraid about. They don't do it anymore.

Interviewer: Ok that's good to hear.

Respondent: I like [secondary school name] because I saw some of my friends already when I went there.

Interviewer: Oh that sounds good. Is there anything that could help you feel less worried about going to secondary school?

Respondent: Well I can go up to someone and ask if...when I'm upset they can look after me or something. Are we going to have buddies, like someone in year 10 or 11 or some people who can look after me and defend me from people who are unkind?

Interviewer: Yes sometimes that happens in schools to help new children and I think that can be really helpful.

Respondent: Eating loads of food like chicken, meatballs and spaghetti and lots of different puddings and chocolate sponge and cake and biscuits is good at [secondary school name] so that will be helpful. And I think I will get used to the children when I have been there for a couple of weeks as well.

Interviewer: Yes I think you are right. How can your mum or dad or teachers help you with changing schools?

Respondent: I am not sure because I don't really want to change schools¹⁵.

Interviewer: Ok

Respondent: I like the name [secondary school name] and my mum won't let me go to [another secondary school name] because there is too many bullies and I was going to go to [another secondary school name] but there is a list and I got into [secondary school name] before that anyway. I am pleased that I'm going to [secondary school name] but I am upset about leaving all my friends.

Interviewer: Yes I am sure.

Respondent: There is a boy who is not going to any of those schools where he doesn't know anyone and is different to all of us, it's called X. There is three of us who are in [class name] who are going to [secondary school name] and then a few others in my school in other classes.

Interviewer: Ok well that sounds good.

Respondent: If I am sick one day and can't come to school, do you think the teachers will mind? I haven't been sick for nearly a year.

Interviewer: You sound like you are a very healthy boy.

Respondent: I am not sure, do you only get one or two sheets of homework a night because we only get one sheet at [primary school name] but not every night? I feel a bit worried about the homework¹⁶.

Interviewer: Did Mrs [secondary school teacher] speak to you about homework when she came to visit you here?

Respondent: Um maybe I can't really remember.

Interviewer: I tell you what we can do. Let us have a chat to Mrs [primary school teacher] because it is something we can talk about and find out more about if we don't know.

Initial Codes

1. Like having friends at primary (theme 1)	11. Bullying concerns (theme 2)
2. Poor social support at primary (theme 1)	12. Getting new friends (theme 2)
3. Bullying at primary (theme 1)	13. Mixed feelings about transition (theme 2)
4. Unhappiness at primary (theme 1)	14. Getting lost (theme 2)
5. Lack of friends /loneliness (theme 1)	15. Anxiety around change (theme 2)
6. Social exploitation (theme 1)	16. Fears about (more/harder) work and homework (theme 2)
7. Social problems at primary (theme 1)	17. Complexity of secondary context (theme 2)
8. Teachers at primary (theme 1)	
9. Clubs/facilities/events at primary (theme 1)	
10. Larger secondary context (theme 2)	