

‘I’m ready for a new chapter’: The voices of young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders in transition to post-16 education and employment.

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Abstract

This study explores the views and experiences of 12 young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in transition to post-16 education and employment, in light of the changes introduced by new special educational needs and disability (SEND) legislation in England. The extension of provision until the age of 25, and the introduction of person-centred Education Health and Care (EHC) plans have given a significant place to the views of young people with SEND and their families. The views, wishes and aspirations of young people must be captured in the newly developed plans, reflecting the statutory requirement for local authorities to systematically record these in a biopsychosocial way, focusing on participation and well-being. **Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people with ASD attending specialist settings or receiving specialist support under the new EHC plans.** These were analysed inductively, through thematic analysis. Findings suggest that at the time of transition young people with ASD want to become increasingly more independent, present ambivalent feelings about their future, and acknowledge the relevance of support systems in their lives. Implications for practice and future research are discussed in light of the new English policy context.

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects how an individual communicates with, and relates to, other people and the world around them, causing clinically significant impairments in different areas of functioning (APA, 2013; NAS, 2014). There is agreement in the field that people with ASD share some common areas of strength and difficulty; as a spectrum condition, the broad manifestations of ASD result in large disparities in functional characteristics from one individual to another, and variable levels of performance across domains (Castro et al, 2012; Humphrey & Hebron, 2015; Schipper et al, 2015). Therefore, the presence of a diagnostic label alone seems insufficient to explain the functional implications of diagnosis (WHO, 2007).

The individuality of ASD manifestations and needs constitutes a challenge in terms of service provision for this particular group (Bond & Hebron, 2016). Although recent decades have seen a significant increase in research on ASD, a review of the literature reveals underexplored areas, particularly those concerning the views of young people, their transition to post-16 education and adulthood, effective interventions and service provision (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Howlin, 2013; Pellicano et al, 2014; Roux et al, 2013). This study aimed to address this paucity in research by exploring the views and experiences of young people with ASD in transition to post-16 education and employment, in light of the changes introduced by the new special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) legislation in England.

Transition to post-16 education and employment

The end of secondary education is a turning point in the life of all adolescents and their families (Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). This period is one of exploration and newly-found independence for young people, in which the pursuit of education and employment is embedded (Wei et al, 2015). Increased financial independence and participation in post-16 education and employment constitute central areas of socially accepted adult roles, and are an integral part of an individual’s post-school quality of life (Anderson et al, 2016; Halpern, 1993). Nevertheless, for youth with ASD and their families this can be a challenging

time, as many individuals leave the comfort of the education system feeling unprepared for adult life at post-secondary education, for work or community living, and with less experience of autonomy and independence than those expected of youth transitioning to adulthood (Pellicano et al, 2014; Schall & McDonough, 2010; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). Findings in the literature report that youth with ASD have the highest risk of being disengaged from post-secondary education or employment (Shattuck et al, 2012; Toor et al, 2016). Across the ability spectrum, they present lower rates of participation in post-secondary, vocational or technical education, and employment than their peers with learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, or intellectual disabilities (Shattuck et al, 2012; Wehman et al, 2014a). The risk of disengagement of individuals with ASD is particularly high for the first two years after exiting secondary school, highlighting a potential gap in transition planning and in the removal of barriers to participation that may be specific to this population (Shattuck et al, 2012).

Participation in decision-making, and extending provision for SEND beyond the boundaries of compulsory education (from 0 to 25) constitute key components of the changes introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014 in England, and place transition-planning in a central position. This represents a renewed opportunity for young people with SEND leaving secondary school, and their families, to directly engage with local authorities and other agencies to discuss and make joint decisions about support and provision, giving local authorities a statutory duty to place the views, wishes and aspirations of the young person at the centre of discussion and transition planning.

The voices of young people with ASD in the new SEND framework in England

All young people have the right to express their views and make informed decisions on matters affecting their lives (UN, 1989). Full and effective participation and inclusion of people with disabilities in society are underpinned by the freedom to make one's own choices and individual autonomy (Porter, 2014; UN, 2006). These principles have been inscribed at the heart of the new special educational needs and disability (SEND) legislation in England, the Children and Families Act 2014, and in the statutory guidance that stems from it, the SEND Code of Practice. At the core of the new Code of Practice is participation of children, their families, and young people in decision-making in matters relating to services and provision to help them achieve the best possible outcomes, with the aim of preparing them effectively for adulthood.

The views of young people, their wishes and aspirations are at the centre of the development of the new Education Health and Care (EHC) plans. These documents were introduced by the new law to replace previous statements of SEND; their purpose is to make special provision for children and young people with SEND with a focus on what they themselves want to achieve, and what support is required to do this in educational, health and social care terms, calling for the integration of services to deliver holistic provision that prepares them effectively for adulthood (DfE & DoH, 2015). To achieve this, the Code of Practice requires the development of person-centred EHC plans that are forward-looking 'to help raise aspirations and outline the provision required to meet assessed needs to support the child or young person in achieving their ambitions' (DfE & DoH, 2015, p.143). In the EHC plan process, the views of young people are required in the first part of the plan, Section A, titled 'the views, interests and aspirations of the child and their parents, or of the young person' (DfE & DoH, 2015, p.164). Despite these advances, a review of the literature in ASD revealed a gap between rhetoric and practice, as individuals with ASD continue to face exclusion in decision-making, consultations and research (Fayette & Bond, 2017; Pellicano et al, 2014).

The ecological nature of the EHC plans is aptly aligned with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2007), based on a biopsychosocial model of disability and health. The principle of participation in decision-making, local authorities appointed duty to ensure co-operation across services, an integration of education and training, health and social care in order to promote wellbeing and improve the quality of provision for children and young people until they are 25 years of age suggests a holistic approach towards SEND, as proposed by the WHO.

Aims of the study

This study aimed to explore the views of young people with ASD in their transition to post-16 education and employment through semi-structured interviews, following an inductive thematic analysis. The focus is on understanding the meaning of the lived experiences of transitioning to post-16 education for individuals with ASD, in light of the changes introduced by the new SEND legislation in England.

Methodology

Ethical approval was obtained from Roehampton University Research Ethics Committee. This paper presents findings from inductive thematic analysis performed on individual semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 young people with ASD.

Participants

Participants were purposively drawn from four secondary schools and one further education provider in Greater London. They were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (a) the young person has a diagnosis of ASD according to criteria by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2000; APA, 2013), or by the International Classification of Diseases (WHO, 2010). Due to changes in definitions and classification of ASD throughout time, identified participants were screened for current ASD characteristics with the Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ), current form (Rutter et al, 2003); (b) the young person holds an EHC plan; (c) the EHC plan indicates the young person's ASD; (d) the young person is between 15 and 19 years of age. Once consent was obtained from headteachers, consent forms for parents and participants were sent via the schools. Twelve young people between 16 and 19 years of age agreed to take part in the study, and were interviewed at their schools/colleges. Sample and individual participants' characteristics can be found in tables 1 and 2, respectively.

[Table 1. Sample characteristics]

[Table 2. Participant characteristics]

The schools that participants attended were located across five local authorities in Greater London; five participants were enrolled in schools in local authorities ranked highly according to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) for London Boroughs, whereas seven participants attended schools in boroughs with low IDACI rankings (DCLG & ONS, 2015). Eleven out of 12 participants were attending special schools, whereas only one participant was attending a mainstream college in which he received specialist support for his classes. Of those participants in year 11, six were transferring to a local college upon finishing secondary school, while four were moving to the sixth form contained in their schools. Regarding those in post-16 education, one participant was continuing in college, while the other was moving on to an apprenticeship.

All participants were able to communicate verbally; however, patterns of communication and interaction were heterogeneous across young people, and were reflected in the range of SCQ scores. Three participants scored below the cut-off point of 15. Since all participants had an EHC plan in place for their SEND, and their EHC plan stated the presence of an ASD diagnosis, the interviews of participants who scored below 15 were included in the analysis. The purpose of the screening was to obtain a broad picture of their current ASD characteristics, rather than to confirm their diagnosis. This

allowed an understanding of each participant's communication profile prior to the interview, providing valuable information with which to plan and adapt the interview process.

Data collection and analysis

Prior to the interviews, the first author met the participants at their schools to introduce herself and the study. During these encounters the researcher presented the study to the young people, and they discussed details of the study, what taking part meant, and the content of the interviews. They asked questions about the project and their participation, and the use of a recording device and tablet. In these meetings all participants gave verbal consent to take part in the study. Nevertheless, on the day of each individual interview, participants and the first author discussed once again the details of the study to ensure there were ongoing opportunities for young people to ask questions and decide on their participation. All young people agreed to participate and gave written consent to proceed with the interview. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the interview or have a break at any point; for this purpose, a printed 'stop' sign was placed within participants' reach during the interviews for them to signal this. Interviews lasted between 16 and 45 minutes, were audio recorded as per consent of the participants, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

An interview schedule was built to guide the topics and wording of the questions. Additionally, a tablet with 'Talking Mats' software was used, as previous studies suggest the significance of visual stimuli to enhance and complement the interview process (Cameron & Murphy, 2002; Lewis et al, 2008; Shepherd, 2015). The outlined questions mirrored the content of Section A of EHC plans, focusing on what young people wanted to achieve following their exit from secondary school, their transitions to post-16 settings, and their aspirations for the future. Questions addressed their feelings and experience of this critical period, and their decision-making process, particularly concerning their post-16 placement and future prospects. The topic of school/college life was covered, and issues relating to support, routines, activities and relationships with peers and professionals were discussed. Participants were asked about their familial relationships, support, day-to-day tasks and routines. Lastly, questions addressed the role of friendships, free time, involvement in leisure activities, and mobility (particularly the use of transport and independent travelling). The interview schedule is available in the Supplementary Material. Interview transcripts were analysed through thematic analysis following a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013). The nature of the main question of this study is concerned with describing the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of transitioning to post-16 education. An inductive logic accompanies the need for understanding these views and experiences in their natural setting, where situations are better understood from the perspective of those involved (Creswell, 2013; Robson, 2011). The analysis of the transcripts consisted firstly of highlighting significant quotations, sentences and statements that provide an understanding of how young people with ASD view and experience the end of compulsory education. This step was followed by the development of clusters of meaning, derived from the highlighted statements, which in turn derive into themes in an inductive process of narrowing data (Creswell, 2012; Guest et al, 2014).

Results

Five themes emerged from the inductive analysis. A summary of each theme is presented with relevant quotations to support them. Each young person (YP) was assigned a number to protect their identity.

Ambivalent feelings about change and the future. Interview questions addressed participants' aspirations for, and feelings about, the future and the next post-secondary stage. The common denominator in answers was a mixture of feelings that underpinned the experience of change. On the one hand, participants reported feeling excited, expressing wishes to become more independent and acknowledging that these changes are intimately related to growing up.

'I feel a bit sad, I am feeling a bit heartbroken because I have known [name of] school since I was a child, but not anymore... because now I am a teenager and I'm ready for a new chapter' (YP 16, 18 years old)

In this respect, participants were positive about the prospect of new opportunities to develop. Nevertheless, their excitement was also accompanied by uncertainty and sadness. They recognised that moving to new settings translated into leaving behind beloved places and people who had seen them grow up, to make room for new learning experiences and challenges.

'A little bit upset, because I really like [name of school] and there's some friends who will be staying here and I'll be in college [...] Well, we all have to move on' (YP 9, 16 years old)

'When I finish here, I cannot come back. It's time to move on, because if I stay here, I'm gonna keep on doing the same things, so the good thing for me is to move on so I can get a job' (YP 10, 16 years old)

Eight participants felt nervous or unsure about moving on to the next stage, revealing concerns about what they would be doing the following year. Although they knew where they would be going, some participants did not know what kind of courses and tasks they would be undertaking in their new placement, and worried about the changes stemming from a new routine and timetable.

'Yes, the start of college, and maybe the job... but I know that it will be the start of college, I know I will be a little bit nervous because I don't know what it is the timetable like there' (YP 01, 16 years old)

These concerns also extended to uncertainty about the people they will meet and interact with, and the availability of support in their new placements.

Independence. Although this theme was one expected to emerge in the interviews, it was shaped differently by participants. They broadly referred to independence when discussing the topics of mobility and the use of transport, domestic life, and self-care, and was alluded to as an achievement, or as goal for the near future. For example, for one participant it meant acquiring more skills to have an autonomous domestic life, such as learning to use appliances, and cooking a meal without assistance from others:

'I think I am independent, I think I can go a bit further in my independence... um, like learning to make a meal on my own, for myself, with no help. And learning a few things like plumbing, electronics, just in case of emergencies' (YP 12, 16 years old).

The abovementioned participant hinted at a wish to live independently, which was later confirmed in the course of the interview. He was the only one who explicitly considered living outside the family home as an independence goal for his future. Another participant conveyed his wish to become more independent in terms of domestic life:

'I think there is something I can improve. Maybe being more independent, like using the toaster and sorting out washing, but that's not in school. I don't do the washing very much because my mum does it' (YP 1, 16 years old)

For more than half of the participants, being independent translated into being able to move around outside the house on their own, as well as using public transport without assistance or supervision. Six participants mentioned that, although they wanted to move around independently, they did not go out on their own without a parent/carer.

YP1: So in the mornings we walk to school. My mum... we walk together and then, just, you know, just... leaving the street, she stops kind of in the middle, and there's a hill, and then I walk here.

CG: So you walk half way with your mum, and halfway on your own?

YP1: Yes, that's it.

CG: And would you like to walk the whole way on your own?

YP1: Yes, I would like to. But my mum loves walking as well.

The decision-making process was also linked to independence. Ten participants mentioned consulting parents, teachers, and support staff to make decisions about their lives, suggesting adults usually know best, have more experience or had been through the same experience, therefore including adults and family members in decision-making made them feel comfortable and safe about their choices. However, two participants highlighted that they sometimes found themselves alone in making important decisions, mostly because of differences between them and their parents in establishing priorities and giving due weight to the preferences of the young person:

'Well, because in my opinion they just want me to do other stuff. They don't focus on the near future I would like to have. So then it's basically myself' (YP 15, 16 years old).

Friendship and free time. Participants acknowledged friends have a crucial place in their lives. All 12 young people reported that most of their friendships were formed at school, and in some cases, these dated back to primary school; two participants revealed that they had a few friends from outside school. They acknowledged feeling supported by their friends when dealing with problems or concerns, and recognised their relevance in sharing their free time and spending time together.

'I can tell what I feel to a friend I trust. They've always got your back for you' (YP 11, 16 years old)

'Well, if I have a problem, or we have a problem, we work together to sort it out' (YP 12, 16 years old)

All participants referred to having conversations with friends as their main activity, along with telling jokes, watching videos online and playing computer games. Five participants reported going to a friend's house for a meal or to spend time together as a free-time activity outside school. Nevertheless, the majority acknowledged spending a great deal of free time indoors, on their own, watching television or videos online, or playing videogames.

'I play X-Box. Unsurprisingly, I am not really outdoorsy. I would just sit in my room, talk to people on it, and play Fifa' (YP 14, 16 years old).

Furthermore, almost all participants recognised finishing school as a saddening event, to a certain extent, in terms of friendships. Participants reported the realisation that moving to a different setting translated into seeing friends less frequently, and wondered about the future of those relationships as their life paths were taking different directions. Some participants feared losing touch with school friends altogether after transferring to different post-16 settings, and reported feeling anxious about the prospect of making new friends in the new setting. Two young people explained that they had spent most of their childhood in the same school and therefore moving on to a new placement represented a challenge:

'Maybe starting again... making new friends in college. That could be quite difficult, never really made new friends for a while now' (YP 12, 16 years old)

Two participants reported having friends but preferred to be alone than to contact them to socialise or spend free time together. The rationale behind these attitudes, however, differed between them. One defined himself as a 'loner', better-off on his own, while the second participant described feeling anxious about contacting friends, fearing rejection; his choice not to approach friends was based on the premise of avoiding this potential scenario.

'Um... I have a lot of friends but I'm sort of like, I don't really contact anyone, I'm not great at it [...] I don't contact them, I am just scared to contact people' (YP 19, 19 years old)

Bullying. Participants referred to previous experiences of bullying as a source of concern in current placements, with some young people realising these past experiences could happen in future placements. Four participants perceived that engaging with new people in an unfamiliar setting – i.e. college – could result in being bullied, and thus found interacting and developing new friendships challenging.

'Well, what I didn't like about it is that we had this one guy, big guy, and apparently what he'd do basically - he is sort of a bully, and what he'd do is take your money' (YP 19, 19 years old).

Additionally, another challenge attributed to changing settings was the handling of bullying in post-16. Although the majority reported being aware of how to deal with these situations at school, by usually involving an adult or authority figure, six participants acknowledged not being sure of how to do so in their new setting.

'I am a bit afraid of getting bullied, 'cause... I hope college is much different than school, but I am not sure they deal with bullying the same way they do at school [...] I'll just call a security guard' (YP 8, 16 years old).

Four participants expressed concerns about attitudes of people, particularly strangers, towards them, with two of them reporting avoiding activities or social spaces that would expose them. For example, one participant considered important getting fit but avoided going to the gym altogether because he felt people stared at him while exercising.

'Well, when I go there [to college] I most certainly wouldn't want to be teased or picked on' (YP 10, 16 years old)

'When I get name-called I just don't want to speak to anyone' (YP 9, 16 years old).

School and family support. All participants recognised the significant role their families play in their day-to-day lives. From solving problems to making important decisions, young people reported choosing their parents to assist them, acknowledging parental experience and knowledge as key to support them. Six participants mentioned trying to sort out their problems on their own first, and asking for parental help when difficulties persisted.

'I'd go first to my parents, because they are more responsible and probably they have more experience about the problems I have' (YP 12, 16 years old)

Regarding making big life decisions, all participants reported parents as key stakeholders, and that school staff were great contributors to help them in the process. However, one participant recognised that he would have liked further involvement in his work experience application, and stressed feeling left out of his own application process.

'I'm not sure on the process because the teachers do all the applications and things, and it's quite secretive [...] I don't really like secrecy though, I would have liked more transparency' (YP 14, 16 years old)

Concerning the support put in place at school, all participants mentioned the relevance and helpfulness of school staff as contributors towards a positive school experience. Ten participants praised the disposition and willingness of professionals to help them academically, and to overcome difficulties arising in the school context.

'Well, they help me understand, they help me communicate with others, how to be sociable, how to speak to others kindly, without ignoring them' (YP 16, 18 years old).

Three participants highlighted that they sometimes did not feel they received the support they needed, at school or at home. One participant referred to this as the teacher unavailability to spend more time supporting her due to the duty to support many students simultaneously.

'Only like the teacher in the class help other children [...] I think she helps everyone in the class'
(YP 11, 16 years old)

Another participant reported his desire to prove to his teacher that he can improve and pass a relevant exam, although realising it could be difficult.

'I want to pass the test and I want to do well, to prove the teacher that I can do it. Because he thinks I can't do it... well, he thinks it's going to be tough and I want to show him that I can do it. But I know that I probably can't do it, even if I want to – but I do want to do it' (YP 19, 19 years old).

Discussion

This study aimed to provide novel data regarding the views and experiences of young people with ASD in transition to post-16 destinations in the scope of the changes in SEND legislation introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014 in England. The findings of this study show that young people with ASD have ambivalent feelings about change and their future. They would like to become more independent in their everyday lives, and recognise the importance of support networks available to them, such as their families, friends and relevant school staff. They also worry about being bullied in their new setting and losing friendships made at school, bringing about anxiety to their transition process. Research suggests engaging young people in discussions about their future and transition early on during their school journey as an effective way of supporting transition (Carter et al, 2010; Robinson et al, 2018). The SEND Code of Practice stresses the imperative for schools to incorporate and accommodate practices to elicit the views of children and young people with ASD and with other SEND in a meaningful way to co-construct and develop provision that reflects their aspirations (DfE & DoH, 2015). The themes emerging from this study could constitute a starting point to these conversations, as they pinpoint dimensions of transition identified as meaningful to, and by, young people with ASD going through the process.

The study revealed that enrolling in post-secondary education and training, and becoming increasingly more independent constitute key transition goals and aspirations for young people with ASD at the end of their compulsory education journey (Chen et al, 2014; Wehman et al, 2014a). All participants reported continuing in education and training following the end of secondary school; however, the aspects of their future that most concerned them were related to everyday life activities and participation. Independence was a major theme shaped by descriptions of everyday life situations in which participants felt, or wished to be more, independent. Consistent with previous findings, young people reported that they did not feel they experience high levels of personal autonomy expected from youth exiting secondary education, and thus expressed their wish to develop skills that would foster leading a progressively autonomous life (Schall & McDonough, 2010; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Wehman et al, 2014b). The focus on participation and community living reported by participants is of vital relevance in the context of the new SEND Code of Practice, as independence, agency and participation in the community are central components in EHC plan reviews from age 14 onwards, and constitute key elements of preparation for adulthood. In this respect, participants offered a wide range of examples of what being independent meant to them – from sorting out the washing to using public transport without adult supervision. This finding highlights once more the perceived need of young people to develop skills that would allow them to participate meaningfully in everyday life situations, as they leave the comfort of the school system and transition to the wider world (Pellicano et al, 2014).

As it transpired from the interviews, young people expressed a broad range of ambivalent feelings about the future, and were able to pinpoint the aspects of their transition that made them anxious. A high proportion of young people translated leaving secondary school into leaving friends behind, wondering about the future of those relationships as they moved to different post-16 destinations. Peer relationships are considered the most significant factor associated with quality of life during the adolescent period and consequently, the uncertainties on the future of this sphere is observed as a threat to their perceived quality of life (DaWalt et al, 2017; Helseth & Misvær, 2010). The experience of poor quality friendships

and loneliness in adolescents with an ASD can increase the risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and can also result in increased likelihood of bullying from others (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; O'Hagan & Hebron, 2016). These findings indicate the need for collaborative strategies and interventions which foster the development and continuity of friendships through and beyond the transition period, so that young people can progressively move towards adulthood with a sense of social support and connectedness. The nature of this transition period also calls for schools and colleges to liaise and create opportunities that prepare students for the change of setting, and help families and young people to develop the skills that would be needed to navigate the new setting assertively.

Participants also highlighted the role of immediate family members as crucial support during this period. Young people valued their parents' readiness, understanding and experience to help them solve problems and make difficult decisions. However, on occasion, parental support seemed at odds with participants' wishes for autonomy. While most participants indicated relying on their parents for decision-making, protection and companionship in the home, they seemed to face the 'push and pull' of parental roles; parents were portrayed in a dilemmatic position of letting go and reducing dependency to promote autonomy, while at the same time protecting their children from harm. Young people highlighted the supportive nature of friendships, and described socialising, sharing interests and leisure time, problems and concerns with them. These descriptions are aligned with the characterisation of friendship proposed by Bukowski et al (1994), reflected in qualities of companionship, closeness, helpfulness and security. Participants perceived their current placements as a 'safe haven' as they provided a strong support network (O'Hagan & Hebron, 2016). As the majority of participants were attending special schools, it could be suggested that specialist settings provide a solid base and multiple opportunities for young people to engage in a wide range of activities as part of their provision to foster friendships in the context of communication and interaction difficulties. The majority of participants reported spending a great deal of their out-of-school free time on their own, predominantly engaging in solitary activities, and going out mostly with family members, consistent with other reported findings (Kuo et al, 2013; Orsmond & Kuo, 2011). From these findings it appears essential to provide opportunities for young people and their families to get involved in a meaningful way in activities and social environments within their communities to strengthen their sense of belonging, reduce isolation and loneliness outside the school setting (Toor et al, 2016).

In line with Humphrey and Lewis (2008), the experience of bullying emerged as another central theme. Participants' accounts of distressing experiences at school and outside revealed a dimension of anxiety associated with the change of setting. When describing these experiences, the majority of young people would actively seek support from parents, teachers, professionals or people in positions of authority, whereas a small number would simply put up with it, or try to ignore the situation, at best (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Actively seeking help seemed to be related to knowledge of the setting – i.e. the prevailing rules and norms, and who to turn to. Leaving school for the majority of participants meant leaving familiar rules, places and people who they had learnt to trust. Changing settings translated into losing trustworthy links that served as a safe base; the unfamiliarity of the context and people in their new placement hindered the young people's opportunities to grasp the mechanisms of support available, and reduce the anxiety accompanying this uncertainty. This finding highlights the need for strong links between schools and post-16 providers. Assigning the young person a point of contact or key worker in the new placement prior to the change of setting could progressively help them establish a safe base as they learn to navigate their new setting.

While aiming to address gaps in research concerning the voices of young people with ASD, this study presented a number of limitations. Firstly, the interviews were conducted with a small sample of young people with ASD, geographically focused on the Greater London area. These young people also held an EHC plan; given that the study was set in the scope of the changes in SEND provision in England, this criterion ruled out potential participants who did not have one in place. Furthermore, most of the participants were attending special secondary schools, and only one was attending a mainstream setting. Although it is estimated that more than 70% of children with ASD are included in mainstream settings (DfE, 2017), it does not necessarily translate into them having an EHC plan. This means that having an EHC plan could have 'favoured' the recruitment of participants from specialist settings. Given the

stringent assessment procedure behind the issuing of an EHC plan, and that the EHC plans of participants indicated the presence of an ASD, participants were only screened for ASD characteristics, and diagnosis was not corroborated through standard diagnostic instruments.

Implications

This study has provided concrete insights of what transition to post-16 destinations looks and feels like for individuals with ASD. The themes of independence, ambivalence of feelings about change and the future, friendship and free time, family and school support, and bullying constitute key descriptors of their experience, and could help steer the conversation of transition among young people, parents and practitioners in a way that is meaningful to the young people. The findings of this study provide further evidence of the use of visual stimuli as communication support such as the Talking Mats framework (Cameron & Murphy, 2002) to elicit and record the views of young people with ASD who present a wide range of communication abilities and needs.

Further research is needed in relation to young people's voice, particularly concerning methodological and practical implications of eliciting the views of young people with ASD, and their transition to post-16 following legislative SEND changes in England and the introduction of EHC plans. Exploring the views of young people with other SEND might also highlight commonalities and differences in experiences and needs that go beyond the borders of diagnostic characteristics and services, thus allowing agencies to work jointly in the delivery of ecological transition planning that recognises the individuality of each young person.

Conclusion

This paper has presented first-hand accounts of experiences and aspirations of young people with ASD at the end of their compulsory education journey. They have emphasised their mixed-feelings about change and the future, their aspirations to become more independent in everyday life, as well as the supportive nature of school, friends and familial networks in decision making and problem solving. Addressing these themes during transition planning is of crucial importance, as they can assist young people, their families, practitioners and professionals in the discussion, design and implementation of interventions and tailored provision that are relevant and meaningful to the young person's views, aspirations and goals.

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Declaration of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

1. Interview schedule