

The Voices and Experiences of Autistic Children, and Their Families, in Preparing for their Transitions from Nursery to Primary School

Executive Summary

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Background

Children on the autism spectrum have difficulties in different domains especially relevant to early years education: social communication, restrictive and repetitive routines, and stereotyped and repetitive behaviour (APA, 2013). Moreover, given the greater requirements for social skills and peer interactions at primary school, autistic pre-schoolers may struggle when transitioning into primary school (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Strategies that have been identified as highly valued by parents including identifying transition contact persons for parents and teachers, choosing a specific placement, and children visiting reception classrooms (Forest et al., 2004). Parents also desired that educational professionals followed a “child-centred paradigm”, putting the child at the centre of transition concerns. However, to date, limited research has been conducted that actually tries to gather the specific perspectives of children on the autism spectrum by interacting with them via the children’s preferred method of communication. This is problematic as the autism knowledge base is effectively informed by non-autistic individuals (Fayette & Bond, 2017). Froebelian principles (The Froebel Trust, n.d) are a useful framework for considering the need to put the child at the centre of the transition process. The five principles used in this research were:

- **Integrity of Childhood in its Own Right** – this entails recognising a child’s independence, and allowing them autonomy in decision making. Also included concepts of Child Voice – how they communicate in their own way – and Child Agency, their ability to act and assert themselves.
- **Holistic Nature of Every Child’s Development** – showing an understanding of the child generally, and striving to see autistic children as having preferences and positive attributes, rather than reducing them to a “list of deficits”
- **Uniqueness of Every Child’s Capacity and Potential** – acknowledging a child’s current abilities and challenges, whilst also considering their future development
- **Relationship to Family, Community, and to Society and Nature** – recognising the child’s interconnected relationships to others, such as peers, parents, and nursery staff.
- **Creativity and Play in Development and Learning** – instances where creativity and play are involved in aiding the child’s development.

Research Aims

The aim of the study was to capture the experiences of nursery-based autistic children whilst preparing to transition to primary school. It also sought to gather the views of parents and nursery staff. Froebelian principles were coded in observational and interview data to determine both where these were present, and whether Froebelian principles informed, or could inform, transition practices.

Method

13 participants: 4 children with autism, 4 parents, 5 staff members; convenience sample from a specialist provision nursery in the south of the UK. An observation schedule was designed to capture horizontal transitions (e.g. moving between activities) across the nursery school day and to identify any Froebelian principles in practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and staff members, aiming to record parent views on the upcoming vertical transition to primary school and staff views on the current transition and previous experiences, as well as views on daily transitions. The data were then transcribed and written up in full, before being coded via a content analysis coding frame designed to capture Froebelian principles, transitions, and positive practices.

Key Findings

Integrity of Childhood, Child Voice (CV), and Child Agency (CA) – Observations showed child voice was usually respected, but interviews and observations raised three dilemmas: a need to balance child autonomy and imposing rules, the need to balance autonomy and safety, and balancing child-led play with introducing new activities they might enjoy. Staff felt strongly that children’s personal communication styles should be respected rather than generic strategies implemented; one parent described improved communication at home thanks to nursery support.

Holistic Nature of Child’s Development – Most staff and parents described favourite activities, as well as individual needs. Parents and staff had concerns from experience, e.g. staff concerns about children not being understood and then excluded, whilst parents feared their children would be misunderstood and have difficulty socialising.

Uniqueness of Child’s Capacity and Potential – For horizontal transitions, staff and parents commonly described children’s current abilities. Some parents worried about their child coping in reception, two saying social and communicative progress was more important than academic skills.

Relationship to Family and Community – At nursery, both positive and negative interactions were recorded; one parent hoped their child would make friends; another wanted the primary to support her as well as her child. Staff described the difficulty parents could face when choosing between a mainstream or special school.

Role of Creativity in Development – One staff member commented on how one child had developed his repertoire of play since joining, and how he tries to get this child to develop skills in play, e.g. using playdoh scissors to cut and shape playdoh, rather than just opening and closing them in his stereotypy.

Conclusions

- Nursery practices were generally supportive of Froebelian principles, in that the nursery strived to respect the autonomy and agency of the autistic children, and helped them to communicate in their own way. Nursery staff indicated that they had some previous negative experiences of children’s transition to primary school where practice failed to holistically understand children for example, children may be excluded for “misbehaviour”, or a particular means of communication may be used with a child even though this may differ from individual preferences.
- Interview findings generally indicated that parents were happy with the support they received from the nursery, but worried about future support at school. This worry was also shared by the nursery staff who described some negative previous experiences with children’s transition to primary. Communication between the nursery and parents was positive, according to both staff and parent interviewees. Again, however, staff were concerned about primary-nursery relations based on their experiences. Primary school transition practices have often not seemed to have implemented suggestions made by nursery staff, concurring with findings identified by previous research.
- Future research should be prospective and longitudinal, aiming to follow the children going into primary school as well as collecting experiences prior to transition. Nevertheless, the research provides an account of experiences of autistic children as part of their preparation to transition into primary school. Uniquely, this research is informed partly from the child’s perspective, and Froebelian principles, both of which would help inform future transition practice for pre-schoolers with autism.
- As this is a small-scale project generalisations are limited. However, this research illuminates transition practices that are experienced as effective by autistic children, their parents and teachers.
- It would be interesting to conduct similar research in mainstream schools that do not have a learning support base, to see if experiences of effective practices differ.

References

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