



Exploring the experiences of horizontal transitions and the upcoming vertical transition to primary school from the perspectives of young autistic children and their parents and the staff at an inclusive nursery setting.

Executive Summary

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Background

Children on the autism spectrum may find it difficult to transition from one stage of their life to another (Denkyirah and Wilson, 2010), especially from pre-school to primary. Indeed, this crucial transition can be 'make or break' when it comes to the wellbeing of autistic children over the longer term (Forest et al., 2004). Research from parental perspectives emphasises that successful transitions for their autistic children should be child-centred, and preparation needs to begin with an understanding of the child (Stoner et al., 2007). However, while research has considered the transitions of autistic children from primary to secondary school, and from secondary to post-compulsory contexts, there is limited research focusing on the transitions for young autistic children from nursery to primary schools.

The Froebel Trust (<https://www.froebel.org.uk/froebelian-principles/>) highlight the main principles for guiding the education of young children, created by the early years pioneer Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). These principles emphasise the importance of play, agency, creativity and free expression in childhood. This project is interested in how these principles and practices can contribute to effective and appropriate transitions to primary school for autistic children. 'Vertical transitions' are defined as when a child moves from one major setting to another (e.g. the transition from nursery to primary school) and 'horizontal transitions' as daily movements between settings and situations (e.g. moving from the garden to inside) (Kagan and Neuman, 1998). This project aimed to explore both kinds of transitions.

Research Questions

1. How do young autistic children experience horizontal transitions in a day nursery setting?
2. What are parents' opinions and views on their child's upcoming vertical transition to primary school?
3. What practices are already put in place to ensure that children experience positive horizontal transitions in nursery and a positive vertical transition to primary school?
4. What practices could be improved or implemented in the nursery to ensure that young autistic children have a positive vertical transition to primary school?

Method

Three male autistic children aged 4 years were observed in their interactions and horizontal transitions in the nursery for a total of 6 hours over separate days. Analysis of these observations was informed by the Froebelian principles as well as themes that emerged from the data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four parents, and three members of staff from the nursery. As this project aimed to explore both vertical and horizontal transitions, the analysis and themes were divided into these two categories. The vertical transitions category includes data from parent and staff interviews. The horizontal transitions category includes data from the child observations as well as interviews from the parents and nursery staff.

Key Findings

- There were some key factors that supported children's horizontal transitions: **understanding the child; enabling the child's voice and agency; communication, including using the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS); and the knowledge of the educators relating to how children learn and the value of play.**
- An inclusive approach was evident in the approaches of the staff at the nursery, with the environment being considered as the main contributor to children's learning rather than a focus on the behaviour of the child.
- The experiences of horizontal transitions showed that children were treated as individuals and their unique needs and interests taken into consideration when planning the transitions in the nursery.
- The use of PECS encouraged children's agency and voice through enabling them to make choices through the day, and communicate those choices to staff members.
- In the planning and preparation for the vertical transition to primary school **the knowledge and communication of the educators, the involvement of schools, and the consistency of routines**, were important factors.
- From the staff members' perspectives, it was important that children's likes and dislikes were planned for when preparing for the vertical transition. This means ensuring that staff members know the child well. It was also important that the expertise and experience of the nursery staff was valued by, and shared with, teachers from the receiving primary schools as they have good knowledge of the children. Parents highly valued the expertise and experience of the nursery staff.
- Staff members at the nursery said how valuable it was for colleagues from receiving schools to come and spend time in the nursery to enable them to build their understanding of the individual child.
- Staff members at the nursery also flagged up issues relating to the structure and consistency of routines. As one staff member commented "these are children who thrive on routines" and so having a long break followed by a part-time start at the new school (for example) can be very difficult for some children and families.

Conclusions

- Understanding the needs and preferences of the individual children is considered essential by parents and staff members. Getting to know individual children is, therefore, a key aspect of enabling successful horizontal and vertical transitions.
- The establishing of clear routines is also a crucial aspect for supporting children and families.
- Children were regularly supported and enabled to make their own choices through the day, with staff utilising knowledge of the child's interests and preferences to help with this. Children could demonstrate their voices and choices through the use of PECS.
- Gaining the insights of the receiving schools would be a very beneficial next step for this research.

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