

Exploring transitions within resourced provision in a mainstream school for children on the autism spectrum: pupil and teacher perspectives.

Executive Summary

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Background

70% of young people on the autism spectrum are currently educated in mainstream schools (Department for Education, 2017). This can bring a number of benefits, however it can also result in some challenges for pupils and the staff, including a lack of support and flexibility which can prevent pupils experiencing smooth, horizontal (everyday) transitions i.e. moving between classes, home and school, and classroom and break times (Stoner *et al.*, 2007). Combined settings incorporating specialist and mainstream educational provision through the use of additional resourced bases can therefore offer a good balance for autistic young people (Bond and Hebron, 2016 and Hebron and Bond, 2017) and be highly valued by parents (Flewitt & Nind, 2007). However, there is little research about this type of provision, especially from the perspectives of the young people themselves. Therefore, this project focused on exploring pupil and staff perspectives on the everyday transitions young people experience when attending a resourced provision within a mainstream school.

Research Questions

1. What are the views and experiences of young pupils on the autism spectrum about their daily transitions between a specialist resource base and the mainstream areas of their school?
2. What are the views and experiences of teachers about the transitions of young pupils on the autism spectrum between a specialist resource base and the mainstream areas of their school?
3. What do these views and experiences identify as the effective practices that support transitions and the practices that could be developed or improved further?

Method

A case study of a specialist resourced provision base within a mainstream primary school in Southampton was conducted. Pupils were initially asked by their teacher to create a poster of their typical day at school. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 5 pupils aged 9-11 years and 6 staff members. The interviews aimed to find out more about the experiences of both pupils and staff and how daily transitions are supported and managed. Transcriptions of each interview were made and analysed through a method of themed categorisation. The study was reviewed and granted ethics approval from the Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (ref # 46209).

Key Findings

The specialist base was an effective method of practice for these pupils and staff; they reported on both the benefits and drawbacks of the base but generally reported on more positive experiences. Four key themes were identified through the analysis:

(1) Structured and Unstructured Periods

- The specialist base offered the opportunity for more structure and routine. Structure was welcomed by pupils and staff e.g. the familiarity of doing handwriting in the mornings.
- More unstructured periods, such as the lessons in the mainstream classrooms and PE were times when both staff and pupils reported more difficulties; noise was a particular issue for the pupils.
- However, it was acknowledged that pupils needed to get used to making transitions in less structured environments and this was an important part of their learning.

(2) Friendship and Peers

- All pupils reported a number of friends whom they enjoyed spending time with both inside and outside the specialist base. The base particularly acted as an environment for stronger friendships to be formed.
- Some difficulties were expressed for particular pupils in forming close friendships and staff suggested further ways to encourage friendship formation including the use of a buddy system, and raising awareness about autism amongst the mainstream pupils.

(3) Support

- Effective communication between staff and pupils was highlighted as vital for supporting smooth transitions. Staff expressed that they would appreciate further communication with the mainstream staff especially around the content of lessons and how these could be differentiated more effectively for the pupils from the base.
- Modelling appropriate behaviours was also highlighted as key, however staff and pupils expressed concerns about some of the behaviours from some of the pupils' mainstream classmates e.g. '*..cause they keep shouting and being naughty*' (pupil comment).

(4) Identity

- The base provides a sense of community for staff and pupils, and allows for freedom to make choices and engage in activities. The pupils were either unfazed or excited about being part of two schools; none suggested any difficulties or dislike. Pupils used the words '*cool*' and '*exciting*' to describe their feelings, and swimming at the special school was described as the '*highlight of the week*'.
- Staff felt they had a very strong team within the base, but felt sometimes '*like a spare part in somebody else's school*'.
- The specialist input and resources from the specialist school were identified by staff as very positive, though staff would have liked pupils to have more access to the ICT suite and kitchen at the special school.

Conclusions

The additional resource base for the pupils and staff was an effective approach to inclusive practice; it allows for flexibility and routine, as well as the formation of friendships that are valued by the pupils. The base feels quiet, safe, and fun from the pupils' perspectives. The base also supports access to resources and expertise from the specialist school, which was much valued by staff and pupils (especially the swimming pool!). The findings challenged the idea that access to mainstream provision inevitably enhances children's positive social experiences, though the limitations of a small sample must be acknowledged. Research should be conducted further to discover more on the views and experiences of autistic pupils, and others, who make use of this type of setting. It would also be interesting to conduct a similar project with the mainstream pupils and staff to hear their perspectives as well. The creative method, developed with classroom teachers, was a novel and effective way for supporting children to express their views.

References

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