# Literature Review

Despite the infamous primary to secondary school transition being common practice in the UK for nearly a century, it is a relatively new concept to examine the impact this has specifically on children with autism, therefore making research limited and very narrow (Neal and Frederickson 2016; Bagnall *et al.*, 2021; Whelan *et al.*, 2021; Birkett *et al.*, 2022; Strnadova *et al.*, 2023; Yates *et al.*, 2023), and the research that does currently exist is often contradictory (Neal and Frederickson, 2016). This is due to policy changes within education as part of the Equality Act (2010), which has outlined that those with disabilities should not be discriminated against, and that schools should do their best to make appropriate accommodations. Moreover, research can often be seen to over-emphasise the negatives surrounding transition, while children with ASD can experience a positive transition to secondary school (Richter *et al.*, 2022; Whelan *et al.*, 2024). Contention also remains regarding the most effective ways of supporting autistic children in their transition to secondary school, which is contributed to the varying needs of children with autism, and how an individualised approach should be taken (Whelan *et al.* 2020; Whelan *et al.*, 2022; Strnadova *et al.*, 2023). The heterogeneity of autism also means that it is not useful to group it with neurotypical children, nor children with other forms of SEND, as will be discussed in this literature review, as well as the impact on these children when poor transition is evident, potentially leading to it impacting themselves, their families and peers. Therefore, in this literature review, the focus will be on examining current support mechanisms, the impact that positive or negative transition can have on children with ASD, as well as those around them.

Impact on child and family

While the discussion section of this dissertation will include a debate whether, or not, transition is typically a positive or negative part of an autistic child’s education, it is crucial to outline some consequences poor transition may have on children. Firstly, transition, whether positive or negative, will disrupt the child’s routines in some way and cause an emotional impact on them, as breaks in routines are exceptionally challenging for autistic people (Birkett *et al.*, 2022; Code *et al.*, 2022; Yates *et al.*, 2023), which is why they will be introduced in this literature review.

The most crucial area surrounding the impact on children with autism during transition, is the consequences it can have on the child’s attainment (Whelan *et al.*, 2021; Richter *et al*, 2022; Strnadova *et al.*, 2023; Yates *et al.*, 2023; Whelan *et al.*, 2024). The main reason these children are in the situation of moving to secondary school, is for their education, so allowing children to progress further in this new environment is very important to all stakeholders. Despite this, Whelan *et al.* (2021) highlight that this has not yet been studied or compared extensively or been the focus of any previous research. Comparing changes in attainment between neurotypical and autistic children is quite surprising, as there is a typical trend of dips in attainment upon starting secondary school for neurotypical children because of a lack of continuity in content, however, depending on the individual, attainment for autistic children typically does not dip as significantly, and often evidenced to improve academically as the information either is not new or it is more engaging (Whelan *et al.*, 2020; Richter *et al.*, 2022; Whelan *et al.*, 2024). While these trends are interesting, due to varying methods of research across these studies, in particular, each one focusing on different areas of the curriculum, a definitive trend can never perfectly describe the experiences of the individuals.

The most researched area of transition for autistic children, is how it can impact them socially and emotionally. For many children experiencing the move to secondary school, they found that their relationships with their peers and maintaining or forming friendships was a large factor in how they experienced this transition (Dillon and Underwood, 2012; Bagnall et al.*,* 2021; Birkett *et al.*, 2022; Richter *et al.*, 2022; Strnadova *et al.*, 2023). When strong friendships and relationships with peers is not evident, children often experience isolation which has a detrimental effect on their lives both in and out of the school environment (Birkett *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, a staggering volume of participants in these studies highlighted experiences of bullying, which similarly was seen to impact on their school and home life (Dillon and Underwood, 2012; Strnadova *et al.*, 2023).

As a result, there is a need to acknowledge the detriment that these factors can have to the mental health and well-being of autistic children experiencing the transition to secondary school. There is plenty of evidence in research using the perspectives of a range of stakeholders, that suggests there is the possibility of poor transition leading to extensive issues with their mental health and well-being (Dillon and Underwood, 2012; Neal and Frederickson, 2016; Bagnall *et al.*, 2021; Whelan, *et al.*, 2021; Birkett *et al.*, 2022; Code *et al.*, 2022; Strnadova *et al.*, 2023; Yates *et al.*, 2023; Whelan *et al.*, 2024). This is partly attributed to the previously outlined area of peer-relationships and these consequences, however much of the issues surrounding mental health problems post-transition, often are pre-existing conditions, that can either be linked or unrelated to autism , or the anxiety of going to a new school continuing throughout their time in secondary school (Neal and Frederickson, 2016; Whelan *et al.*, 2021; Birkett *et al.*, 2022; Code *et al.*, 2022; Strnadova *et al.*, 2023; Yates *et al.*, 2023; Whelan *et al.*, 2024). This is why it is vital for effective support to be provided for autistic children going to secondary school, so that minimal disruption occurs before, during and after their transition.

Due to a lack of research directly with children with ASD, lots of the perspectives around transition to secondary school is given from other stakeholders, commonly the mothers (Neal and Frederickson, 2016; Birkett *et al.,* 2022; Code *et al.*, 2022; Richter *et al.*; 2022). As a result, a wealth of knowledge can be found regarding the effects of the new environment into their homelife by someone who knows them extremely well, but it also gives us insight into how this challenging time can impact on the parents and families. The largest way that this impacts the parents, is that many parents have heightened anxiety and stress from facilitating their child’s transition and being the support system for when they finish their school day (Yates *et al.*, 2023; Whelan *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, some studies did highlight that there could also be a negative impact on the family’s relationships with each other, some stating that the parents begin to have issues in their relationship, and others state that siblings are hesitant to interact as closely as they had done prior (Yates *et al.*, 2023). Alternatively, Neal and Frederickson (2016), suggest that having a sibling or parent that went to the same secondary school both helped the family unit to bond and minimise anxiety all round for the change. Evidently, when transition is poor, this makes it even more crucial that the transition is facilitated effectively, and that there is some sort of pastoral care in place to ensure a balance in school and at home.

Supporting transition

Another component to examine in the transition to secondary school is the effective facilitation and resources of support. This is challenging to confirm how or when this should be done to benefit the children and other stakeholders involved (Bagnall *et al.*, 2021). The primary support mechanism in place that many children are able to access are transition days (Whelan *et al.*, 2020; Bagnall *et al.*, 2021; Code *et al.,* 2022; Strnadova *et al.* 2023). This entails children with additional needs being given the opportunity to go to the secondary school environment before the first day, potentially also when there are less students on the campus, in order to become accustomed to the new environment before their first day. This may involve mock-up lessons, and meeting members of staff they could encounter while at school, including teachers and support staff. Children and parents alike comment on what a useful day this is for children in easing their anxieties, as many view secondary school as a very scary place (Strnadova *et al.*, 2023).

Arguably the most effective way of supporting transition for children with autism is to keep a strong line of communication between the parents and the school (Tobias, 2009; Dillon and Underwood, 2012; Bagnall *et al.*, 2021; Code *et al.,* 2022; Strnadova *et al.*, 2023). This again links to the fact that effective support looks very different for different children with autism, therefore the best tool is to utilise the adults that know their needs and routines the best. Being in touch with the school and specific members of staff was argued by Tobias (2009) to ease parental concerns, and support their children, and was described to be a comfortable interaction for some. However, Dillon and Underwood (2023) argue that it Is vital to recognise that this should be in balance, as some parents report a challenging endeavour to get their voices heard , while too much communication can also overwhelm parents. While challenging, it is undeniable that this balance should be formed from the beginning of their time at the school and carried out throughout.

Even though this sounds straightforward, there are several challenges that come to ensuring that these are in place. Primarily, there is an argument over who the responsibility lies on to make specific arrangements for children with autism (Strnadova *et al*, 2023), often leading to reverting back to the universal model which has already been discussed as problematic. Moreover, many mainstream schools lack specific training on children with autism, and how to effectively support them joining the school (Tobias, 2009; Dillon and Underwood, 2012). However, it is worth highlighting that these studies, while still hold great validity in the field, the age of the studies mean that this is likely to have changed with differences in society and expectations of teacher professionals.

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