



Parent perspectives of children with autism spectrum disorder transitioning from primary to secondary school in New Zealand

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Abstract

This article details aspects of between-school transitional processes experienced by children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), taken from the perspective of five New Zealand parents who have assisted their family members' transition in this area within the last five years. To begin the rationale for undertaking the study, including a brief synopsis of themes emerging from two similar small-scale international studies, is outlined. The methodology and method used to gather the data for the New Zealand study is then briefly described. Three theme areas—fitting in, teacher understanding and communication—emerging from participants' experiences in this little researched area of educational transition for children with special needs in this country are detailed. Examples of information shared during interview sessions in the theme areas are also included in this section. These examples reveal that parents and their children with ASD negotiate a complex, often fraught but also rewarding process as this particular transitional period is initiated and completed. A brief discussion of study findings and implications for further research is provided in the final discussion section.

Keywords

Children; transition; Autistic Spectrum Disorder; parent perspectives; primary school; secondary school

Introduction

The idea that inclusive education for all children with disabilities should be seen as an inalienable human right has been accepted as an integral part of education theory and policy for the past two decades (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1994; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). In New Zealand, this view has more recently been reinforced in the requirements of two significant policy documents—the New Zealand Disability Strategy [NZDS] (New Zealand Government, 2001) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities [UNCRPD], (United Nations, 2007). The UNCRPD was ratified by New Zealand in 2008. In the UNCRPD Article 7 affirms that children with disabilities are entitled to equal consideration in all



human rights areas that are accorded to their non-disabled peers. The right of all children with disabilities to education is emphasised in particular in Article 24. This Article guarantees that children are not to be excluded from free and compulsory primary or secondary education on the basis of disability. Further, reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is to be provided and that support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education is to be put into place. However while national and international accords are clear about where children with disabilities are positioned in relation to education in regular school settings, research findings suggest that some of the day-to-day practices followed in individual schools in New Zealand can still prevent full implementation of a rights based approach (Hamilton & Kecskemeti, 2015; Higgins, MacArthur, & Rietveld, 2006).

Precise numbers of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder [ASD] in New Zealand are hard to find. Autism New Zealand estimates the prevalence of ASD overall as approximately one person in 100, translating to approximately 40,000 people. This figure—at 0.8 percent—is significant when set against the 4,541,056 who currently live in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Inclusive strategies designed to accommodate what is now viewed as an alternative way of thinking should be present in all aspects of New Zealand classrooms for young members of this group. Yet a significant source of evidence that challenges this assertion can be seen in the 261 complaints made to the New Zealand Human Rights Commission (HRC) about students with disabilities access to schooling between 2002 and 2008 (Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Of interest here is the significant proportion of complaints made by parents of students with disabling conditions that affect the behaviour of the child concerned, specifically: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and those with some form of ASD, including Asperger's Syndrome. The majority of difficulties featuring in complaints relate to the following schooling issues:

- enrolment problems, e.g. schools not wanting to enrol children or only enrolling them for limited hours;
- the lack of school funding for teacher aides or additional resources;
- the lack of ability of children with disabilities to participate fully in wider school activities, e.g. school camps and other school trips; and
- the suspension, exclusion or expulsion of children with disabilities.

The HRC report does not detail the substance and resolution of each of the cases. However, the number of complaints affirms that at least some children with ASD are being denied access to schooling, or access is compromised in some ways that affect their ability to learn (Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

Rationale for the study

Initial interest in exploring the topic of parent perspectives of children with ASD who are transitioning from primary to secondary school came from two key sources. The first included the experiences of the second author as a family member with a younger sibling with ASD. As she explains:

From a young age, I have had a strong interest in disabled people and their welfare. This position shaped my recognition that the transition from primary to secondary school for members of this group can be a time of significant stress and concern for all family members. The information contained in this article summarises aspects of a small, qualitative research project I completed as a dissertation topic for my Masters in Disability and Inclusion Studies degree in 2014. I wanted to explore the perspectives of parents of children with ASD in New Zealand who had gone through the process of transition from primary to secondary school—a group whom I know possess an intimate understanding of the factors that underpinned the challenges and successes they and their child experienced throughout this process. I wanted to find out what this process had been like for other families. (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 2)

The study was also undertaken in view of the significant lack of in-depth New Zealand research reporting on children with ASD's between-school transition experiencesⁱ. In general, information available in this country suggests that pre, post and through the schooling system transition strategies put into place well in advance can result in better outcomes for children with disabilities (Frank & Sitlington, 2000). In this regard the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's [NZCER, 2013] most recent national survey, undertaken in July/August 2013, reveals that 87 percent of principals/head teachers of primary schools said they worked closely with local intermediate or secondary schools in order to enable successful transition from their school for students with special education needs (Wylie & Bonne, 2014). However, the HRC complaints data reveals that such strategies, even if in place, may not work so well for at least some students. How many of the successfully transitioned students with special needs are students with ASD? - is a question that this study sought to clarify.

Definition and methodological approach

For this research study, ASD is broadly defined as a set of heritable neuro-developmental impairments characterised by significant social communication and flexibility difficulties. Difficulties in learning and executive function can also be present (World Health Organisation (WHO), 1993; Hannah & Topping, 2013). The study is underpinned by a social barriers model view of disability (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1975). This methodological approach, also called the Social Model, distinguishes between the terms 'impairment'—defined as an individual functional limitation—and 'disability'—which refers to largely socially-created external restrictions placed on the impaired individual. These restrictions are experienced by impaired people as they live in a society essentially created for non-disabled people. Disability is imposed through social isolation, environmental barriers and exclusion. This definition was important for this study as it signalled the necessity to prioritise a search for contextual barriers to a successful transition, rather than concentrating on examining the difficulties created by individual students' impairment effects. This view also opens up the possibility of addressing the difficulties experienced by any person with disabilities, including students with ASD, through political and social change (Shakespeare, 2006).

Literature review—transition of children with ASD

While studies examining a number of aspects of the pre and post-school transition process for students with disabilities are well represented, fewer studies have examined the experiences of children with disabilities as they transition through the compulsory school system (Thompson, Morgan, & Urquhart, 2003). What contemporary research studies reveal is that, while the experiences of students with disabilities of their transition from primary and secondary school contain both positive and negative features, both "anticipated and actual" (Hannah & Topping, 2013, p. 3), students with ASD-related impairments are more fearful of making this transition and can take longer to adapt to the new school environment (Hannah & Topping 2013; Shogren & Plotner 2012; Tobin et al., 2012). Children with ASD generally require regularity within their environment, and can find situations that draw on the skills of social communication with unfamiliar people and the need to be flexible difficult to sustain (Tobin et al., 2012). Accommodation of these impairment effects is necessary. What has been found to assist the smooth running of the process in these cases is pre-preparation (before the transition) and support throughout the process itself. However, difficulties encountered in these two areas can hinder the successful adaptation of students with ASD to the new school.

Two major barriers to the completion of a successful transition experience have been identified in research studies. The first comprises efforts by the student to adapt to the new educational environment. Here, academic performance can be compromised during the time it takes for students with ASD to adjust, further compounding the initial problems experienced in the new environment (Hannah & Topping, 2013). The second barrier includes communication breakdown between key

ⁱ This statement refers to peer review research in this particular area in this country. See Wilkinson (2014) for a more extended analysis of comments made in this section. See Wilkinson (2014) for a more extended analysis of comments made in this section. An e-copy is available from the second author at hamiltca@waikato.ac.nz

stakeholders through the transitional process. Of significance to this barrier is how teachers and parents view the role of families and students at the time of transition (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). Mismatched expectations can result in poor communication and a breakdown of the process. Research suggests that ensuring effective communication between all stakeholders can counteract at least some of the anxiety and distress children with ASD experience at this time (Tobin et al., 2012; see also Crouch, Keys, & MacMahon, 2014). Personalised relationships with certain teachers can provide a particularly welcome sense of security and belonging within the school environment, which can also contribute to success in developing peer relationships. However, it is noted that too few longitudinal studies of this area of transition for students with ASD have been undertaken to completely verify these findings (Hannah & Topping, 2013).

Literature review: Perspectives of parents of the transition process

Research in the area of parental perspectives on educational transitions for their family member with ASD has largely investigated parents' perceptions of the pre-school to school transition or the post-school transition to the world of work. Parent perspectives of the transition from primary to secondary school of members of this group is more limited, although a small number of more recently published studies shows an increasing interest in this area. Two recent studies investigating transitional experiences for students with ASD in this area in England provided a detailed source of information and inspiration for this study (Dillon & Underwood, 2012; Tobin et al., 2012). Both sets of researchers gathered the perspectives of parents of students with ASD using a focus group methodology. Dillon et al. (2012) worked with two focus groups of six individuals each, with a pre-transition and a post-transition stage focus. Tobin, et al. (2012), held one focus group with seven parents, with a follow up "telephone discussion with four parents 18 months later" (p. 77).

Both studies reveal that a majority of parents were unsure whether the new school was adequately prepared for their child's disability and most anticipated a traumatic experience for their child and their family. Some felt there was little choice regarding a suitable school, while others struggled with what choosing the 'best' school might mean (Tobin et al., 2012). Those who expressed negative views either had low expectations of the success of the upcoming process or thought that things 'could only improve' for their child in secondary school settings. Those with more positive past experiences tended to be more optimistic, but these parents too expressed caution about the outcome of the upcoming transition process for their child (Dillon & Underwood, 2012). Some were concerned with the sensory and physical difficulties their child had to deal with when entering a school that was larger and busier than their previous placement. Others worried about frequent changes of rooms and teachers, as they knew these factors would be disorienting for their child.

In hindsight many reported that the primary school did not begin the transition process early enough (Tobin et al., 2012) while opinions varied as to how helpful support had been from the secondary school involved. Not enough communication with the new school featured in some remarks while other parents felt they had too much - as if the school depended on them throughout the day (Dillon & Underwood, 2012). Participation from other agencies and support persons could be very limited. In contrast planning was noted to have taken place during the transitional phase and school-based personnel were active during this time. However, the success of these measures seemed to depend on how well ASD as a diagnosis was understood and the attitudes of both teachers and head teachers towards inclusion (Tobin et al., 2012). Peer support was recognised as having a significant role within a smooth transition, yet researchers noted that few students themselves were offered a leadership role within this process (Dillon & Underwood, 2012).

Method

Following Dillon and Underwood (2012) and Tobin et al. (2012) a qualitative focus group method was chosen as the data collection format for this study. Ethical permission was granted in July 2014. Two local branches of Autism New Zealand were contacted and agreed to distribute invitations to parents through their networks. Five parents eventually responded to the call for participants. Due to time and distance constraints a decision was made to conduct one-to-one semi-structured interviews as volunteers made contact, rather than running a focus group.

Interviews were held either in the family home (3 participants) or at a workplace (2 participants). Four women and one man were interviewed. After each interview an email was sent to thank the participant involved. A summary of key findings drawn from the analysis was also emailed to all participants after the write-up period. A grounded theory approach to the analysis of comments gathered enabled key themes to emerge throughout the process of data review (see Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). These reiterated key themes found in Dillion & Underwood's (2012) and Tobin et al.'s (2012) studies. This provided further validity for the method usedⁱⁱ.

Emerging themes: ASD and transition in a New Zealand context

Participants' contributions revealed that their family member made their transition from and to different kinds of schooling systems. Two students transitioned in Year 9 (age 13) when both moved to a secondary school. One is now fully integrated in regular classes while the other is in a combination of regular and learning support classes. Two students moved to a separate intermediate school in a different area at age 10. Both are enrolled in regular classes for all subjects. The fifth child transitioned from the primary to the secondary section of the same school (age 12). He still attends the same campus and is involved in regular and learning supported classes. Themes emerging reiterated findings from the international studies outlined above. In this section data from three key theme areas - fitting in, teacher understanding and communication are briefly summarised. Written extracts from the interviews are included so to enable participants' voices to illustrate key points found in each theme area. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant anonymity.

Fitting in

All participants shared concerns about the social inclusion of their family member. Concerns began prior to the transition period and continued through the process itself. A majority mentioned concerns about their child being 'socially awkward', becoming lonely or being the victim of bullying post-transition. Two parents also expressed concerns for safety into adulthood, as seen in this example below:

He's an easy victim if he's allowed to be so that's something we've got to be vigilant about ... He's a very naïve and trusting young man and I think that's a challenge for later life, he's going to trust the wrong people maybe. (Jake)

One parent worried that her child would not know many people at the new school.

I was concerned that he would be quite isolated, I think there was only one other girl from OP [the child's primary school] going, with S [older sibling] I think there was him and one other boy. And so I was worried about the fact that he wasn't gonna know anyone and ... wouldn't make friends. (Amy)

Another had concerns about the number of new students at the school that would not know her child.

... would there be anyone in his class that he knew from primary school and then the next problem, as I said before, about 50 to 60 percent of the class being new to the school so they wouldn't even know him. (Rose)

Changes in attitudes of peers towards their child was an issue raised as a significant social concern.

... a concern for even the year seven, is, is his peers, you know the kids are just starting to get, um a little more malevolent, you know, cause they're all so concerned about themselves and you know, going through their own shit as teenagers do, that makes E vulnerable because the kids don't wanna be seen to be associating with him because they're not gonna be cool ... he can't understand the 'in jokes', but he wants to be friends. (Amy)

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Stress and worry

Concerns about fitting in included worry about the different expectations their child had to adjust to when entering secondary school. For some concerns began well before the transition event, as indicated below:

I probably did the spend the whole year before worrying about it and wondering how it would be and knowing that he needed to change classes and knowing he didn't do change very well and knowing that he would have to have five or six different teachers ... All of those things were highly stressful ... I ended up going on meds for anxiety. (Tracey)

One included the following example of the level of stress that can be experienced when children with ASD are introduced to the routines of a new school.

... they had an assembly, like a welcome assembly and all the kids from the feeder schools went ... and K was feeling sick and nervous, he didn't want to go in the room so we watched through the back doors ... when we got back to primary school, you know full on panic attack, couldn't breathe, thought he was going to vomit, thought he was going to die, didn't know what was happening because he'd never had that kind of panic attack before. I wasn't sure if he actually had a tummy bug or if he was really stressed out. And he had said to me, "I can't do this mum, I can't go to intermediate, it's too much. (Sarah)

Going home on a crowded bus was mentioned by two participants as being a particular fitting-in concern for their child with ASD. One did experience some difficulties, as indicated in this example.

... we did have an incident in year, the first year, Year 7, like within the first day or two, an incident on the bus. Some kid punched E and I didn't even know about it, he didn't say or anything ... someone told S [older sibling] as he got off the bus this boy had punched E, cause he was holding his seat and they weren't supposed to. Other kids would have just gone to another seat but E had heard the rules so he was going to sit there. So um, I heard about it, S came home and said someone said that this, so I said right, I'll take E to school, the next day, go and wait to see Mrs. B. who looks after the bus. (Amy)

To forestall such difficulties another parent reported approaching the bus driver at the beginning of the term to explain about the possibility of her son becoming overwhelmed and confused when on the bus. The bus driver permanently allocated a seat behind him for the child and made sure he got off at the right stop.

Mitigating the difficulties

Small but important steps set up in anticipation of possible difficulties were mentioned as key mitigating factors. Two parents took a box into the school at the beginning of the year that contained items that their child liked, such as books or games, for when they needed some quiet time. Another created a pamphlet about their child to give to each of his teachers/teacher aides, along with a photo of the child on the front of it, briefly explaining his strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes and strategies to use if he got confused or upset. Extra visits before the transition itself in and around the school were also used to counteract potential problems. Some found maps, building plans and creating visual timetables helpful.

Well, the getting lost part, I didn't need to worry. We'd gone around the school in the holidays with maps and so he knew all the buildings and he had memorised the Principal, the Associate Principal, the whole faculty, he knew who everyone was, he'd seen all their pictures and he knew them before he even got there so all that part was fine and I didn't have to worry about that. (Hannah)

One parent videoed the school grounds for her child to watch at home. Another took photos of all the people her child would be interacting with and made it into a book for him to look at before beginning the term. All had meetings with the school prior to the school year and some parents were also able to

go in with their child for a 'meet the teacher' evening held by the school. Getting a detailed IEP to the school prior to starting the year was important as was meeting other students beforehand. However, half the participants said they felt they needed to be the prime 'motivators' in regards to organising and implementing a smooth transition process for their child.

I think if I hadn't been my son's advocate in all of this, he wouldn't have got the transition he did. (Tracey)

One parent mentioned that her child had one good friend at school and an older sibling that looked after him at school when he needed it. She believed these previously established relationships allowed for a smoother transition process.

We were very lucky that he had older children at school that he knew, his sisters and their friends that really helped, made a big difference. People always looking out for him. (Rose)

However, another spoke about their initial worries regarding the impact her younger child with ASD may have upon the older sibling if he attended the same secondary school.

we had to consider was how, whether it would be detrimental to S, to send him to the same school ... I was concerned about that his sort of social side was a little fragile ... so I didn't want to, affect that, at all, just having him feeling like he was responsible for his brother at school is another issue. (Amy)

Meeting academic expectations

Fitting into increasing academic expectations post-transition was mentioned by several participants as a difficulty that had to be managed. Two of the children had learning disabilities as well as ASD. One was within the average developmental age range level for reading and writing but had difficulty with mathematics. His parent was concerned that teachers at the new school would not realise how much support he needed in this particular area.

the academics concerned me a bit, although he was going to learning support but I thought, how will they support his maths particularly seeing as he is at such a low level. (Hannah)

Here, concerns were expressed by the parent to the school before the child arrived. The school responded by taking some of his work from the primary school to examine before he arrived in order to assist them in creating a suitable curriculum for him. This strategy worked well. The other student had problems in all academic areas. This parent worried more about social exclusion because of their child's academic difficulties than the academic problems themselves.

I wasn't actually that worried about his education, I was more worried about him being happy and not being too stressed ... The education for me was really second to everything else, maybe because he's not academic so maybe that's why, but I really had no worries. (Rose).

Teacher understanding

All participants talked about the number of new teachers/teacher aides who would be working with their child. Staff levels of knowledge about ASD were frequently mentioned. One recalled a teacher aide who had been previously employed by the school who had a background in nursing but no experience with ASD. As she stated:

I think she only lasted about 3- or 4-days. She hadn't realised how hard it would be. (Rose)

Another mentioned worries of rejection when planning for transition, as his son could be a challenging student within the classroom. One parent was informally told by a school principal that their school would not be a suitable environment for her child.

I know the Principal there personally and so he said to me look we can't cope with a kid like him here, he will be ostracised, I've got nowhere to put him securely if he needs to calm down, I have no teachers with any training to deal with that. (Sarah)

She appreciated the honesty but found these comments difficult to hear. Two also spoke about teachers behaving in ways that made them feel inferior as parents. One said:

It's a huge issue for families ... that families are up against is that teacher's, um, know best, I mean they're, teachers are all chiefs, you know, with all their little Indians, and it's really hard when you're the CEO constantly to not think like a CEO all the time and think that you know more than, um the parents, I see that, see that a lot. (Amy)

Two participants were particularly apprehensive about the lack of Special Education and ASD specific training received by secondary school teachers.

L was one of the first children in the school from primary through, that had autism but by the time L got to secondary, when he transitioned through, there were some other children so there had been some training courses. Um, some of the teachers had no understanding at all but some teachers were up there and onto it and those were the ones who tended to get involved with L and welcomed him into the classrooms. (Rose)

Positive responses

Parents also spoke about the positive experiences and responses they had prior to and during transition. Three mentioned that their child was excited to move to secondary school and this attitude was a contributing factor to the success of the transition experience.

So at primary school he had been a school librarian and a road patroller ... He's kept on being a road patroller at intermediate, he's in the choir and he was in the choir at the primary. He's also joined the chess club and he's playing indoor football ... But really being at intermediate, with different age group has expanded his horizons so much, there is more opportunity, equipment and the teachers working with that age group. (Sarah)

These activities allowed this child to become comfortable resulting in the development of exciting new interests and experiences. Two spoke of working together with staff to effectively counteract problem behaviour through use of a reward system.

... they had a reward system where if he had done particularly well and maintained reasonable behaviour and whatnot the teacher would take the ones that were student of the week to a café for lunch on Friday so he got to go for lunch quite often, because he was really good and that also kept him busy on a Friday and then a couple of other teachers took him out fishing after school on their boats and things as a reward ... it was lovely. (Hannah)

All acknowledged that they experienced positive responses with most school staff in regards to their concerns and additional issues that arose throughout the transition process.

Parent advocacy

Most parents expressed that they found at least one aspect of the process of transition personally intimidating. Knowing what is important for their child and family and being a strong advocate, or finding someone who would assist with advocating for their child's educational rights, was identified as a key part of overcoming this factor by all parents.

I think for high school if you're not a confident person then you need to have a good advocate with you because high schools do, kind of have a superiority complex ... so I think if you're not a particularly strong person make sure you've got a good advocate from the start ... like Autism NZ, the staff person there will do it... (Amy)

However, this parent also suggested use of an ‘outside’ third person in the advocacy role if possible.

... sometimes it’s actually better to not have someone that’s in that paid role, partly cause they’re then taken away from other things they could be doing with others. I see it too much, there’s usually a Group Special Education [GSE] person or Autism NZ so actually, just have a strong family member, you know, or friend, that’s ... most people, if you ask your friends and stuff if they can help you with something, they’re actually really happy to help. They know you have a much tougher life than they do, and they’re actually really happy to help, so if you’ve got a friend who’s a kickass lawyer, or a kickass, you know, something that you’re not, ask them if they could spare a few hours over the next six months while you do your transition, with you, with them....
(Amy)

Yet calling on friends could be a process to go through in itself, involving its own potential stressors.

... be strong with what you need for your child, but go in with someone else, cause it’s, they are intimidating. It is really hard, um, but also, um, expect to, to, yeah you’ve gotta work really hard to make them your friends, and acknowledge them when they go beyond, the extra mile, you know. (Amy)

Communication

A majority of participants mentioned having to adjust to a reduction in the frequency of communication between the home and school when their child started secondary school. One gave this example:

At secondary school they’re meant to be more independent but I have to say that I have to remind teachers all the time, you can read out the school notices but can you just write L’s name on that notice and put it in his bag for me? Because he will never come home with verbal notices, like “oh it’s mufti tomorrow” or “oh bring \$5 for pizza tomorrow” so he’s the one that would not, you know, have the \$5 for the pizza or not have money for the sausage sizzle because it’s just a verbal notice ... it’s not anything vindictive, they’re just forgetful. They don’t realise. (Rose)

Three out of the five children were reported as having two or three IEP [Individual Educational Plans] meetings per year to discuss educational goals and progress. Yet not all teachers involved with the student were able to attend. One parent was able to speak to her child's year Dean regularly on the phone. However, it was more common for parents to communicate with one main teacher on a regular basis, primarily through email and text messages.

The ‘invisibility’ of ASD was mentioned by some parents as a significant barrier. This issue had been encountered not only within the transition process but also throughout their child’s life.

The trouble is, to look at him he just looks like everyone else, like normal. So people treat him the same, don’t make allowances where he needs them and think he’ll be alright, but he’s not and they don’t realise. (Rose)

Parents shared stories of interactions with others who were initially unaware of their child's disability. This could result in offensive, embarrassing and sometimes humorous outcomes. One spoke of attempting to get a diagnosis for her son in the earlier years of primary school. As she states:

He didn’t have a diagnosis when he started at primary school, in fact, we didn’t know he had any problems when he started at primary school and it all went down the tubes within the first few months and CDC [the Child Development Centre - a local disability support service] said he wasn’t on the spectrum and therefore they thought he was just a bad kid and we were bad parents. (Sarah)

This parent was advised to go on parenting courses until her child finally, somewhat to her relief, received his diagnosis of ASD. Two participants expressed that it was important to remember that every case of ASD is different and this is something for both parents and teachers to keep mind when developing and implementing strategies. One felt that schools should be more aware of how important transition is for a student with ASD. She did not think that relying on a resource teacher: learning and

behaviour [RTL] to ease the transitional period was adequate on its own for a successful transition, as she explains:

Um, I think that the RTL's do two or three visits with the child to the school and they don't really go into classes, they just have a wander around and talk about what's gonna happen ... I don't think for my son that would have been enough, he needs to know the details of stuff, he needs to know that at the end of this period I need to pack up my bag and I need to, I've got five minutes to get to my next class and my, I think, and, and again maybe I'm just way over protective and wrong but I think he needed to have some time at practicing that before being chucked in there."(Tracey)

Discussion

This study examined parents' views of the transition experience for their family member with ASD from primary to secondary school in New Zealand. The interviews, while not originally planned for, facilitated a rich discussion about the topic. Comments reveal that this transition area raises specific issues for New Zealand parents, yet concerns and experiences in each theme area also echo those of parents in both international research studies outlined in this article. Although levels of anxiety could be high, significantly, New Zealand parents engaged in a number of highly creative responses to anticipation of the problems their child could encounter during and after the transitional period. The kindness of individuals - the bus driver, Mrs B, who was reported to have '*sorted out the problem*' the associate principal - is a feature of these accounts, an area missing in the write up of Tobin et al.'s (2012) study in particular. This is not to say that similar experiences did not happen to parents involved in this international study, but these incidents were not included in the article published.

This study and the two international studies reported on in this article, reveal the importance of social integration for parents and their child with ASD. For some this may be more important than opting for support for significant gains in academic achievement, an interesting finding that needs further investigation. What degree of importance is placed on support for robust social integration strategies at IEP meetings in secondary schools? The impact of informal conversations on school destination in rural areas in particular was an unexpected finding, particularly in respect of the obligation of all schools to provide a welcoming environment for all disabled students in this country. This finding raised a further question - when school choice is restricted due to living in a small town, how do parents manage the impact on other siblings who must attend the same school? What kind of educational support might parents in more rural areas need when this situation arises? These questions also need further investigation. Thirdly, a small number of participants were interviewed for this study and all were Caucasian. A majority were female, with only one male taking part, and all children with ASD talked about were male. These limitations also feature in the two comparison international studies. Do the same concerns found in all three studies equally apply to the transition processes experienced by girls with ASD? Finally, the need for further research to address the lack of compulsory special education training for teachers and teacher aides is also noted.

While the questions this study raises remain unanswered, the insight gained from these interviews highlights the pressing need for more research to be undertaken in the area of transition from primary to secondary school for children with ASD. Until these are carried out it is uncertain as to how many transition processes, now deemed successful, include transition processes designed for children with ASD. However, why so few parents chose to take up the invitation to participate in this study also needs further thought, as the low numbers responding was very unexpected. More work to isolate why this is the case is also needed.

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