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**School transition and SEND: Investigating parental accounts of their child's primary to secondary school transition experience through the use of Mumsnet data**

Hannah Cromwell and Claire L. Fox

School of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University

Corresponding author: Dr Claire Fox, School of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, 53 Bonsall Street, Manchester, M15 6GX. Email: [claire.fox@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:claire.fox@mmu.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

### **Background**

Previous research on school transition has highlighted how it can be a particularly difficult time for children with special educational needs and disabilities. In addition, parental involvement in the transition is seen to be an important factor in facilitating a positive transition.

### **Aim**

This study aimed to investigate the factors that impact the school transition experience of children with SEND, through the use of Internet forum data and the perceptions and experiences of parents.

### **Sample**

A total of 12 threads from the internet-based forum website Mumsnet were selected and analysed containing 127 posts from 46 different users.

### **Method**

The keywords 'School transition' and the selected chosen topics of 'SEN', 'SN Children' and 'SN teens and young adults' were used to search for relevant forum threads. Forum threads were then analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

### **Results**

The themes generated were 'Proactive parents', 'Child-focussed: Understanding and addressing the individual child's needs and concerns', and the overarching theme of 'Sufficient preparation' with the themes 'Preparation pre-transition' and 'Preparation post-transition'.

### **Conclusions**

Understanding the parents' role in school transition can help to support other parents to better support their child; the advice of other parents and suitable methods they have found to support their children can be suggested to others. Recognising the issues will also be useful in improving the support within schools.

## Introduction

School transition is a child's movement through the education system from attending primary school to attending secondary school, which, in the UK, usually happens for eleven-year-old children. Previous research shows that it can be an incredibly difficult time for some children. School transition occurs simultaneously with the beginning of puberty, which contributes towards many changes within a child's life (Evans et al., 2018; Gough Kenyon et al., 2022). In addition to this, children encounter considerable social, cognitive and academic change within their school environment (Jindal- Snape & Cantali, 2019). These changes are often very difficult for all children to deal with and can increase student's anxiety levels (Moore et al., 2021). Some of the main concerns of children surrounding school transition include forming new relationships with new students and staff and the possible occurrence of experiencing bullying (Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2021).

School transition is difficult for all students. However, it can be particularly hard for students who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). McCoy et al. (2020) found that children with general and intellectual disabilities are three times more likely, and children with specific learning difficulties are more than twice as likely, to experience negative transitions compared to their non-SEND peers. They can also face problems including reduced access to necessary resources and the school having effective provisions (Scanlon et al., 2015), as well as finding the physical school environment such as the size of the school and the movement between buildings challenging.

A study by Foley et al. (2016) identified that there is often a lack of communication between primary and secondary schools regarding a SEND child's needs and secondary schools have a general lack of understanding of how to support SEND. This idea is further

supported by the work of Anderson et al. (2000) in developing their framework to improve school transition. They suggest that preparedness is a key factor in supporting school transition.

Research by Bagnall et al. (2021) involved gathering data from children, teachers, members of transition support teams and parents to investigate SEND school transition. The use of the parental perspective in this study helped to inform the current research. It was found that parents were worried about supporting their SEND child's feelings towards moving schools without unnerving them, and that parents need support so that their own negative school transition experiences do not influence their child's experience. Other research in the area supports that parents play an important role in their child's school transition. A literature review by Harris and Nowland (2020) showed that parental involvement is crucial in acknowledging changes in the child's emotions before moving to secondary school and that parents are a strong source of support to ease the child's worries.

Many studies investigating school transition for SEND students have sampled children and teachers. However, less research has been conducted using parental perspectives. Acknowledging how parental involvement and support are important throughout school transition for students with SEND, this study aimed to address this gap and build upon previous research in the area by using parental accounts of school transition on the internet-based forum website Mumsnet.

Use of Mumsnet forum posts was chosen to make use of a large resource of accessible data. This enabled the analysis of posts that were more honest accounts of a parent's experience of the SEND child's school transition, as these are anonymous accounts written in the poster's own words which include as much detail as they are willing to share, to

compare experiences, seek help and offer guidance to others. Using forum data in studies is becoming increasingly popular as a way of observing and analysing genuine expressions of thoughts and behaviours and is also useful when studying potentially sensitive topics by using accounts that have been freely shared (Hanna & Gough, 2016).

The study aimed to gain a greater understanding of factors that impact the school transition experience of children with SEND, and address the research questions of ‘What difficulties are parents concerned that their child with SEND will face?’, ‘What problems are faced by children with SEND when transitioning from primary to secondary school?’, ‘What factors can help or hinder the transition process for children with SEND?’ and ‘What advice is given by other parents to combat these problems?’.

## **Method**

### **Data collection**

The data were collected from the forum Mumsnet, an open-access website designed to allow parents to discuss problems and for others to give advice (Mumsnet, 2022). Using the ‘advanced search’ function within Mumsnet the keywords ‘School transition’ and the selected chosen topics of ‘SEN’, ‘SN Children’ and ‘SN teens and young adults’ were used to find relevant forum threads. The threads used were posted between June 2021 and October 2022 and were chosen from the advanced search in Mumsnet. The inclusion criteria for the forum posts were reduced to only discussions of primary to secondary school transition. The remaining inclusion criteria were kept open, to allow for ideas surrounding challenges, concerns, support and intervention when transitioning to secondary school.

In total, 12 threads were chosen and analysed, containing 127 posts from 46 different users. All threads, posts and usernames were anonymised when the data were

downloaded into Microsoft Word documents. Within the threads, there were some prolific posters, Users 14, 27 and 39 each feature in two threads, User 38 features in three threads and the most active poster, User 11, features in five threads. The number of threads chosen was justified in relation to other work using forum data (Hanna & Gough, 2016).

### **Analytic approach**

To analyse the data in this study, Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis were used by the first author. Actions to improve the credibility of this research included regular meetings between the two co-authors (student and supervisor) to discuss the data analysis. In addition to this, a reflexive journal was kept taking note of any thoughts, opinions and experiences that occurred during the research process. In the results, U indicates the User number and T the Transcript number.

### **Ethical issues**

Ethical approval was applied for and gained from the Faculty of Health and Education at Manchester Metropolitan University in November 2022. In line with good practice, consent was gained from Mumsnet to ensure they approved for their data to be used. Even though Mumsnet users do not use their real names, all usernames were anonymised. Similarly, any identifiable information within the post were also removed when the data were downloaded. Mumsnet has been named in this study as requested in their acceptance of their data use.



## Results

### Proactive parents

A widely represented concept was that of parents being proactive during the school transition experience. Proactiveness was shown through parents communicating with the schools to gain support for their children. To discuss support for the transition with the school, users directed each other suggesting, “In secondary, communicate with either the SENCO, form tutor, HOY (Head of year) or 1:1 (if applicable)” (U19, T7). They also encouraged other parents to “speak to the SENDCO at his primary school .... Its their job to help with transition too.” (U11, T3).

Other parents suggested that proactivity was needed when approaching the school about support, by ensuring that the parent had decided what support they want for their child. For example, “you have to be clear and specific about what you want” (U32, T9), and, “I’d be going to any meeting with a clear idea of what you’d like to try” (U33, T9).

On the other hand, when sufficient support was not offered, it was suggested that parents should be proactive in fighting for support for their children. One parent suggested that sometimes schools do not appreciate the need for SEND support in school. They reported feeling very frustrated because the school “just don’t see how he NEEDS needs those things, just to be able to be there” (U18, T 7). To combat these issues, other users suggested that the parent must explain the impact on the child, e.g. “[say they are] unable to attend school due to the lack of support/ interventions that were meant to be in place” (U11, T7).

Other parental responses show that fighting for support for their child is incredibly important, as one explained that their child was “Paying the price for the lack of support he

received” (U39, T12). Communicating with the school and fighting for support for the child was shown to be beneficial, as User 15 says how being “Noisy about DS needing help” (T5) has resulted in the issues they were facing being dealt with.

In addition to this, parents discussed the need to be proactive and take action themselves in organising support for their children and not simply waiting for the school to take action first. When one parent mentioned that they had not been contacted by their new school, another responded by asking “Did you not proactively contact them?” (U14, T4), User 35 echoes the idea that parents “should not have to wait for the school to contact you” (T9).

However, parents must also take action to gain support when the school disagree that support is needed. Many parents spoke of how their child’s Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was helpful in providing support during school transition. On the other hand, just as many parents spoke of how their school refused an EHCP assessment for their child and how they were successful in applying themselves. They discussed how “You can apply for an EHCNA (Assessment) yourself, you don’t need to wait for the school” (U38, T11) and that parents should not be dissuaded, “Don’t listen to the school putting you off ... Many parents are told the same, but successfully apply themselves” (U38, T10).

### **Child-focussed: Understanding and addressing the individual child’s needs and concerns**

Another key idea that is presented across the forum posts was that every child is different, and it is important to understand how the school transition is impacting the child emotionally, while recognising the child’s concerns as well as the parent’s concerns about how the child’s needs will impact the transition.

Parents spoke of the “Scary times” (U44, T11) that both themselves and their children experienced throughout the school transition. One parent mentioned how they still remembered the “Stress and worry of the Y7 start; for children and parents alike” (U36, T9), and another mentioned how they felt “sick with anxiety” (U43, T11) about their child’s upcoming experience of moving schools. This shows that the child is not the only person who can be emotionally impacted by school transition as in some cases, parents can feel just as worried as the child.

A common expression of emotion from the SEND children was anxiousness about their school transition. Many parents expressed how their child was a “Bundle of nerves” (U1, T1) and how the child’s level of anxiety went “Off the scale” (U22, T7). Parents discussed how there were a multitude of factors that contributed to their child’s anxiety around school transition. One parent spoke of how their child found the “Sheer size of the school, number of teachers, level of homework and fear of forgetting something quite overwhelming” (U9, T2) and another parent said how their child kept “asking lots of questions about whether he will have friends” (U45, T12).

To try and initially support these issues, parents spoke of advice they received, including maintaining good communication with the child so that they “can/will share worries/concerns” (U1, T1) and working on developing a “growth mindset, emotional literacy and anxiety management” (U33, T9) to develop resilience. This shows that understanding the child’s concerns can lead to offering effective support, and so it is important to discuss the child’s worries with them.

Additionally, parents raised many concerns about the different issues their child has as part of their SEND. Many parents spoke of how their child can find it “difficult to cope

with change” (U27, T8) and how negative reactions such as meltdowns can occur “when something has changed .. or she has been asked to do something she wasn’t expecting to do” (U37, T10). This difficulty with change may negatively impact the experience of school transition as the whole process involves increased change.

As well as this, one parent worried about how their child “really struggles with peer groups and correct socialisation” (U10, T3) which is echoed by another parent whose child “struggles socially and communicating with teachers” (U16, T6). This is shown to create problems for the child in school as one parent says how their child was “Unable to ask for help at school” (U37, T10) due to their lack of communication skills.

Another issue discussed was the struggle that some SEND children can have with controlling their emotions. One parent explained how “emotionally and mentally things can get too much... and little things can cause her a lot of frustration” (U30, T9), which is similar in other cases as a parent described how their child “struggles to identify and regulate her emotions” (U37, T10). Understanding the individual child’s needs and concerns about the school transition is very important to be able to understand the elements of transition they may find most difficult so that preparations can be made to support their transition.

### **Sufficient preparation**

**Pre-transition support.** Parents discussed how their child’s school transition was impacted both positively and negatively by the support or lack of support they received in the pre-school transition period. Many users spoke of how their child required an enhanced transition, in one case this consisted of “weekly visits with his primary and a transition day over the summer” (U38, T11). Others mentioned how their child was “given the opportunity

to visit his secondary school more than just once before he started because he had an EHCP" (U11, T11). These were agreed to be beneficial forms of transition support as one user stated how these visits were used to make the children familiar with the space and key elements of the school such as "the canteen, reception space, key departments ... TAs they would work with, form tutors..." (U46, T12). Additionally, transition books, either provided by the school or made by the parent themselves, were suggested as beneficial methods to prepare children for school transition. One parent mentioned how their child made a "social story book which helped" (U11, T11).

Unfortunately, these forms of support were not accessible to all children. The coronavirus pandemic had led to many transition activities being cancelled, for example, User 6 explained how in their daughter's case "there were no visits or transition days due to covid, so it was very much in at the deep end for her and her friends" (T1). This was also the case in Transcript 3 as "due to covid they aren't offering any other transition visits." (U10). In other cases, some of the children were not seen as students who needed extra visits, "he was not included in the extra transition days as primary felt he did not need it" (U45, T12).

**Post-transition support.** The discussions continued into the support that had been offered to the children post-transition and how this support was not always effective. Users discussed how secondary schools have provided support for their children in the form of "a full time 1-1 ... and is free to go and visit the sen resource base whenever he gets a bit overwhelmed" (U42, T11). Another user mentioned how support can also take the form of "a time out pass, a key worker ... allowing her to move classes 5 minutes early to avoid the rush" (U14, T6).

Despite this, not all parents expressed that their children had the same level of support after their transition. For example, some reported how "transition plans that were

talked of just didn't happen" (U15, T5) leaving their child unsupported both during and after the transition period. Another parent detailed how their child "hasn't been introduced to teachers, doesn't know who his key worker is, there's no quiet space to go during breaks" (U18, T7).

Some parents assume why support had not been provided. For example, one parent stated that, "the system is only interested when the wheels fall off and not in preventing that (problems occurring)" (U13, T4). This suggests that schools may wait for things to go wrong, and that they will provide support when it causes wider problems, as one user says, "She doesn't cause any trouble in class hence why the school isn't bothered" (U16, T6). Overall, this shows the importance of support being offered at the right time for the child and be provided throughout the whole experience.

### **Discussion**

The findings show that the experience can be emotionally challenging for children with SEND and that support is required to increase the likelihood of a positive transition. Furthermore, they support previous findings that parental support is a key factor in facilitating a positive transition and that it is necessary to work with parents to support school transition. The current research highlights the important role of parents of children with SEND and how they find themselves needing to be proactive in organising and fighting for support for their children.

The results of this study also support previous work that shows how support is necessary for children with SEND and that it is crucial that this support is offered throughout the whole process. From the comments, we see the negative impact a lack of support had

on school transition experiences, and how children were left feeling unsettled after their move to secondary school.

In addition to this, the results of the study also suggest that a SEND child's individual needs may cause issues during school transition, and that anxiety is often present in these children. These findings are important as they reaffirm that there are multiple factors that can impact a child with SEND's school transition and how this experience will be different for each child. This again highlights how support should be offered for the specific individual needs of the child, as each child may find different transition elements difficult.

The use of the parental perspective is not new, however, understanding the additional action parents take during school transition can be useful to identify where provision is not effective. The results show that parents often must request meetings with staff to arrange support for their child, as this is often not already in place, and how arrangements for transition support can be organised but then not followed through. Additionally, parents must take action to arrange EHCPs for their children to gain support because schools are unwilling to do so. Whether this is due to a lack of time, resources, or funding, it is important to identify where the barriers to gaining support are.

Local authority funding for children with high-level needs has fallen by 2.6% (DFE and NAO, 2019). Furthermore, the increased number of children attending special schools has increased local authority spending on SEND but has subsequently decreased funding for mainstream schools (DFE and NAO, 2019). A SEND review government report (DFE, 2022) acknowledged parental frustration caused by the delays in gaining support for their children in mainstream education and beyond, and how parents feel that local mainstream schools cannot support children with SEND in the current circumstances. These views are similarly

expressed throughout the results of the current study. In addition to this, the advice shared shows effective methods other parents have found to tackle challenges throughout school transition.

The study's limitations include how using previously existing forum data did not allow us to gain responses to specific questions or opinions on particular topics; we could only analyse the topics the parent had written about. As well as this, pre-existing data does not allow for any expansion of detail upon points that may be relevant to the research. Details about the specific conditions of each child mentioned were not always given by the parents posting. This means that conclusions specific to a particular SEND, for example, autism, cannot be made. Therefore, future research would benefit from using an approach that combines both existing forum data and interviews to gather data.

The recent government report proposes the improvements that will be made to transition standards, "providing consistent, timely, high-quality transition preparation for children and young people with SEND" (DFE, 2022:51). It is hoped that these findings provide evidence to illustrate that these changes need to be made.



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