Teachers’ and parents’ perspectives on the transition of preschool children with autism to formal education in Malta

International research indicates that children with autism experience higher than average levels of anxiety when facing change due to the nature of their difficulties in communication and social skills (Beamish et al; Starr et al, 2014; Perfitt, 2013; Dillon & Underwood, 2012; Van Steensel et al, 2011; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Rosier & McDonald, 2011; Daley, Munk & Carson, 2011). Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder also experience higher levels of anxiety than parents of children with other developmental disorders (Fortuna, 2014; Villeneuve et al., Lilley, 2013; Hannah & Topping, 2012; DiCaro & Worthman, 2011; McIntyre et al, 2010; (Denkyirah & Agbeke; McIntyre et al., 2010; Gargiulo, 2009).

In spite of such findings there is limited research on transitioning of children with developmental disabilities in general (Starr et al, 2014; Perfitt, 2013; Rous & Hallam, 2012 Daley et al, 2011; Stoner et al, 2007; Forest et al, 2004), particularly on transitioning of pre-children with autism (Beamish et al, 2014; Perfitt, 2013; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Denkyirah et al, 2010; Grandin, 2008). Much of the evidence available consists of small scale studies focusing on teachers’ and parents’ perceptions on transition planning rather than the actual impact of transition planning on young children with autism and the effectiveness of strategies used (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Ahtola et al, 2011; Kluth, 2003) while a few larger scale studies agree on the positive impact of transition planning on children’s adjustment to school (Ahtola, 2011; Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005).

Summary of Parents’ perspectives on the transitioning of children with autism spectrum disorder to formal education:

- Dissatisfaction with services received during transitions (Janus, Cameron, Lefort & Kopecanski, 2007)
- Not enough communication with schools (Petrakas & Lehrer, 2011).
- Need for more teacher-parent collaboration together with additional support on how parents can help their children at home (Fallon & Zhang, 2013; McIntyre et al, 2010; Stoner et al., 2007; Kluth, 2003).
- Parents need to be better informed in order to effectively support their children’s transition to formal education (Fabian, 2002).

Summary of Teachers’ perspectives on the transitioning of children with autism spectrum disorder to formal education:

- More administrative support needed (Petrakos & Lehrer, 2011)
- Lack of training and lack of time to carry out more intensive strategies (Beamish et al, 2014).
- Expressed more concerns about the transition of children with ASD than for other developmental disabilities (Beamish et al, 2014; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Sutherland, 2008)
- Strategies that have been used by teachers tended to focus on teaching coping skills to children with ASD rather than intensive transition strategies (Lilley, 2014; Briody et al, 2005).

Summary of what is considered as a more successful transition

- There is a need to focus on how well children have adapted to the new settings and also how their social skills are developing since these are the areas of most concern as expressed by both teachers and parents (Fortuna, 2014; Fallon & Zhang, 2013; Parsons et al, 2011).
- Importance of staff training in ASD (Connor, 2000)
- Importance of administrator knowledge on subject (Pazey et al., 2014; Emsberger, 2010).
- Importance of many transition practices rather than few (Ahtola, 2011; Shulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005).
- Growing trend towards the importance of continuity of support rather than amount of support together with more collaboration between main stakeholders (Hoeppner et al, 2007; Maras & Averling, 2006; Petriwskyj et al, 2005)
- Tailor made strategies for individual children are needed (Hoeppner et al, 2007; Early, Pianta, Taylor & Cox, 2001)
- Parents to be considered as a valuable source of information for teachers (Kluth, 2003).
Successful transition partly influenced by types of strategies adopted by parents and teachers (Podvey et al, Dockett & Perry, 2013; Guldberg et al, Carida, 2011).

There is no single best model but it is important to focus on building relationships among stakeholders not just a series of practices (Dockett & Perry, 2013)

Local study

In the light of the above findings, a study was carried out on the transition of pre-school children with autism to formal education in a Maltese primary school with a relatively high prevalence of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Semi structured interviews are used to analyse the perceptions of parents while questionnaires are used to analyse those of both sending and receiving teachers. All participants expressed concerns about the transition of these children to formal education mainly due to children’s high anxiety levels and associated behaviours. All teachers reported the need for more collaboration while some prioritised more training for themselves and also for parents. Overall response from parents indicated a need for more collaboration with school together with more training for both teachers and parents. A special focus of the study was on what participants considered as promoting more successful transitions. Overall, increased collaboration between school and home was rated as the most important in promoting a more successful transition from pre-school to formal education. While importance was attributed to all the transition strategies indicated, many teachers reported a lack of time available together with a lack of collaboration among teachers and also between teachers and parents as main barriers to a smoother transition from pre-school to formal education.

The study indicates a need for further research and developments in transition planning and implementation for young children with ASD.

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