Transition of Students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders from Primary to Post-Primary School: A Framework for Success

Evelyn Deacy, St. Angela's College, Ireland
Fiona Jennings, St. Angela's College, Ireland
Ailbhe O Halloran,St. Angela's College, Ireland

Abstract

Students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have specific difficulties which impact on the transition between primary and post-primary school (Steady and Roberts, 2013). As an increasing number of students with ASD are now accessing mainstream education due to Irish Government policy on inclusion (NCSE, 2013), this has led to increased challenges for schools in providing appropriate support for students with ASD during the transition process.

The purpose of this research was to investigate best practice in relation to the planning, process and strategies that support the transition of students with ASD from primary to post-primary school. A purposive sample was chosen for the research. A questionnaire survey was sent to graduates of the Post Graduate Certificate/Diploma in SEN (ASD) from St. Angela's College, Sligo, Ireland who were working in primary and post-primary schools. This sample of participants was identified as having experience and qualifications in the field.

Key findings included: strong oral communication between schools, the presence of transition programmes in many post-primary schools, the use of a wide variety of generic and ASD specific strategies in place in both primary and post-primary schools and a large number of personnel involved in the transition process. Analysis of findings and current literature enabled the researchers to propose a framework that the Department of Education and Skills, support agencies and schools may use to examine practice in order to enhance the transition programmes based on student's needs, the profile of the school and its community.

Introduction
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder associated with a Dyad of Impairments that is Social Interaction-Social Communication deficits and Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours (Ousley & Cermak, 2013). Difficulties with Social Interaction/Social Communication can be evident in difficulties communicating with others in social contexts, non-verbal communication and initiating and maintaining social relationships. The Impairment of Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours may be characterised by stereotypical behaviour, need for routine, intense special interests and sensory issues (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013).

In Ireland, Government Acts, the Report of the Task Force on Autism (Department of Education and Science, 2001), litigation, and circulars provide evidence that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) has moved towards a policy of inclusion for students with special educational needs (SEN) and, specifically, students with ASD (Parsons, Guldberg, MacLeod, Jones, Prunty, & Balfe, 2009). This has led to an increasing number of students with ASD accessing mainstream education, including students accessing resource support and specialised ASD classes (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2010, 2013). To illustrate this change, there has been a dramatic growth in ASD classes in the post-primary sector from 36 in 2008 to 119 in 2013 (NCSE, 2013). These developments have challenged schools on a number of fronts in particular the transition of students with ASD from primary to post-primary school.

Research evidence indicates that the transition from primary to post-primary school is a critical milestone in the lives of all children (Sirsch, 2003; Hughes, Banks & Terras, 2013; Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Desmond, Shevlin & Vahey, 2013). The changes that occur physically, mentally and emotionally during adolescence have an impact on a young person's ability to adapt to and embrace the momentous step to post-primary school (O' Halloran, 2008). Hargreaves et al., (1996, cited in O' Brien, 2003) identified the simultaneous occurrence of a triple transition: the move from one school to another, from one peer group to new peer groupings and the important succession of childhood into adolescence. Lerner (2006) has found that transition from primary to post-primary school is especially hard for teenagers with learning difficulties and related disorders. Maras and Aveling (2006) propose that young people with ASD may find transition particularly difficult since adapting to change or unusual situations are a particular feature of ASD.

Understanding the Dyad of Impairments sheds light on the specific difficulties faced by students with ASD in transition. The transition to post-primary presents the student with ASD with a large number of new relationships with whom (s)he has to interact appropriately. Potentially, the student can meet up to nine or ten teachers a day (Dann, 2011; Steady & Roberts, 2013). Linked to the Impairment of Social Interaction/Social Communication, the student may become separate from the peer group and be misunderstood by teachers (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). Related to the Impairment of Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours, students may display stereotypical behaviour and intense special interests (Boucher, 2009). While these behaviours may have been accommodated in a smaller primary school, they may increase due to the anxiety of the move and may mark the student out as different in their peer group (Stobart, 2012). The transition itself is a break in the familiar routine of primary school which may lead to heightened anxiety in anticipation of the change in routine (Steady & Roberts, 2013). Sensory issues may also impact on transition. The post-primary school is a complex environment. Movement between classes, in common areas and

in practical classes may be overwhelming for the student with ASD at first, without support (McGillicuddy & O' Donnell, 2013).
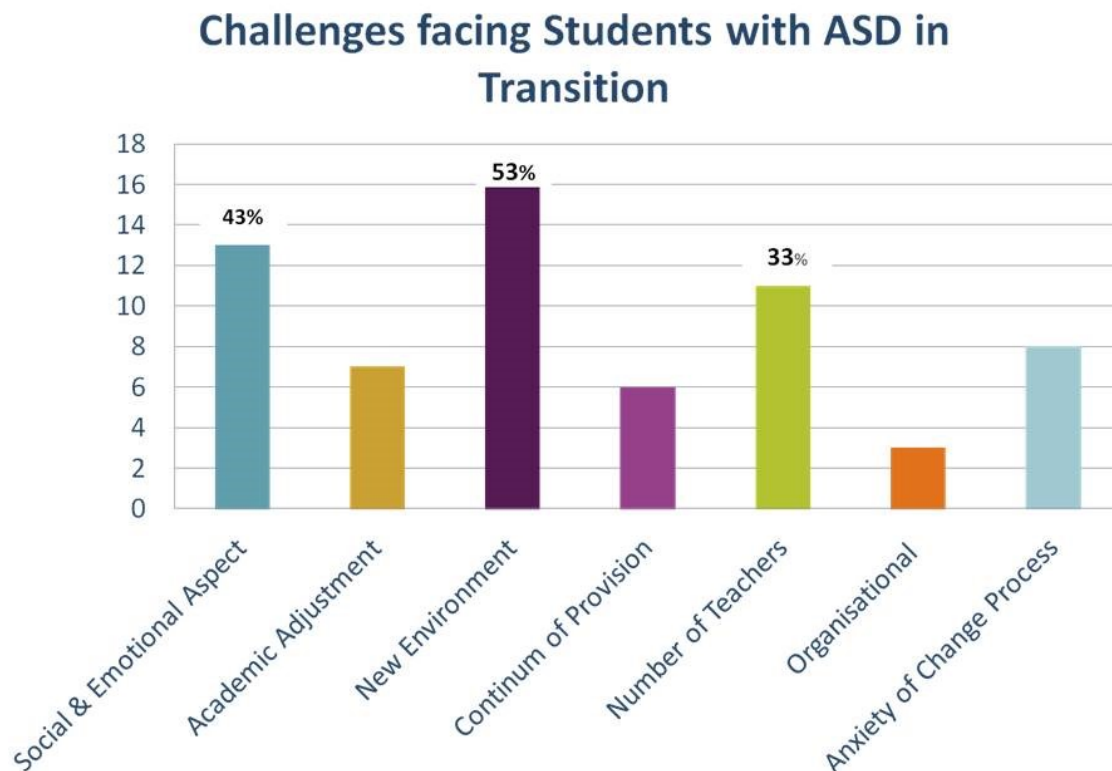
In general, students with ASD are at greater risk of a negative transition experience in comparison with their peers (Hannah and Topping, 2013). As a result of these difficulties, it is extremely important to successfully manage their transition between primary and post-primary school. How students adapt at this time of transition has implications throughout the rest of their time in post-primary school and into adulthood (West, Sweeting & Young, 2010). Support is needed in three particular areas in order to facilitate successful transition of students with ASD: preparation, a programme of transition activities, and relationships (Hannah & Topping, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:
The purpose of this research was to investigate best practice in relation to the planning, process and strategies that support the transition of students with ASD from primary to post-primary school. A purposive sample (n=52) was chosen for this research. These were graduates of the Post Graduate Certificate/Diploma in SEN (ASD) from St. Angela's College, Sligo, who were working in primary and post-primary schools throughout Ireland. This sample of participants was identified as having experience and qualifications in the field. An email directed the potential participants to a website (www.surveymonkey.com) at which the survey questionnaire was located. This instrument was chosen as it has been demonstrated to reduce cost and time in the gathering and processing of data. It enabled the researchers to access a nationwide population under the cover of anonymity (Cohen et al., 2011). The response rate was 57% (n=30) which was very favourable given that the response rate for internet surveys is typically lower than paper based survey (Reips, 2002). Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (IBM Cork, 2011). Qualitative data was thematically analysed. Key themes were identified on the basis of a repeated pattern across the data and relevance to the study (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS
63% (n=19) of respondents taught in primary schools and 37% (n=11) taught in post-primary schools. 77% (n=23) had an ASD class in their school and 70% (n=21) had taught more than 12 students with ASD. 90% (n=27) of these teachers were currently teaching students with ASD and 73% (n=22) had supported students with ASD in transition from primary to post-primary school. Respondents were in agreement that difficulties relating to autism affected transition between primary and post-primary school. 90% (n=27) of respondents indicated that sensory difficulties and more than 80% (n=24) agreed that social communication skills and challenging behaviour were important factors in the process. The research found a range of challenges facing students with ASD in transition (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Challenges facing students with ASD in Transition

Three areas were identified as particular challenges. 53% (n=16) of the respondents indicated that the new environment was one of the greatest difficulties. 43% (n=13) of respondents indicated that students with ASD are challenged by the social and emotional aspect of transition. 33% (n=10) of the respondents felt that the number of teachers that the student with ASD encountered in the post-primary school was a significant factor in the transition process. Findings were analysed and presented under the themes of preparation, a programme of transition activities, and relationships (Hannah and Topping, 2013).
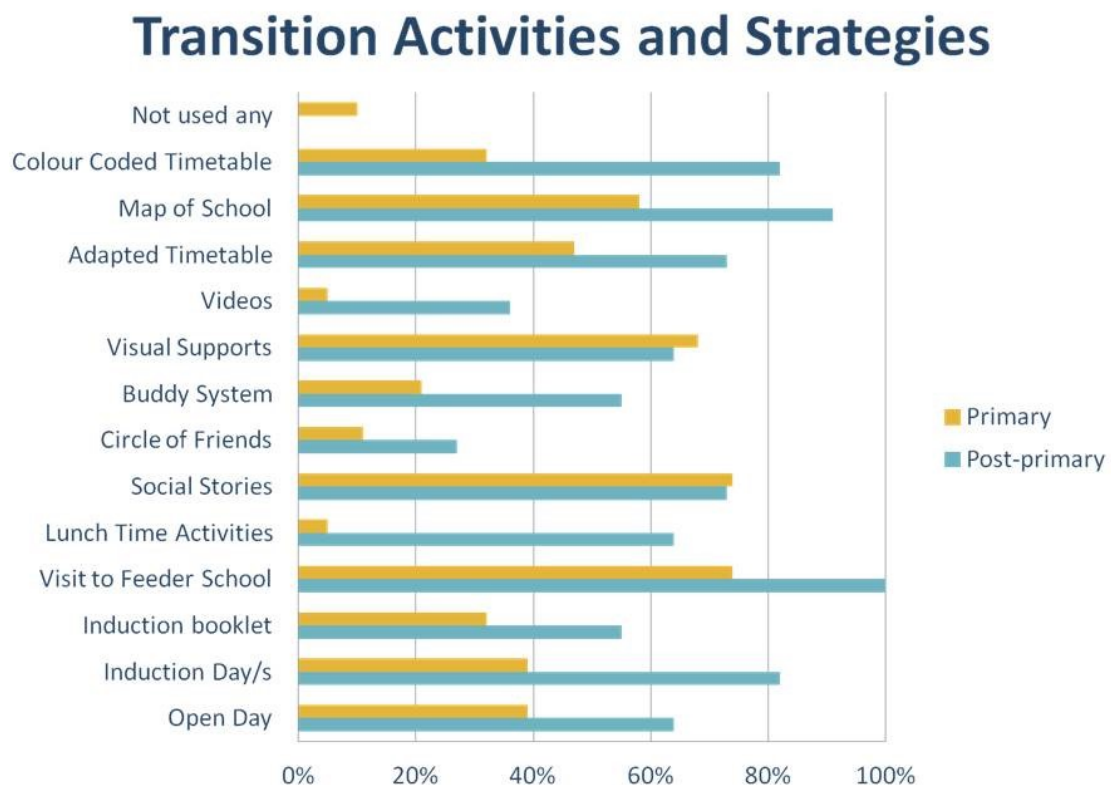
Preparation
The literature indicates that preparation can be a key to successful transition (Hannah and Topping, 2013). 87% (n=26) of the respondents in this study agreed that the opinion of the student with ASD should be sought during the preparation and transition period. 97% (n=28) agreed that there needs to be a close liaison and communication between the teachers. It emerged that schools use a variety of means of passing on information. 90% (n=27) passed on information through formal meetings, 73% (n=22) through oral means and 66% (n=20) of respondents passed information through parents. 74% (n=22) felt that the IEP should transition with the students with ASD. Reasons provided by respondents included that the IEP provides crucial and insightful information about the student that has been gathered over their primary school years. However, 20% (n=6) of the respondents were unsure about the transfer of the IEP. Respondents felt that by transferring the IEP schools may be working

towards targets that may no longer be appropriate and that it may slow the development of relationships as the profiling and assessment phase may be delayed.

A Programme of Transition Activities
Stobart (2013) suggests that transition programmes are important and have a significantly positive impact on a students' ability to settle in and adjust to post-primary school. Transition programmes can be commercially produced or an individualised menu of strategies designed to meet specific needs. In this research 37% (n=7) of primary teachers were using transition programmes in comparison with 63% (n=7) of post-primary teachers. More than 70% (n= 21) of primary and post-primary schools used social stories with approximately two thirds of both sectors using visual supports. Visiting the post-primary school was an established practice at primary level (74%, n=14) and all (n=11) post-primary schools visited their primary feeder schools. Strategies that were most commonly used in the post-primary sector were providing a map of the school (91% n=10), colour coded timetables (82%, n=9), and inductions day/s (82% (n=9) (Figure 2).

Identified challenges for students with ASD in transition are difficulties with social and communication skills, cited by 83% (n=25) of the respondents. Strategies utilised to support socialisation and formation of relationships included buddy systems (55%, n=6) and lunch time activities (64%, n=7) in post-primary schools. This contrasted with primary schools where 21% (n=4) used buddy systems and only one school used lunch time activities. Circle of Friends (27%, n=3) and video priming (36%, n=4) were the strategies used least in the post-primary sector concurring with results from the primary sector with 11% (n=2) using Circle of Friends and only one school using video priming.

Figure 2: Transition Activities and Strategies

Relationships
Preparation for transition and a programme of transition activities and strategies require working relationships between all involved. The importance of these relationships can be recognised by schools by the formation of transition teams. Three schools (16%, n=6) at primary level had a transition team in their school while 55% (n=6) of post-primary schools had a transition team. However, it is possible that schools are successfully using a team approach without formally naming it, *'While we don't have a transition team or have it included in our policies we put a lot of effort into the process: ...link with multi-disciplinary team... meet with parents and student prior to transition, visit to the primary school and link with Principal, Resource teacher, Class teacher, SNA'* (Post-primary Teacher).

90% (n=27) agreed that the relationship between the student with ASD and a key staff member is crucial for successful transition.   At primary level, it was the class teacher, (47%, n=9) followed by the SEN teacher (42%, n=8) and the principal (37%, n=7) who provided the support for transition. At post-primary level, this was provided by the SNA (63%, n=7), the ASD class teacher (54%, n=6) and the SEN teacher (45%, n=5).

The importance of relationships between and within schools was recognised by respondents, *'I think the more communication between the primary and post-primary the better. A good relationship between the resource teacher primary and the resource teacher in the secondary is very helpful'* (Primary Teacher).
In terms of building relationships, 90% (n=27) of the respondents indicated that communication with parents is necessary. During transition, schools engage with a number of different outside agencies. 42% (n=14) of schools were supported by the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) and 45% (n=15) by their Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO). Some teachers identified the value of the outside agencies involved, *'Input from ASD services with the post primary school is very beneficial'* (Post-primary Teacher). Another identified the need for more support from these services, *'This area is very underdeveloped in our school with little guidance from outside supports. I feel there should be more input from professionals to help the teacher ensure that transitions are made with minimum distress to the child'* (Primary Teacher).

DISCUSSION
This research reflects the literature which states that students with ASD have specific difficulties which impact on the transition between primary and post-primary school (Dann 2011; Stobart, 2013; Steady and Roberts, 2013). Sensory issues were highlighted by this research as a significant factor impacting on transition. This reflects the inclusion of sensory issues in the revised diagnostic criteria Diagnostic Statistical Manual V (APA, 2013). This is a key area for consideration when planning for transition (Stobart, 2013)

Results from this research illustrate that schools recognised the importance of preparation for successful transition. Literature suggests that preparation for transition for students with ASD begins up to two years in advance of transition in order to address the challenges for students with ASD (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013; Stobart, 2013). This preparation for transition needs to be a supportive and a collaborative process between the students, home, schools and outside agencies (Dann, 2011). This research showed strong evidence of a reliance on oral communication and, while valuable, the importance of the transfer of documents has been highlighted (NCCA, 2014). While a fifth of respondents were unsure about transferring the IEP between schools, literature suggests that IEPs are significant in the transition process because they facilitate a continuum of support (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013).

This research outlined a wide variety of activities within a transition programme used in schools to address difficulties associated with ASD. There was widespread use of social stories and visual supports such as colour coded timetables and school maps. This concurs with literature (Frith, 2003; Dann, 2011) advocating activities and resources related to the structure and organisation of the school. The value of structured lunch time activities as part of a transition programme was highlighted by Stobart (2013) but this was used by more post-primary schools than primary. While the importance of activities such as Circle of Friends to support transition was highlighted in literature (Jendal Snape, 2005; Stobart, 2013), this was not used widely by schools in this research. The use of video priming as advocated by Sterling-Turner & Jordan (2007) could be extended by both sectors to prepare students for changing environments and routines (Ennis and Manns, 2004; Bowen and Plimley, 2011).
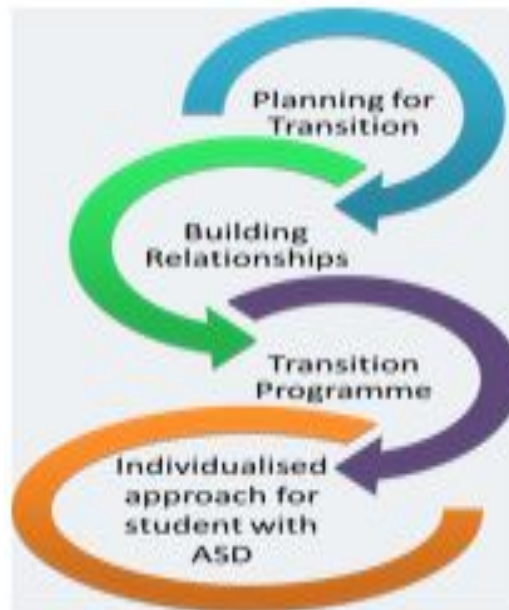
The importance of relationships in transition is emphasised in literature (Thorpe, 2003; Stobart, 2013). According to Dann, (2011) the sharing of information across staff groups, with pupils knowing key members of staff in order to build relationships with them is a key feature of positive transition experiences.This research demonstrated that schools recognise the importance of sharing information across sectors and with outside agencies. There were a number of individuals in each sector who supported the student in transition although these may not have formally recognised themselves as a transition team. The transition team is highlighted in literature as crucial in supporting the student (Hughes, Banks & Terras, 2011; Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013) so the formalising of systems in schools may need to be considered. According to Barnes-Holmes et al., (2013) it is also important that a key individual is designated to support the student in transition. In the current reframing of the role of the SNA (DES, 2014), it was interesting to note that 63% (n=7) of teachers in post-primary schools named the SNA as the support person to the students with ASD in the transition process. Whereas the presence of the SNA had been welcomed (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008), others have stated that this support emphasises the difference between students with ASD and their peers (Rutherford, 2012). This may be particularly significant at the time of transition. In light of the changing role of SNAs in post-primary schools reflection is needed on the most appropriate personnel to fulfil the role of the key individual for the student with ASD. In line with recommendations from literature (Dann, 2011; Hannah and Topping, 2013; Steady and Roberts, 2013), this research outlined the role of parents as crucial in supporting the student with ASD in transition from primary to post-primary school.

The challenges posed by ASD have an impact on the student with ASD in transition from primary to post-primary school. It is important that these difficulties are recognised and ameliorated so that negative long term effects are avoided. Preparation, a programme of transition activities, and the building of relationships between all involved in the transition process contribute to its success. This current study found that schools were appropriately engaged with the transition process but have potential to further incorporate evidence based practice in their work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We are proposing a framework that Departments of Education, support agencies and schools may use to examine and support practice during the transition process for all students including those with ASD (Figure 3). This is aligned to recommendations in literature for the transition of students with ASD from primary to post-primary (Dann, 2011; Hannah and

Topping, 2013). This framework recommends structuring the transition programme over a three year time period starting two years before the transition.

Figure 3: A Framework for Transition for Students with ASD in transition from primary to post-primary school

In the Planning for Transition stage, the primary school should update the IEP focussing on the skills that will be necessary over the transition period. Primary and post–primary schools need to devise oral and written communication systems which commence in the years before transition and which continue throughout the transition period. It is important the IEP transfers with the student and that IEP targets are reviewed, updated and implemented as appropriate in the new setting.

The importance of Building Relationships needs to be recognised through the creation of a transition team in both schools. A key member of staff who is part of the transition team should be identified. This person will collaborate and communicate with parents on behalf of the transition team. They will have responsibility for liaising with staff within and between schools. This person will act as a point of contact for the student with ASD. Through the development of a supportive relationship this individual will ease the transition of the student with ASD.

Transition Programmes are important and have a significantly positive impact on a students' ability to settle in and adjust to post-primary school. Many of the aspects of a generic transition programme will support the student with ASD and, for the purposes of inclusion, should be part of any plan for the student with ASD.

Each student with ASD will need an Individualised Approach, which is based on assessment and identification of individual strengths and challenges. The use of evidenced based practices is necessary to address the specific needs of the individual with ASD in transition.

The following limitations should be considered. The findings as presented are restricted to the purposive sample used and may not be generalisable. A wider sample may be necessary to confirm these findings. The research, as described, is reflective of the Irish education system and there may be distinct characteristics and outcomes compared to the systems in other countries.

The aim of this research project was to investigate best practice in relation to the planning, process and strategies that support the transition of students with ASD from primary to post-primary school. Challenges experienced by students with ASD as they transition from primary to post-primary school were explored. There were many examples of good practice in schools as they supported students with ASD in transition. However, the transition process needs to be structured in a more formal and consistent manner. This research has implications for educational policy and practice in relation to the transition of students with ASD from primary to post-primary schools. Schools should be encouraged to plan for transition over a three year period and to use the framework presented as the basis for this process.

References

American Psychiatric Association (2013) *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.) Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Barnes-Holmes, Y., Scanlon, S., Desmond, D., Shevlin, M., & Vahey, N. (2013) A Study of Transition from Primary to Post-primary School for Pupils with Special Educational Needs. Trim: NCSE.

Boucher, J. (2009) *The Autistic Spectrum - Characteristics, Causes and Practical Issues.* London: Sage.

Bowen, M. & Plimley, L. (2011) Oh No Not Big School; Information and Ideas for Everyone Involved in Transition Planning with Autism Spectrum Disorders Moving to Secondary School. Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government. Available from: http://www.awares.org/pkgs_files/librarydoc_905.pdf

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology.* Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 77-101.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2011) *Research Methods in Education (7th Edition)* Oxon: Routledge.

Dann, R. (2011) Secondary transition experiences for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASCs). *Educational Psychology in Practice* Vol. 27, No. 3, pp.293–312.

Department of Education & Science (2001) *Educational Provision and Support for Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders: the Report of the Task Force on Autism.* Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Department of Education & Skills (2014) *Circular 0030/2014 The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme to support teachers in meeting the care needs of some children with special educational needs, arising from a disability.* Available from https://www.education.ie.

Ennis, D. & Manns, C. (2004) *Breaking down barriers to learning: practical strategies for achieving successful transition for students with autism and Asperger Syndrome.* Surrey: The National Autistic Society, Surrey County Council's Children's Service, Partnership with Parents, South East Region SEN Partnership.

Frith, U. (2003). *Autism: Explaining the enigma (2nd Edition).* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Hannah, E. & Topping, K. (2013) Anxiety levels in students with autism spectrum disorder making the transition from primary to secondary school. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, Vol 47, No.2, pp.198-209.

Hargreaves, A., Earl, L, & Ryan, J. (1996) *Schooling for Change.* London: Falmer Press, cited in O' Brien, M. (2003) Girls and Transition to Second Level Schooling in Ireland: Moving On and Moving Out. *Gender and Education*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp.249-267.

Hughes, L., Banks, P. & Terras, M. (2013) Secondary school transition for children with special educational needs: a literature review. *Support for Learning* Vol. 28, No.1, pp. 24-34.

Humphrey, N., & Lewis, S. (2008). "Make me normal": The views and experiences of pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools. *Autism,* Vol. 12, No.1, pp.23–46.

IBM Corp. (2012) *IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 21.0*. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.

Jindal-Snape, D., Douglas, W., Topping, K., Kerr C. and Smith, *E.* (2005) Effective Education For Children With Autistic Spectrum Disorder: Perceptions Of Parents And Professionals. *The International Journal of Special Education* Vol 20, No.1, pp.77-87.

Lerner, J. & Kline, F. (2006) *Learning disabilities and related disorders: characteristics and teaching strategies (10th Ed)*. London: Houghton Mifflin.

Maras, P. and Aveling, E. (2006) Students with Special Educational Needs: Transitions from Primary to Secondary School. *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 33, No.4, pp.196-203.

McGillicuddy, S. & O' Donnell, G. (2013) Teaching students with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Available from http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2013.764934.

National Council for Special Education. (2010) NCSE statistics on resource allocations. August 2010. Available from http://www.ncse.ie/uploads/1/NCSE_Statistics_Summary.pdf.

National Council for Special Education. (2013) NCSE 13/14 full list of special classes attached to mainstream schools. Available from http://www.ncse.ie/uploads/1/specialschoolsmainstreamschoolslist02122013.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2014) *Transfer of pupil information from primary to post-primary: Report on consultation and materials for transfer.* Dublin: Liffey Press

Ousley, O. & Cermak, T. (2014) Autism Spectrum Disorder: Defining Dimensions and Subgroups. *Current Development Disorders Reports* Vol. 1, No. 20, pp.20-28.

Parsons, S., Guldberg, K., MacLeod, A., Jones, G., Prunty, A. & Balfe, T. (2009) *International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders.* Trim: NCSE.

Reips, U.D. (2002) Internet-based psychological experimenting: five dos and don'ts. *Social Science Computer Review,* 20(3), pp.241-249.

Rutherford, G. (2012) In, out or somewhere in between? Disabled students' and teacher aides' experiences of school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* Vol.16, No. 8, pp. 757–74.

Sirsch, U. (2003) The impending transition from primary to secondary school: challenge or threat? *International Journal of Behavioural Development* Vol. 27, No. 5 pp. 385-395.

Steady, A. & Roberts, R. (2013) *Moving on up - Supporting Transitions from primary to secondary school for pupils on the autism spectrum. Resource pack for parents and carers.* Available from http://www.leics.gov.uk/autism_transitions_parents_pack.pdf.

Sterling-Turner, H. & Jordan, S. (2007). Interventions addressing transition difficulties for individuals with autism. *Psychology in the Schools* Vol.44, No. 7, pp.681-690.

Stobart, A. (2012) *Transition toolkit: Helping you support a child through change.* Autism Education Trust. Available from http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/transition%20toolkit.aspx.

Thorpe, P. (2003) *Moving from Primary to Secondary School: supporting students with an autistic spectrum disorder.* London: National Autistic Society

West, P., Sweeting, H. & Young, R. (2010) Transition matters: pupils' experiences of the primary–secondary school transition in the west of Scotland and consequences for well-being and attainment. *Research Papers in Education*, Vol. 25, pp.21–50.