



Effective Practices in School Transitions for Autistic Children and Young People: A Literature Review and Case Study

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Supporting children and young people's school transitions has been a key policy driver for Scottish schools. School transitions can be challenging for children and young people (Hopwood et al., 2016) particularly those on the autistic spectrum (Yazici & Akman, 2020). It is important that schools provide effective transitions practices to maximise the opportunities for students to experience positive school transitions. School transitions in this paper refer to both early years centres to primary school and primary to secondary school. This paper is made up of two related studies. Study One considers the peer-reviewed published literature from 2002–2022, with fifty-five papers meeting the inclusion criteria, to investigate the nature of effective school transitions for autistic children and young people. Included papers were analysed thematically and 13 evidence-based effective practices (EPs) identified. In Study Two these EPs were used as a priori themes to help understand the processes underpinning practice in one Scottish local authority (LA). Results from a semi-stratified sample of 7 transitions policies from the LA revealed that student-centred planning, collaborative working, discussions around additional support needs (ASN) and effective planning were the most noted transitions supports. Staff knowledge of transitions, adaptations for Covid and environmental supports were the least mentioned. Understanding the nature of EPs in this area may facilitate their implementation and help practitioners better support transitions between schools for autistic children and young people.

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Within this paper, school transitions are conceptualised as being a significant period (Zeedyk et al., 2003) within a child or young person's educational journey which include new social, practical and academic demands. Research evidence from the past 35 years reveals that children's achievements can slow or even decline during transitions between schools (Hopwood et al., 2016). Within this paper two school-based transitions are considered, that from early years centres to primary school and from primary to secondary school. In their paper Nuske et al., (2019) note the differing pressures placed on children transitioning to primary school and those transitioning to secondary school. They discuss the social and emotional, literacy and attentional skill pressures present for children transitioning to primary school, and the academic, workload and social pressures present for children transitioning to secondary school. The transitions between schools are particularly significant for autistic children (Makin et al., 2017; Mandy et al., 2016; Peters & Brooks, 2016; Yazici & Akman, 2020). The term 'autism', also referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a form of neurodiversity whereby it is considered that people's brains function differently. Neurodiversity embraces differences in brain function and behaviour as a natural manifestation of human variety. ASD can impact on various areas of development over time (Ousley & Cermack, 2014). These include social communication, social interaction and selective and repeated patterns of behaviours or interests (see World Health Organisation, 2022).

Given the scale of the change within school-based transitions and that difficulties with change can be a common area of difficulty for autistic children (Stack et al., 2020; Mandy et al., 2016; Peters & Brooks, 2016; Yazici & Akman, 2020), it is highly likely that autistic children are at increased risk of having concerns throughout the transitions process (Makin et al., 2017; Marsh et al., 2017). This is likely to be compounded by difficulties with social communication, interaction and sometimes behaviour, experienced by pupils with ASD. Indeed, some teachers rate social skills as more essential than academic skills for successful school transitions (Marsh et al., 2017). It is important that children and young people experience transitions that provide the required level of support (Larcombe et al., 2019).

TRANSITIONS GUIDANCE IN SCOTLAND

School transitions has been the subject of discussion nationally in recent years. In Wales, the government recently introduced statutory guidance (Wales Government, 2022) for schools, to produce and share transitions plans. In Northern Ireland the Department of Education have initiated a Transitions of Children into Education project (Department of Education NI, 2023) which aims to increase multidisciplinary working across early school transitions; and in England the Department for Education noted the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's transitions (Department for Education, 2022). In Scotland, a review of current policies reveals a notable increase in guidance on transitions in recent years. There are several key directives which include legislation, policy guidance and position statements which have been generated by the Scottish Government. The Education Additional Support for Learning Act (2004) and the supplementary Additional Support for Learning Statutory Guidance (2017) place duties on local authorities to prepare children for transitions and ensure that transitions arrangements are effective. The statutory guidance notes the need for strong collaboration to support transitions. The Act identifies appropriate timescales for planning processes as, not being less than six months at the early years stage and 12 months at secondary and post school stages. Transitions planning should be embedded in the LA policies and procedures for ASN, and the following principles of good practice noted:

- External agencies should be involved in transitions planning where required e.g., health, social work.
- The pupils' views should be sought and considered.
- Parents should be part of the planning process.
- Early consultation should take place with the receiving establishment.
- Schools should ensure that the necessary support is in place for pupils with ASN.
- Transitions should be co-ordinated by a relevant person known to the child and family.

Furthermore, while principles of good practice are identified, the underlying evidence base to which they relate has not been clearly outlined.

POST-COVID PANDEMIC – TIME TO RE-VISIT SCHOOL TRANSITIONS?

Research has indicated that the Covid pandemic has impacted significantly on school transitions (Bagnall et al., 2022) in that many pupils experienced little or no transitions support. Within Scotland, alongside two extended closures of schools and early learning centres, pupils experienced little/no; formal in-person transitions work, access to pupils from other schools also transitioning, home school liaison, contact with new staff, exposure to their current educational setting, as well as a reduction within the curriculum. This in turn led to less opportunities for learning, socialising, emotional developments and physical activity. Furthermore, children and young people experienced further transitions from home learning back to school and early years centres.

This research was undertaken during the Covid pandemic, and it offers the opportunity to re-focus on the importance and nature of effective transitions with a view to improving practice. It is important that school practitioners have timely access to the most EPs, as noted within the academic literature, to inform both planning and practice. This allows schools to maximise the opportunities for students to experience positive transitions. These appear to offer the greatest potential for positive outcomes in that children are then equipped with the tools they need to flourish in an ever-changing environment. The combination of empirical insights and practical guidance offer the opportunity for growth and development of our education system combining both elements of research and practice.

RESEARCH IN SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

Research investigating the impact of school-based transitions for autistic children and children with other ASN's has identified several helpful strategies that can be utilised in the planning of support. Fontil et al. (2020) undertook a systematic review of the literature and from 1,452 initial citations, included a total of 39 studies in the review. The review was based on transitions to kindergarten and included the views of people associated with the child. The central findings of the review highlighted the importance of collaborative practices, multi-disciplinary transitions meetings, the exchange of information across stakeholders, parental, and child visits prior to starting, transitions workshops, parent support groups and regular parent contact. The review concluded that teachers were lacking support and training in the facilitation of successful school transitions.

Other researchers have undertaken combined studies of pre-school and school transitions for autistic children. Nuske et al., (2019) undertook a systematic review of the transitions literature for students with ASD, looking particularly at areas of concern and strategies for success. The review considered data from 443 children. The study identified numerous strategies for pupils, parents and teachers that supported positive transitions. For students, the strongest evidence was identified for the use of tailored transitions supports, increasing exposure and predictability, social support, and coping strategies. For parents the strongest evidence was for clarifying and clearly communicating the transitions processes and for teachers the strongest evidence was found for inter-school and home communication, a transition facilitator and for student-centred planning. As in other reviews within this subject area the reviewers themselves noted difficulties with limited studies investigating transitions for autistic children and limitations around the studies including small sample sizes. As the authors note:

“Few studies have examined the support needs of transitioning students with ASD and intervention development has only recently begun.” (Nuske et al., 2019, p.318).

Cantali (2019) undertook a systematic review of the international literature investigating the holistic transitions experiences of children with ASN transitioning from primary to secondary school. The review aimed to identify and critique existing international literature of primary to secondary school transitions, as well as identify good practice and gaps within the literature. The review acknowledged there was limited literature focusing on good practice in school transitions for pupils with ASN. The review found that over a 15-year period, 52 texts were

identified of which only 22 included empirical studies. The author concluded that supported transitions were essential for children with ASN and echoed other researchers in stressing the importance that transitions are tailored to children's needs.

Further, Hoy et al., (2018) noted the shortage of research investigating EPs with autistic children. They utilised a case study approach using semi-structured interviews with 5 autistic children, 6 parents and 4 teachers. Their research identified the 5 key themes of transitions as: inclusion, child centred approach, familiarisation, visual supports and communication and consistency. The authors noted the limitations of the small-scale research in terms of generalisability.

It appears pertinent that practitioners designing school transitions policies and practices show awareness and understanding of research findings regarding effective transitions practices as well as the nature and impact of multiple transitions experienced by children, young people and families undertaking school-based transitions.

MULTIPLE AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL TRANSITIONS (MMT) THEORY

Theoretical frameworks can further the understanding of school-based transitions and Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) is particularly relevant for practitioners working in this area. Within this theoretical framework, transitions are conceptualised as an ongoing process of social, psychological and educational adaptations, which are sought to be understood in terms of multiple transitions for both the individual and significant others. The theory considers other accompanying, or triggered transitions that happen because of the transitions. Indeed, the transitions itself may have been triggered by another transition. It highlights the multiple layers of transitions and crucially their interactions. The theory emphasises that children experience many transitions at the same time across several domains when changing school (e.g., social, academic, pedagogical, psychological, contextual). These multiple transitions impact on each other as well as the environments of others, for example, friends, parents, and teachers. The theory draws upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) whereby an individual's development is influenced by the environment around them and their interaction with it, at both micro and macro levels. The theory also incorporates understandings from complexity theory (Zimmerman et al., 2008), which further acknowledges the complex and dynamic nature of transitions. Within this system, transitions are not viewed as linear but as continually evolving. In utilising this theory, researchers and practitioners can consider the holistic nature of school transitions and the complexity of the changes experienced by pupils as well as others around them. It also supports those looking to intervene effectively in school transitions away from a 'one shoe fits all' approach to investigating a series of interventions targeted at various levels. This is particularly important for children and young people with ASN.

Further, Jindal-Snape (2023) purports that individuals' beliefs, experiences of transitions, relationships, discourse, and support systems, provide resources for pupils to navigate their transitions. She identifies the importance of resources within the transitions process. Jindal-Snape identifies the 12 pillars which are shown below. The dimensions are inter-dependant and have been separated for the purposes of noting them. Jindal-Snape highlights that the dimensions are dynamic and will change in their availability over time. These domains align with MMT theory. The 12 dimensions determining Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions are:

1. Habits of Mind (MMT-HOM)
2. Habits of Heart (MMT-HOH)
3. Attitudes and beliefs about transitions
4. Perception of ability and skills to navigate transitions
5. Experience and outcomes of other multiple and concurrent transitions
6. Discourse about transitions at home, school, workplace, in the wider community, media
7. Social Capital (social connections/networks/relationships)
8. Significant others' ability to support transitions (e.g., family, professionals, peers)

9. Significant others' experiences and outcomes of their own transitions
10. Opportunities to discuss transitions in everyday life
11. Experience of diverse pedagogical/andragogical approaches/work practices
12. Organisational, familial and community culture

(Jindal-Snape, 2023, p.540)

Helpfully within this conceptual framework the 12 pillars can be built upon and supported and those wishing to do so are offered identifiable areas within which to intervene.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Study One below reports the findings of a review of the published peer-reviewed literature aimed at identifying effective strategies for school-based transitions with autistic pupils, for use by early years centres, schools, and local authorities. Study two then utilised this information to review a selection of policies within one Scottish LA to establish the extent to which evidence-based practices, for autistic children, featured in existing school policies. It is hoped that clear identification of what the literature deems effective school-based transitions practice will mean these practices are identifiable and increasingly used in future school transitions policy development. This research is one part of a wider project which aimed to co-produce transitions guidance for schools for autistic pupils. The research aimed to firstly identify the nature of EPs and then to answer the research question of what transitions practices are currently used to support autistic children and young people within the LA?

STUDY ONE: METHOD

The first author and a research assistant (RA) carried out a review of four databases and thematically analysed relevant papers to identify EPs from the academic literature that positively support school transitions. The term 'EPs' is used here to describe practices that high-quality research has deemed as efficient.

The first author and RA reviewed the published peer-reviewed academic literature from the ERIC, APA, PsycINFO, and the British Education Index databases. These databases were selected as they cover a wide range of academic journals focusing on both education and psychology. The search terms used were '(autism or ASD or autism spectrum disorder or autism spectrum or autistic disorder) and (transition or transitions)'. The search was limited to peer reviewed academic papers written in English published between 2002–22 covering the age ranges of childhood; preschool; school age; adolescence; adulthood. 'Adulthood' was included as a preliminary scoping exercise indicated that including the term identified additional relevant studies of school transitions to secondary school. Both quantitative and qualitative articles were considered. Table 1 below summarises the search strategies and the eligibility limiters involved in the search.

SEARCH STRATEGIES	ELIGIBILITY LIMITERS
autism or asd or autism spectrum disorder or autism spectrum or autistic spectrum disorder or autistic spectrum or autistic disorder	• Date of publication: 2002–2022
AND	• Peer reviewed academic journals in English
Transition or transitions	• Databases: APA PsychInfo, ERIC, British Education Index
	• Age: Childhood; preschool; school age; adolescence; adulthood
	• Did not consider autistic children or young people or school transitions

Table 1 Search strategies.

Relevant papers were identified from their titles, summary details given in relation to the article, abstracts and keywords. A further search was then undertaken on Google Scholar with the search terms autism or ASD or autism spectrum disorder and school transitions for articles that may have been missed from the database search. The Google Scholar database search was limited to a further twenty digital pages after, the last appropriate linked reference, was identified.

The first author and the RA carried out a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the articles that were identified as relevant within the search. This process incorporated six distinct stages of thematic analysis:

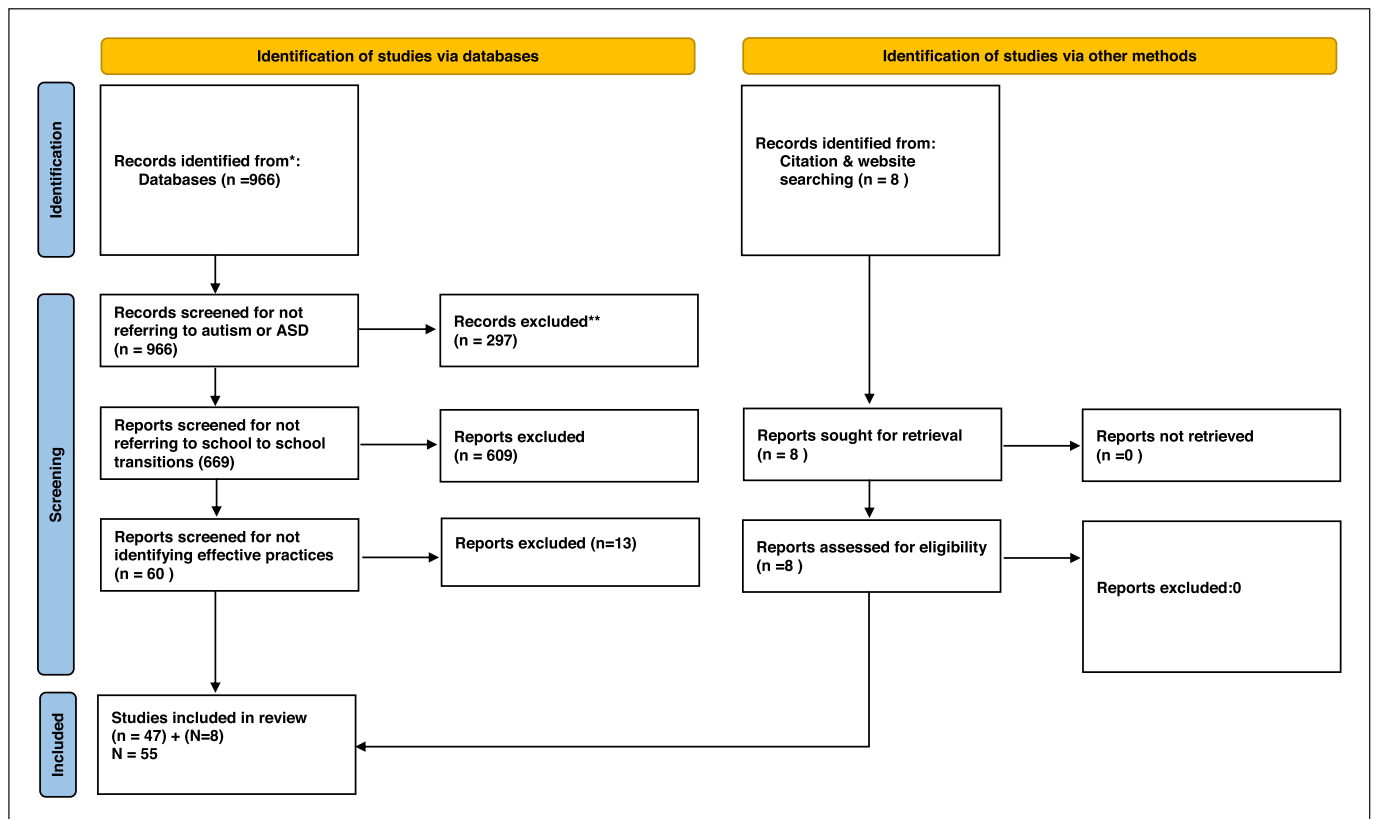
1. Data familiarisation
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

The thematic analysis stage 1 and 2 were undertaken individually by the researcher and RA, one paper at a time. The papers were read for familiarisation, with brief notes being made. EPs were noted at that point and potential codes were generated within each paper. Each researcher then generated their own initial themes. Themes are described by Braun & Clark (2006) as practices where there are similarities or had a level of commonality (i.e., shared patterns), for example, collaborative processes as a theme to identify practices whereby different groups of people worked together e.g., meetings, discussions, planning groups. The reviewers met in three online meetings to discuss the initial codes and themes with the aim of discussing and agreeing initial themes for all papers. The researcher and RA completed stages 4 and 5 together through discussion and agreed a final set of themes.

STUDY ONE: RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the details of the search results. The 966 papers identified by the search strategy were reviewed for their suitability. Papers looking at post-school transitions or other types of transitions other than early years to primary or primary to secondary were removed (N = 669).

Figure 1 PRISMA flow chart of literature search results.



‘Collaborative working’ was the most cited effective strategy for transitions noted within the included studies reviewed. The following practice themes were agreed by the researchers through discussion, from the literature search, as being identified as useful in supporting effective transitions. There were no sub-themes attached to the identified themes:

- **Collaborative processes** involving all relevant **professionals** i.e., practices that discuss a range of professionals working together e.g., speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, school nurses. This can include shared meetings, assessments, and interventions.
- **Collaborative processes** involving **parents** – practices that include direct links with parents around transitions e.g., parents attending meetings, parent visits, parent sessions.
- The **promotion of relationships** – practices that promote relationships for transitions i.e., peer to teacher and peer to peer. For example, school disco's, shared school trips, meet the teacher etc.
- **Effective planning** – practices designed to plan for effective school transitions in advance e.g., schedules of visits, timeline of events.
- The **identification of key personnel to ensure appropriate processes**/supports are in place e.g., a key transitions support person i.e., a class teacher, depute headteacher or a pastoral care teacher.
- The **development of staff knowledge** – practices that aim to increase staff knowledge on how to effectively support school transitions e.g., transitions processes input, support, training, ASD/social communication knowledge.
- The **availability of information** for parents, pupils, and staff to access – practices that provide transitions information to others on transitions i.e., handbooks, newsletters, websites, policies etc.
- **Environmental supports** – practices that consider the impact of the new environment with the aim of providing support e.g., visits, maps, identified safe spaces.
- **Student centred planning** – practices that place the child at the centre with an emphasis on children's voice, e.g., the development of a clear student profile, a continuous curriculum and opportunities for children and young people to share their views i.e., planning around an assessment of the individual pupils needs.
- **The development of self-regulation supports and strategies** – practices that recognise that additional support may be required across transitions to support self-regulation for some pupils, put in place pro-actively e.g., group work, check-ins.
- **The development school wide nurturing approaches** – school wide practices that support social, emotional, and behavioural development of all students. Including considerations of young people's mental health and well-being i.e., reference to whole school nurturing approaches, planning for anxiety or increased stress, identification of further supports etc.
- **Engagement and motivation support** i.e., references to practices that support a sense of purpose, school belonging, recognising motivation and willpower, feelings of students towards school.
- **Adaptations for Covid** i.e., any references to adaptations to transitions that have been made as a result of the Covid pandemic.

STUDY ONE – DISCUSSION

The aim of the review of school transitions research was to provide a representation of research over the last 20 years, in terms of practices that are deemed effective with autistic children and young people. A review was undertaken of the ASD literature across four databases and Google Scholar. The results of the search identified 55 relevant papers which were then read by two researchers and themed into 13 areas of practice. The identification of 13 generic areas whereby practitioners can enhance transitions practices, based on research evidence, will support local authorities and schools to enhance practice in an evidence-informed approach. The researcher notes that on reflection the 13 themes could have been condensed further based on commonalities e.g., collaborative processes with professionals and collaborative processes with parents could have been combined together to describe all collaborative practices and effective planning and student-centred planning could have been combined.

This was not done at the time as it was felt that some papers referred to different types of collaboration (not all involved other professionals or parents) and not all effective planning made specific reference to being tailored for individual pupils.

The clear identification and articulation of 13 EPs for autistic pupils means that credible knowledge is added to existing practice therefore providing greater potential for providing effective transitions. The inclusion of research evidence is a critical factor in providing high quality school transitions. Furthermore, the inclusion of research evidence in practice, alongside school expertise and a consideration of contextual factors, supports in closing the research to practice gap that is documented within academic literature within the area of autism (Boyd et al., 2021).

STUDY TWO: METHOD

The researcher sent three emails (an initial email and two follow up emails) to all headteachers within the LA (n = 52) as well as to headteachers of partnership early years centres (n = 5) requesting that early years centres, and schools email copies of their transitions policies. As autistic children and young people would commonly participate in both the schools generic transitions practices and any enhanced transitions practices for children with ASN, both generic transitions policies and ASN specific policies were requested from schools.

The researcher requested that where schools did not have a transitions policy to send the researcher a nil return. A stratified random sample of seven school transitions policies, across the early years, primary, secondary and specialist sector were then reviewed separately by three researchers using a content analysis (CA) approach. It was agreed it would be helpful to have representation from each sector i.e., early years, primary, secondary and specialist school sector so that the review would have a level of breadth across the LA.

IDENTIFYING TRANSITIONS POLICIES

Table 2 identifies the responses received. In total the researcher received 16 transitions policies from schools with 10 schools replying that they did not have a formal written policy. The breakdown per sector can be seen within Table 2 with the overall and sector response rate. The response rate was highest from secondary schools of which there are significantly less than primary or early years centres. The response rate was poorest from early years centres. It should be noted that most early years centres (n = 31) are situated within mainstream primary schools. The policies received were all generic school transitions policies and no schools submitted an ASN transitions policy or a policy for autistic children and young people. Some policies referred to additional supports for children and young people with ASN e.g., “Staff are provided with a data sheet for all pupils with ASN – a copy is passed to Guidance for placement in a pupils personal record.”

SECTOR	NUMBER OF POSSIBLE SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF REPLIES	POLICY SENT	NIL RETURN – CONFIRMED NO POLICY IN PLACE	RESPONSE RATE
Early years	5 – stand alone 31 school based 5 partnership nurseries	4	4	0	10%
Primary	41	16	7	9	39%
Secondary	8	5	4	1	63%
Specialist	2	1	1	0	50%
Number	92	26	16	10	28%

Table 2 Responses from schools to request for transitions policies.

7 of the 16 submitted policies were selected for CA. Two policies from each sector were sampled by stratified random sampling (Robson & McCartan, 2017) in that the policies were separated into sectors and then randomly selected i.e., 2 policies from early years, 2 from primary, 2 from secondary and 1 special school. It was important to consider each sector. It was not possible within the timescales to analyse all policies submitted.

ANALYSIS

CA (Drisko, 2015) was used to identify and describe themes in a systematic way allowing them to identify areas of interest. CA can be defined as: “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2013, p.24).

Basic CA relies on a frequency count of information that often does not require the researcher to make extensive interpretative judgements in coding and data analysis (Drisko, 2015). The unit of analysis used was a sentence. The purpose of the activity therefore was to identify a quantitative count of the most and least used EPs, as identified in the review of the literature, with a selection of LA schools. It is therefore assumed that the more EPs adopted by schools within their transitions processes, the greater the likelihood that the transitions will be effective. CA of the sample of seven school’s current transitions policies was used to provide further information to assist in answering the research question of ‘What transitions practices are currently used with children with ASD within the LA?’

The CA analysis was undertaken separately by three researchers, the first author, the RA and a trainee educational psychologist with experience in CA. The researchers read through the policies several times, analysing one policy at a time, noting each time an EP was referenced. Themes were utilised within a codebook. The codebook was created collaboratively outlining the variables, clarifying how they would be measured and the coding rules before the CA began.

Titles and quotations which were extracted from the coding process. All other uncoded data including all sentences that did not fall into the identified themes were analysed using a grounded theory approach analysis, referenced as ‘grounded techniques’ (Al-Eisawi, 2022).

In order that the researchers get a clear picture of EPs that were currently utilised in schools and early years centres it was decided to separate the theme of ‘the promotion of relationships’ into the two distinct areas of peer-to-peer relationships and teacher to peer relationships and the ‘staff knowledge’ theme into knowledge of transitions processes and knowledge of ASN. It was felt that these were discrete and important interventions for effective transitions. It was likely that establishments may use one but not the other and analysing these separately would give a more accurate picture of areas of strength and areas of development.

Figure 2 shows the CA process agreed and followed by the three researchers.

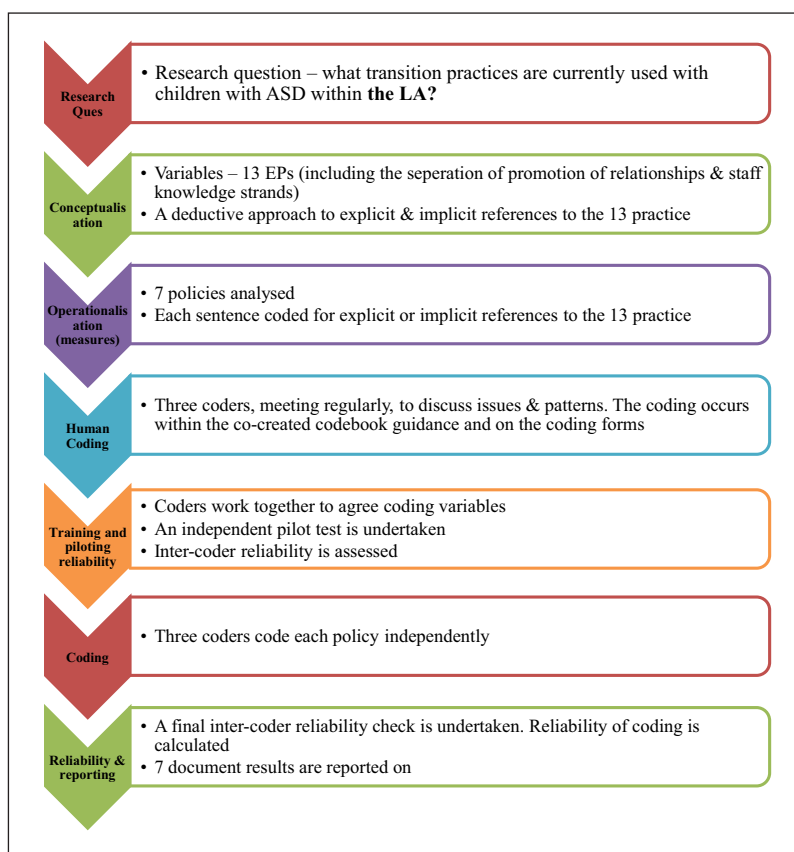


Figure 2 CA process.

Where an EP was cited within the unit of analysis it was counted within that theme. Where more than one theme was present within the unit, the second theme was coded as an additional unit. The researchers aimed for an 80% inter-rater reliability (Neuendorf, 2017), policies coming under that threshold were discussed and further analysed.

ANALYSING THE ‘UNCODED’ DATA

Grounded Theory (GT) methodology is an inductive approach (i.e., where the researcher starts with the data and moves from that to a more general set of propositions) whereby the aim is to discover information from an analysis of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This process was used for all remaining data that had not been relevant to the identified themes. Coding this data means that the researcher can ensure that important data is not missed in the CA of the transitions policies. Furthermore, this will support the researcher in answering the research question around existing practices in schools.

GT describes three stages of coding namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Within grounded techniques two stages of coding will be undertaken, open coding i.e., an initial stage of coding, the development of coding categories, and axial coding the emergent stage whereby commonalities, themes or patterns can be extracted.

A code within grounded techniques is often a specific indication of the main issue or phenomenon being described in the data. The researchers underwent the following process:

- Initial coding and axial coding
- Categories, relational model, core categories and story lines
- Qualitative data validation and bias reduction

STUDY TWO-RESULTS

Table 3 outlines the final agreed results of the content analyses of all seven policies. Inter-rater reliability varied between policies from between 81% and 94%, with an overall inter-rater reliability of 88%. Differences were discussed in coding after both the pilot policies and at the end of the coding process.

From Table 3 and Figure 3 the most referenced supports by the sample of transitions policies were student centred planning (15.1%) and references to collaborative working (12%). Staff knowledge and discussions around ASN (9.5%), effective planning (9.2%) and collaboration with parents (87%) featured within the seven policies. Only two policies had been adapted considering the pandemic and only one policy referenced staff knowledge of transitions processes. These were the least referred EP themes. Further, environmental support, self-regulation support, strategies and engagement, and motivation strategies were not regularly referenced within the transitions policies.

RESULTS FROM ‘UNCODED’ DATA

The 66 ‘uncoded’ items were reviewed utilising a GT approach (Al-Eisawi, 2022). The results revealed four categories of ‘uncoded data’. These were data relating to:

- Definitions
- Processes (e.g., class allocation, forms, PSE curriculum)
- Other support (e.g., self-care, storytelling), and
- Aims (of the document or transitions)

The definitions and processes outlined by schools within their policies were descriptive in nature and aimed to give a better understanding of the transitions policies e.g., “the way the classrooms are set up next year is changing”, “our primary one teachers remit is to oversee the day to day running of the early years centre”. Very few other supports were identified within the transitions documents, and they tended to be generic in nature i.e., not related to the transitions process itself this included references to work experience, references to other

supports that can be provided if required (un-named). It was concluded by both researchers that significant amounts of relevant data had not been missed by the researchers within the CA.

EPS	SECONDARY		PRIMARY		EARLY YEARS CENTRES		SPECIALIST	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
	SECONDARY SCHOOL 1	SECONDARY SCHOOL 2	PRIMARY SCHOOL 1	PRIMARY SCHOOL 2	EYC 1	EYC 2	SPECIALIST 1		
Items not coded according to any of the above	5	17	16	13	2	3	10	66	15.6%
Student-centred planning	10	11	7	4	4	18	10	64	15.1%
Collaboration involving relevant professionals	12	11	5	0	4	6	13	51	12%
Staff knowledge (of ASN)/ discussion of support for ASNs	14	16	2	0	6	1	1	40	9.5%
Effective, proactive planning	7	4	9	0	9	7	3	39	9.2%
Collaborative process involving parents	6	3	7	0	2	12	7	37	8.7%
Nurturing approach	6	6	6	1	3	3	1	26	6.1%
Relationships are promoted (between peers)	4	12	4	2	1	1	0	24	5.7%
Information available for staff, parents and pupils	2	7	1	0	4	7	2	23	5.4%
Key personnel identified (to ensure appropriate processes and communication)	2	7	1	2	1	2	3	18	4.3%
Relationships are promoted (e.g., between pupils and staff)	3	4	5	1	1	3	0	17	4%
Engagement and motivation	0	1	0	1	0	1	3	6	1.4%
Self-regulation supports and strategies	1	0	3	0	1	0	0	5	1.2%
Environmental supports	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	4	0.9%
Mention of COVID	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	0.5%
Staff knowledge (of transitions processes)	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2%

Table 3 Results of the CA of school transitions policies.

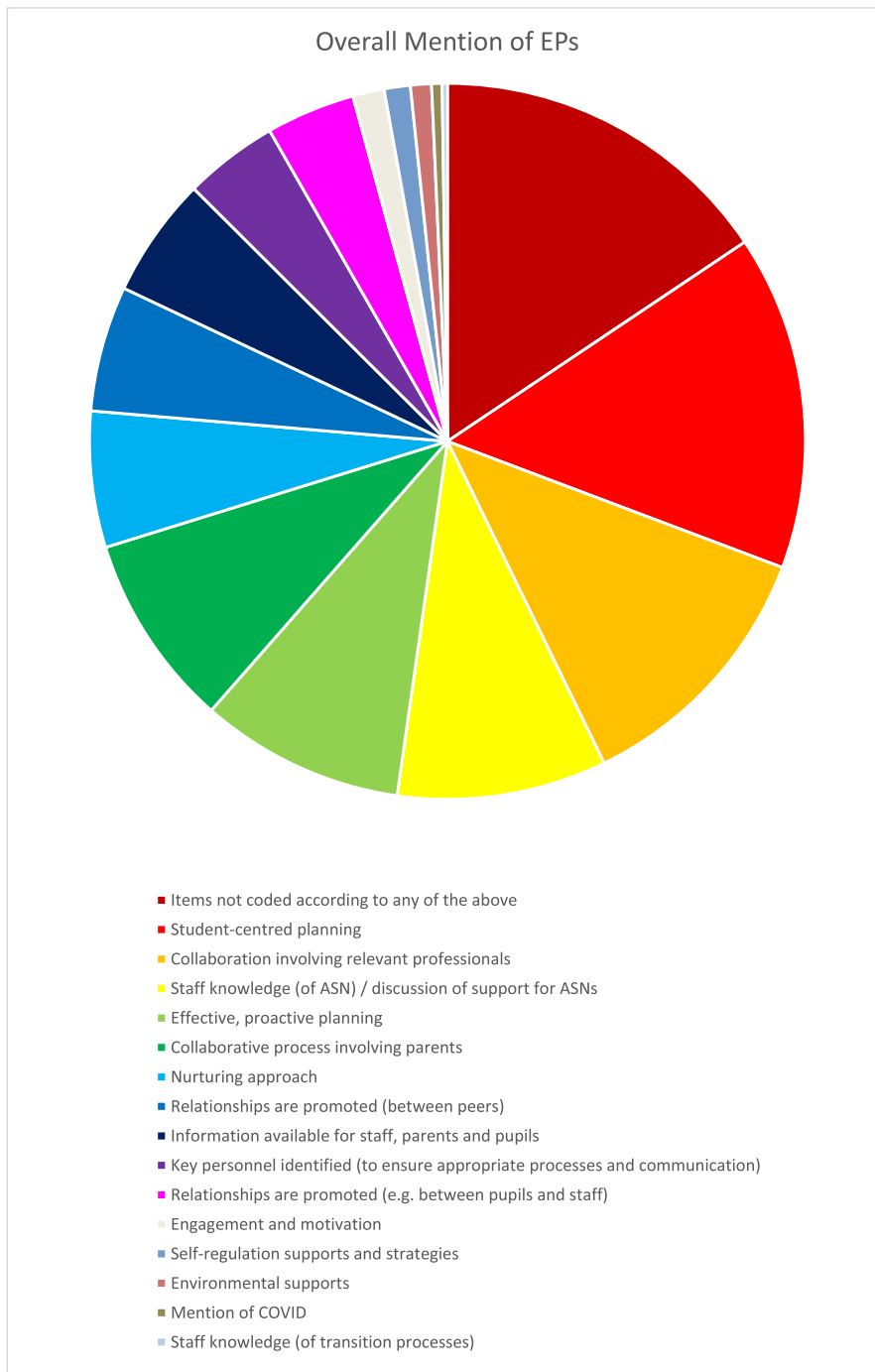
STUDY TWO DISCUSSION

The EPs identified by two researchers were utilised as *a priori* themes for a CA of a small sample of one Scottish local authorities' early years centres and school transitions policies. The review of practice within the LA revealed that there was no overarching LA guidance or policy around mainstream or ASN school transitions. Analysis of the schools' individual policies revealed that student centred planning and staff knowledge and discussions around ASN, were the most cited EPs. Although the review was carried out during the Covid pandemic, adaptations, or references to Covid, environmental supports, self-regulation supports, and strategies as well as engagement and motivation strategies received the fewest references.

There was significant variability between policies across the sample of seven schools. Some schools appeared to have created their own policy based on local need as they perceived it. Other schools had not formalised a policy. This may be because there had not been any LA co-ordination in this area. There were a range of practices within the LA with many schools not having any written transitions policy. The sampled policies described a variety of practices with little consistency. The school transitions policies made a moderate reference to some EPs, but this was not consistent across policies.

The most utilised EPs within one LA were student centred planning, collaboration with other professionals, staff knowledge of ASN, effective planning and collaboration with parents. These appear to be processes that are well established in school transitions processes and recognised to be effective. However, staff knowledge of transitions processes, adaptations for Covid, environmental supports, self-regulation supports, and engagement and motivation support were rarely referenced. As all policies were generic school transitions policies (i.e., none were specifically for children with ASN) it may have been that these aspects were considered too specific for generic policy documentation. However, researchers continue to note the importance of supporting teachers in building skill to implement effective transitions (Larcombe, 2019; Nuske et al., 2019), in considering environmental adaptations (Makin et al., 2017), in including self-regulation & engagement and motivation supports (Hebron, 2018, Bagnall et al., 2020).

Figure 3 Combined results for overall EPs from 7 transitions policies.



GENERAL DISCUSSION

The importance of well-planned and evidence-informed practices has become increasingly apparent since Covid whereby many children and young people did not experience full school

transitions and whereby it has been reported that this has later led to difficulties (Quenzer-Alfred et al., 2021). Schools can now identify which practices they use that are evidence-informed and could thus be deemed as areas of strength and enhance their transitions practices by adding further interventions into their programs. Interestingly many of the EPs identified were already present in the national Scottish Transitions Guidance which has been developed in recent years e.g., gaining pupils views and working with parents. The identification of the 13 themes allows the LAs to generate school transitions guidance for schools, highlighting the themes and how schools might incorporate these into their practices.

In considering MMT theory the researchers adopted a holistic ideology of school transitions supports considering those already present and undertaken by educational establishments, such as how children think and feel about transitions, past experiences of transitions, internal and external resources they can access and significant others who can support them. The consideration of MMT theory encourages researchers and schools to maximise the involvement of parents and other professionals within transitions and as well as considering the parents own transitions experiences. Theories like MMT encourage practitioners to consider the ecology of the child or young person and the variety of simultaneous transitions that children and young people experience when engaging in school transitions. This allows schools to plan for support in its widest sense and identify key variables which can be used to maximise transitions success.

In relation to the 12 pillars of successful transitions identified by Jindal-Snape (2023), the identification of the 13 themed areas supports in the application of these pillars in practice. For example, collaborative processes with professionals and parents will potentially support the pillars of perception of ability and skills to navigate transitions, discourse about transitions, significant others ability to support transitions and opportunities to discuss transitions in everyday life. It also offers the opportunity to explore the experiences and outcomes of parents own transitions. The development of staff knowledge of transitions practices, which was identified within this research as one of the 13 themes, can assist staff in applying areas identified within the 12 pillars by encouraging them to support pupil's attitudes and beliefs about transitions, perceptions of ability and skills to navigate transitions and realise the importance of supporting positive discourse about transitions at home and school. Staff can also be trained in processes that will build social capital within schools e.g., the direct teaching of problem-solving methodologies. These 13 themes can therefore be utilised to support the 12 pillars into school transitions practice.

LIMITATIONS

This research has several notable limitations. The review of the literature reported in Study One was restricted to published peer-reviewed research, due to time constraints and did not consider relevant unpublished studies and theses. The search itself was reviewed by a single researcher. In Study Two, only a small number of transitions policies ($n = 7$) were analysed by the three researchers, again due to time constraints. Those schools forwarding their policies were self-selecting which may mean that the sample was skewed to schools that had confidence in sharing their policies and thus may not be representative of the whole LA nor of the wider picture of transitions within Scotland. Study Two was also undertaken at the time of the Covid pandemic, which may have had an impact upon the responses from schools. In addition, the generalisability of findings may be limited as the research did not account for potential variations in transitions policies and practices across local authorities and socioeconomic backgrounds within Scotland.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future areas of research include clarification of factors that support and impede effective inclusion, further research on stakeholders' perceptions and experiences, further longitudinal studies investigating the longer-term impact of school transitions and further investigation into EPs within post-school transitions ensuring all pupils access and sustain positive destinations. MMT theory offers researchers a useful framework for developing research, policy, and practice within the area of transitions. Additionally, exploring the role of technology in facilitating smoother school transitions and its impact on student's adaptability could be a valuable avenue

for future research. Furthermore, investigating the influence of cultural and linguistic diversity on the transitions experience of students could provide insight into creating more inclusive transitions policies and practices. Examining the effectiveness of mentorship programs and peer support systems during transitions could enhance understanding of the social aspects of the transitions process.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an overview of thirteen school transitions practices deemed effective by the published studies, which met the inclusion criteria of Study One. Study Two offered practitioners the opportunity to develop their practices in line with empirical studies. Within the field of education, it is key that practitioners continue to bring research evidence into practice. Educational psychologists can have a key role in synthesising research findings for busy teaching professionals to maximise opportunities for improving policies and practices for pupils. Moreover, future research could consider the implementation challenges and success factors associated with developing the thirteen identified effective school transitions practices. Exploring the collaboration between educational psychologists and other stakeholders, such as parents and community members, in implementing EPs could also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to enhance school transitions experiences. Additionally, investigating the scalability of these practices across different educational contexts and considering their applicability in diverse cultural settings could further inform the development of universally effective transitions strategies.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The anonymised raw data gathered within this research was part of the requirements for a professional doctorate. The data can be viewed at [Carole CAMPBELL — University of Strathclyde](#).

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical approval was granted from both the University Ethics Committee (UEC21/76) and the LA Children's Services Leadership group.

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All authors contributed to the planning and reviewing of the research and to the submission of the journal article.

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