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# Is transition an (adult) problem? – experiences of autistic students during the transition from primary to secondary school

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**Key words:** Transition, secondary school, autism, France.

Recent research indicates that the transition from primary to secondary school is an important step in students' lives. Although this step is often expected to be even more challenging for autistic students, there are new hints that the transition could also be an opportunity and not necessarily a negative period. Sixteen autistic students in France were interviewed three times during their first year of secondary school (6<sup>th</sup> grade) regarding their transition to secondary school. They presented a positive self-image and preferred secondary school over primary school for various reasons. They focused on their everyday life in secondary school rather than problematising the transition, which in most cases had been planned and prepared by the adults in their life. Their positive experiences and unique views on the transition and the first year of secondary school could contribute to a more optimistic and inclusive transition planning. Therefore, the study provides original accounts from a group of participants who are often neither involved in transition planning nor in transition research.

## Introduction

The transition from primary to secondary school is considered a challenge for most students (Hoy *et al.*, 2018; Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2006; Makin, Hill and Pellicano, 2017). Jindal-Snape *et al.* (2021) found out that studies on this transition to secondary school conceptualised the transition as a change, specifically a negative one, like a disruption or a risk. The transition is characterised by a number of changes: new and often larger buildings, new and more teachers, higher workload, new classmates, new

subjects, *etc.* In this context, research acknowledges that students with special needs and autistic students, in particular, are likely to encounter more difficulties during the transition than their peers without special needs (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Hebron, 2017; Leroux-Boudreault and Poirier, 2017; Makin, Hill and Pellicano, 2017; Bruck, Webster and Clark, 2021).

According to the DSM-5, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder of variable severity that is characterised by difficulty in social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Some characteristics of ASD become more prominent at the secondary school level, both in terms of school work as well as in peer relations. Furthermore, a need for stability and continuity is common among autistic people. Given these supposed contradictions between the various changes and a need for routine, it is not surprising that studies on the primary-secondary transition of autistic students focus instead on the challenging aspects of the transition. However, some studies indicate that the transition could also be a positive experience for autistic students (Neal and Frederickson, 2016; Hebron, 2017; Richter *et al.*, 2020; Stack, Symonds and Kinsella, 2020). These studies emphasise the individuality of autistic students, who use their personal strengths and resources to overcome obstacles in the transition process and, in many cases, a functioning network around them.

Neal and Frederickson (2016) exclusively focused on autistic students' perceptions during the transition in order to find out what facilitated successful transitions. The students reported to like their new school, to have made new friends and to like the school staff. As facilitators for these successful transitions, they name practical strategies such as visiting the new school and meeting school staff or students, as well as a positive, constructive and problem-solving approach to the transition. The

importance of transition preparation and of positive relationships is in line with other studies (Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2006; Dann, 2011; Fortuna, 2014; Hebron, 2017; Makin, Hill and Pellicano, 2017; Stack, Symonds and Kinsella, 2020).

These latter studies did not exclusively focus on students, but put students' perceptions against the perceptions of adults around them, *for example* parents or teachers. These adult stakeholders are less positive about the transition, in general, and see it as crucial challenge for the students (Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2021). Although there are observations of increased satisfaction from students towards secondary school during their first school year (Hebron, 2017; Richter *et al.*, 2020), there are also reports on difficulties to cope with the new demands as well as social difficulties (Dann, 2011; Hebron, 2017; Makin, Hill and Pellicano, 2017). This could suggest that the characteristics of a successful transition refer to the subjective experiences of the individuals living it, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to define a successful transition precisely without taking into account this individual point of view.

Multi-informant studies are very useful in a complex situation where different stakeholders are involved and depend on each other, but it also risks overseeing the most concerned group, the students themselves (Stack, Symonds and Kinsella, 2021). In most of these studies, the adult sample outnumbers the student sample participating in the same study. This lack of student data could explain why the transition in general is seen as difficult in research literature, while the students themselves do not seem to share this impression (Dann, 2011; Hebron, 2017; Nuske *et al.*, 2019; Stack, Symonds and Kinsella, 2020). It is important to underline that autistic students may experience the transition in a very specific and personal way (Barrow and Hannah, 2012; Conn, 2015), which cannot necessarily be detailed by other informants (Stack *et al.*, 2021). McNeilly *et al.* (2015) argue, from a social justice perspective, that children are social actors whose experiences and opinions are valid, relevant and guaranteed by international treaties, *for example* Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

The number of students with special needs, including autistic students, in the French school system has been rising remarkably since a law, which prioritises inclusive education, has been introduced in 2005. Several measures have been established in order to create an inclusive education system (Direction de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance, 2020). In this context, it is important to know how these measures and the transition in general are perceived by those who are the most concerned. Only a very limited number of studies on the primary-secondary transition of students with ASD in

France or their experiences at secondary school level are available (Aubineau, 2017; Richter *et al.*, 2020).

This study aims to obtain a better understanding of the students' perspective on the primary-secondary transition: How do autistic students perceive the primary-secondary transition? What does the transition mean for them? What strategies and barriers do they identify? Their perceptions could serve as a basis for further modifications of the transition process in a changing education system. The results of the interview data obtained from French students with autism could contribute to the corpus of international literature, since a development towards a more inclusive education system is underway in many countries and poses similar challenges despite the differences in the education systems (D'Alessio and Watkins, 2009).

## Method

The study is part of a bigger research project on the primary-secondary transition of autistic students in France, of which parts have already been published (Richter *et al.*, 2020). However, it became apparent that the students' voices deserved a deeper insight and a more focused presentation. Existing studies show that it is important to take into account the variety of student profiles and to see the transition as an individual experience (Dann, 2011; Fortuna, 2014; Makin, Hill and Pellicano, 2017), which is why a qualitative approach was chosen. This allows a deep understanding of each student's particular experiences and perceptions. Hebron (2017) observed an increase in students' satisfaction in regard to secondary school over the time of one school year. Therefore, a longitudinal approach was chosen in order to be able to capture potential long-term changes (Hargreaves *et al.*, 1990; Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2006).

## Participants

ASD-related associations in France were contacted in order to invite participants. Two cohorts of in total 16 autistic boys were interviewed during the school years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019. All students were in 6th grade, which is the first year of secondary school in France. They were either taught full-time in a mainstream classroom or had additional support through a specialised unit (*Unité localisée pour l'inclusion scolaire; ULIS*) led by a special needs educator (*cf.* Table 1).

## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with autistic students were conducted at three different times during the running school year (T1 = beginning, T2 = middle, T3 = end), if possible. In order to develop the interview guides, studies from other countries that included autistic students (e.g., Dann, 2011; Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2006; Makin, Hill and Pellicano, 2017) were explored in order to identify topics and issues that might also be relevant for students in France.

**Table 1: Participant characteristics**

|                       | No. | Age | Sex | Primary school | Secondary school | Public/private | Teaching assistant | Diagnosis as provided by the parents | Interview length in min |    |    |
|-----------------------|-----|-----|-----|----------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|----|----|
|                       |     |     |     |                |                  |                |                    |                                      | T1                      | T2 | T3 |
| School year 2017–2018 | 1   | 11  | m   | MC             | MC               | private        | part-time          | Asperger                             | 29                      | 35 | 12 |
|                       | 2   | 10  | m   | MC             | MC               | public         | part-time          | Asperger                             | 9                       | 11 | 7  |
|                       | 3   | 11  | m   | MC, ULIS       | MC               | private        | part-time          | Asperger                             | 7                       | 15 | 10 |
|                       | 4   | 12  | m   | MC             | MC               | public         | part-time          | Asperger                             | 11                      | 9  | 9  |
|                       | 5   | 11  | m   | MC             | MC               | public         | part-time          | High-functioning autism              | 11                      | -  | 6  |
|                       | 6   | 12  | m   | MC             | MC               | private        | full-time          | ASD                                  | 4                       | 4  | -  |
|                       | 7   | 11  | m   | MC, ULIS       | MC, ULIS         | public         | full-time          | ASD                                  | -                       | a  | -  |
| School year 2018–2019 | 8   | 11  | m   | MC, ULIS       | MC, ULIS         | public         | part-time          | PDD                                  | 14                      | 7  | -  |
|                       | 9   | 12  | m   | MC             | MC               | public         | part-time          | PDD                                  | 10                      | 11 | 12 |
|                       | 10  | 11  | m   | MC             | MC               | public         | full-time          | ASD                                  | 10                      | 8  | -  |
|                       | 11  | 11  | m   | MC             | MC               | private        | full-time          | ASD                                  | 12                      | 9  | 13 |
|                       | 12  | 12  | m   | MC             | MC               | public         | part-time          | Asperger                             | 24                      | 8  | 10 |
|                       | 13  | 11  | m   | MC             | MC               | private        | part-time          | Asperger                             | 17                      | 18 | 24 |
|                       | 14  | 11  | m   | MC             | MC, ULIS         | public         | part-time          | Asperger                             | 18                      | 15 | -  |
|                       | 15  | 12  | m   | MC             | MC               | public         | part-time          | Asperger                             | 6                       | -  | 8  |
|                       | 16  | 10  | m   | MC             | MC               | public         | full-time          | Asperger                             | 13                      | 10 | 29 |

ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder; m, male; MC, mainstream class; PDD, pervasive developmental disorder; ULIS, specialised unit. <sup>a</sup>In written form.

The children were interviewed either at their home or *via* telephone or video call. Each family could choose the place and mode of the interview and whether the parents wanted to be present during the interview with the child or not. In some cases, the parents' presence was considered a necessary circumstance to facilitate the child's speech, since some students seemed to need the feeling of support in this unusual situation (McNeilly, Macdonald and Kelly, 2015). The students were informed about the confidentiality and their right to stop the interview without consequences at any time. In order to make it easier for them to express discomfort, the children were provided with a yellow card in order to pass on to the next question and a red card to stop the interview. According to the parents, not all students knew about their own ASD diagnosis. Therefore, no interview question concerning this subject has been addressed directly, except for students who mentioned the diagnosis themselves during the interview.

#### Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The qualitative content analysis (QCA) was informed parsed using the technique proposed by Mayring (2014), specifically the 'Structuring' method (also *cf.* Richter *et al.*, 2020). A category system was created based on the criteria for a successful transition from primary to secondary school for autistic students (Richter *et al.*, 2019; see Table 2); thus, each criterion was used as a category at the beginning. During the first coding process using the software MAXQDA, some parts of the texts could not be clearly

assigned to one single category and other categories proved to be imprecise. As an example, the category 'Membership in the class' touched very different topics such as friendship, bullying or everyday life as a student in class. Other categories are important to assess a transition in general, but they are not relevant for the student's own perceptions, such as the 'teamwork among school staff' category.

In the first coding process, it became clear which *a priori* categories the students did not mention at all, or which topics within a category were relevant to them and needed as subcategories for more visibility. This is why in a second coding process, new (sub)categories [SC] were generated from the material itself (*cf.* Table 3), leading to inductive elements in the general deductive approach. This second coding process demanded the modification of the original category system integrating the new elements presented in Table 2. The software MAXQDA helped to modify the coding system without losing any data during the different coding processes.

The detailed category system consisted of the name of each category, its definition, an anchor sample and coding rules and formed the foundation for the analysis (Table 3).

#### Ethics and data availability statement

The sampling was presented to the ethical guidelines of the University of Strasbourg and has been entered in

**Table 2: Final category system which shows the *a priori* categories from the literature and how they evolved during the different coding processes**

| A priori categories from the literature (Richter et al., 2019)  | Categories obtained through QCA of student interviews   |
|---|---|
| A well-planned, child-centred transition process involving all key stakeholders has been applied, when:<br>The student is a respected member of the class.<br><br>Academic achievement continues at the same level or slightly lower.<br><br>The student and its teachers have a positive relationship with each other.<br>The student knows the new school building and its reference persons well.<br><br>Cooperation and teamwork organisation ensure continuity in the learning process.<br>Teachers feel self-efficient and satisfied in their daily work.<br>Parents are familiar with the school and its staff and see it as a good place for their child. | MC: Transition planning<br><br>MC: Membership in the class <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SC: Making friends</li> <li>• SC: Fitting in/Being normal</li> <li>• SC: Social difficulties</li> </ul> MC: Academic achievement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SC: Schoolwork in class</li> <li>• SC: Evaluation/Grading</li> <li>• SC: Specific arrangements</li> </ul> MC: Getting along <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SC: Knowing the building</li> <li>• SC: Knowing reference people</li> </ul> Not considered relevant by the students<br><br>Not considered relevant by the students<br><br>MC: Unstructured times <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SC: Breaks</li> <li>• SC: Classroom Changes</li> <li>• SC: Emotional Situation</li> </ul> MC: Outside school <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SC: Homework</li> <li>• SC: External activities/support</li> </ul> |

MC, main category; SC, subcategory.

the processing register by the data protection officer (no. 240; <https://cil.unistra.fr/registre.html#proc-240>). Additionally, the project was validated by the ethics committee of the University of Strasbourg. All participants gave their oral and written consent. In accordance with the ethical guidelines, research data are not shared.

## Results

Although in former literature focusing on parents or teachers the transition is described as a huge step and a remarkable challenge in a child's life (Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2021), the students in this study did not seem to question this stage, but accepted and handled it as a normal part of their school career.

In line with the existing literature, the students characterised the transition by various changes. The changes they identified were related to the number of students and teachers, the size of the secondary school building as well as the academic demands. These changes were seen as positive in general, as most students reported preferring secondary school over primary school.

*Because it's true that I miss primary school, and now it's a little harder, but secondary school is better than primary school, because we have several types of other classes, which are bigger, and secondary school is much bigger than primary school.*

(S13, T1).

The results of the interview analysis are presented below for each main category that was considered relevant by the students in regard to their primary-secondary transition (Table 2).

### Transition planning

In the interviews that were conducted in the beginning of the school year, most students did not remember anymore which transition activities had taken place before the actual start at secondary school a few months ago. When asked directly about certain measures, many remembered the discussions within their families, with primary school teachers as well as school visits or meetings with staff from secondary school. These reports show that often different types of preparation often took place and often more than once.

**Table 3: Extract of the detailed category system**

| No.  | Category name       | Definition   | Anchor sample   | Coding rule  |
|------|---------------------|--|---|--|
| MC 1 | Transition planning | What the students describe as preparation for their transition | « <i>we made a small notebook where we noted, well, all that we needed.</i> » (Student 3, T1) | This can mean both preparatory activities, as well as 'welcome activities' right after the transition. |

MC, main category.

*first, with the meeting with the principal so that he can at least see who I am [...] and I've been able to discover the school, which he finally told me a little bit about. And the open house doors allowed me to situate myself in the school because it's quite a labyrinth. That allowed me to get a good idea of where I was and it also allowed me to talk with some people [...] Finally - well - to discover more, the rooms, that is to say the rooms, the rules, the refectory kitchen [...] well - some things, that's it.*

(S1, T1).

#### *Membership in the class*

Friendships and social relationships in general were an important topic for the students in the context of the primary-secondary transition. Most of them had made friends quickly at their new school; in some cases, more social relationships were reported at the end of the school year: *I have several [friends]. This year I didn't have any at all I was all alone but at the same time I didn't know what to do but now I do.* (S2, T2).

Some of the students' reports reflect their understanding of friendship. This includes distinguishing between different levels of friendships, for which the French language provides specific vocabulary such as friend (*co-pain/copine*), close friend (*ami/amie*), classmate (*camarade*), acquaintance (*pote*). *And then I have friends. Mostly one really good friend, two really good friends, but then the others are just friends.* (S2, T3). In other cases, this differentiation did not seem to take place: *The students? They all raise their hands when it comes to accompanying me to the school nurse for my [health problem]. It means they like me.* (S4, T1). In several cases, the students describe their friendships as supporting each other in difficult situations: *Oh, we're a bunch of more than ten. So when someone's bothering me, two or three of them will come with me.* (S16, T3).

However, some students referred to their ASD in order to explain their particularities: *Actually I'm autistic, I can't stand the sound too loud.* (S11, T1), others underlined to be 'someone normal' (S4, T1).

Social exclusion and manipulation were mentioned, but only by a few students: *They make me do things that I don't like.* (S12, T3). Teasing occurred from time to time,

but the students did not always judge this as a major problem; at least when some time had passed since the event and when the teasing students had excuses for their behaviour. One reason for social difficulties was jealousy in regard to specific arrangements that were established for the students with ASD. In all cases, the students stated that either their parents or the school staff were aware of the situation and had offered solutions to the problems: *For example, [name of a classmate], he's constantly bothering me, but fortunately his parents came by.* (S4, T3).

#### *Academic achievement*

The schoolwork became more challenging, but for many students also more interesting.

*Well then, for physics, I love to do experiments, experiments with magnets, for example, to see if we can make electricity with certain objects, for example wood or something else. And history/geography, I love history because sometimes I used to pretend I was an archaeologist.*

(S13, T1).

Asked about the academic aspects, many students referred to their teachers and more specifically to their teachers' personalities, which seem to have a considerable impact on which subjects the students liked and how they felt about secondary school in general: *I hate physics and chemistry. [...] because the teacher is annoying.* (S4, T2).

*I also had the English teacher that I liked a lot because she had a little bit of empathy, a little bit of humour. [...] She liked the 6th graders a lot. And frankly, it was nice to work with her because she had an English accent [...] Also what I like about her is that she has nice make-up, she's there all the time, it's even rare that she's absent.*

(S1, T2).

The school results of the interviewed students varied, but in general were considered quite positive by the students themselves: *in some subjects, less good, but in some subjects, eh good* (S1, T2).

Some students mentioned that they had specific equipment or other arrangements that their peers did not have in order



to manage their schoolwork: *I've got a computer to type all this stuff up, because I used to write super slow. (S13, T1).*

#### Getting along

Navigation has been a concern of several students before the transition and in some case remained a difficulty during the first few weeks. Starting from the second interview (T2 = middle of the school year), students reported being familiar with the school building and able to navigate in it independently. Those who had difficulties developed strategies such as following their friends.

The interviewed students mentioned teachers in regard to the school subjects they teach, their personality, but not so much as reference persons with whom they have an important relationship with. They would rather turn to other adults at school, such as their teaching assistants, the school nurse or other school staff.

The role of teaching assistants was multifaceted. In general, they helped the students to organise their materials and to stay focused during the lessons: *For example, sometimes when I'm too distracted by the course, she says "Get out your pencil case" or writes something, and sometimes she just helps me write, because [...] it's the 6th/7th class of the day and I'm about to freak out so yes, then. (S16, T1).* In one case, a student perceived the teaching assistant as a mean to *reassure the students, reassure the teacher (S8, T1)* after a violent meltdown in the first week of the school year. One student felt bad for his teaching assistant when he learned that his classmates were talking badly about her.

#### Unstructured times

Most students spend the breaks with their classmates:

*Then during the break I chat, I have fun, I also chat with [name], it's a new friend that shouldn't be left alone because he was born with a body deformity [...] and when he runs too much it hurts him [...] That's why I have to go with him.*

(S13, T1).

Some preferred to be alone in order to calm down and relax, *for example* in the library. Others avoided social difficulties:

*I like to be alone, I like to be quiet. I prefer it, because when you're with other people, [...] there's always trouble or something. When you are alone, you are alone.*

(S4, T3).

Several students mentioned the frequent classroom changes as beneficial in order to be able to move. Others identified situations, which cause them stress and may lead to inadequate behaviour. However, strategies were often in place.

*Yes it's to take breaks, breaks with an MP3 player that was fortunately authorized by the principal. (S1, T2).*

*Sometimes I have to run out into the yard because otherwise I can't make it.*

(S16, T1)

Some students reported to be very exhausted in the middle and at the end of the school year, which had an impact on their behaviour at school and on their performance. *I went through a period of fatigue. And since every trimester there's necessarily a level of difficulty that increases, so I'm very tired. (S1, T3).*

#### Outside school

Most students did their homework at home and with the support of their parents: *unwillingly, but I do them anyway (S3, T3).* In general, they perceived to have a lot of homework, which was problematic for those who stated to be very exhausted after a school day.

Free time activities were mentioned between the lines, such as memberships in sports clubs, music lessons or social skills groups.

#### Evaluation of the transition

Overall, the students consider the transition and secondary school as a positive experience despite the challenges they had to overcome: *I expected it to be- to have fun, to discover new things and new friends and that went very well. (S13, T1).*

*I think the 5th-6th grade change is the hardest I've ever had. Because there are more teachers. Kindergarten to primary school was already a shock to me because there were less teachers, but my biggest shock was in 6th grade.*

(S14, T3).

The students had difficulties identifying the useful strategies that they had used or developed during their own transition. However, some had ideas on what to recommend to other students in the transition situation, which probably also reflected their own experiences.

In their recommendations, they refer to academic, personal, social and organisational aspects.

Academic aspects:

*You need to revise well.*

(S16, T3).

*Inventing techniques to solve certain exercises.*

(S11, T3).

Personal aspects:

*And finally you mustn't stress too much.*  
(S3, T2).

*When you get a bad grade you mustn't get discouraged. We tell ourselves, we'll do better next time.*  
(S3, T3).

#### Social aspects:

*Ah, actually, I'd advise them to respect teachers*  
(S9, T2).

*if you mess up with your classmates from the start, it doesn't work out. Because then you can be pretty sure you're going to be hated at some point.*  
(S4, T1).

*The best thing is to have friends because you can revise together, I mean all alone it's useless.*  
(S16, T3).

#### Organisational aspects:

*about the functioning of the secondary school, knowing who to turn to in case of problems. All these things, the most important things.*  
(S1, T2).

*what I've done was that I was well prepared*  
(S3, T2).

*it will be necessary to bring your schoolbag at the end of the mid-day class, to remove all the things and then put in new ones.*  
(S13, T3).

The results show the students' view on their own transition to secondary school and how they evaluated it in retrospect. This was put in focus in order to identify which topics were relevant for them as the main actors in their transition process.

### Discussion

In this study, 16 autistic students were interviewed three times during their first year of secondary school in France. The interviews shed light on how these students experienced their transition to secondary school.

The results show that, in general, neither the fears before the transition nor the actual transition experience itself differed from what students without special needs described in existing international research. Being afraid of getting lost in the new building, having a higher workload or not making new friends are reported by studies on students with or without ASD (Mackenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan, 2012; Bailey, Giles and Rogers, 2015; Leroux-Boudreault and Poirier, 2017; Makin *et al.*, 2017;

Cantali, 2019). These studies also state that students actually often do not encounter these difficulties during the transition or they experience them only during a short period of time. This was confirmed in this study for the organisational and academic aspects: 'No, it's better now, it's better. I'm getting to know the place'. (S16, T2), whereas social relations often needed more time to develop.

#### Preparation as adult task

Preparation activities seem to be similar for all students, but more frequent and more extensive for autistic students. Several students in this study reported to have visited the school more than once and to have met secondary school staff before the actual school transfer. That this may be beneficial is confirmed by studies on the primary-secondary transition of students with ASD (Stoner *et al.*, 2007; Deacy, Jennings and O'Halloran, 2015; Cremin, Healy and Gordon, 2017; Hebron, 2017; Tso and Strnadová, 2017; Stack, Symonds and Kinsella, 2021).

This preparation is in many cases organised by the schools and/or the families, which shows that the challenges inherent in the transition process are acknowledged by the adult stakeholders. They are aware of the potential difficulties, anticipate a lot and put in place strategies to support the students (Richter *et al.*, 2020). This could be the reason why the students do not perceive the transition as a problem, but rather as a normal development. The interviews showed that the students were aware of the changes, but also felt well prepared. Their evaluations at the end of the school year showed that this impression was realistic: most of them coped well with the new situation. One could argue that the adults prepare for the challenges of the transition in such a way that the students feel able to deal with the situation. However, this puts into question whether the students themselves were involved in their own transition planning. Chandroo *et al.* (2020) mentioned the importance of students' involvement in order to be prepared on the long term for future transitions and life decisions.

#### Various forms of peer relationships

Although the organisational aspects were resolved during the first weeks, social relations needed more time to develop for some students. Although almost all students reported to having friends at the end of the school year, this was not yet the case in the first interviews at the beginning of the school year. Both the positive and negative experiences that the students shared in the interviews are reflected in existing research. Studies showed that there can be differences in the friendships of autistic and non-autistic students, but also underlined that autistic students often long for and are able to form reciprocal and meaningful friendships. Nevertheless, teasing, bullying, manipulation and exclusion are phenomena that risk to



hinder the development and maintenance of positive relationships (Kasari *et al.*, 2011; Rowley *et al.*, 2012; Calder, Hill and Pellicano, 2013; Dean *et al.*, 2014; Schroeder *et al.*, 2014; Leroux-Boudreault and Poirier, 2017; Makin, Hill and Pellicano, 2017).

Although there is a remarkable amount of studies on bullying or other social difficulties of autistic students at secondary school (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Schroeder *et al.*, 2014; Hebron, Humphrey and Oldfield, 2015; Bradley, 2016; Maïano *et al.*, 2016), few studies focus on positive social relationships and friendships, although most students in this study reported to spend the breaks with their friends, to chat and to play together. The notion of helping each other is also mentioned in some cases, showing a more differentiated and reciprocal idea of friendship than other studies let expect (Kasari *et al.*, 2011; Calder, Hill and Pellicano, 2013). In the interview situation, the students were not asked to provide definitions for terms such as ‘friend’; however, one can assume that autistic students whose use of language in both choice of words and speech may be different do not provide the same differentiated nuances as their peers. However, the different nuances in the French language make the interpretation difficult, as students may use different terms to describe social relationships or friendships interchangeably (Aubineau, 2017).

Existing studies (Wainscot *et al.*, 2008; Humphrey and Symes, 2011) show that students with ASD are more often involved in solitary activities, but not necessarily by choice. Only a few students in this study preferred to be alone during the breaks. If they did, they justified it as protection against social difficulties such as bullying, but also by being exhausted and needing time to relax.

#### *Ambivalent roles of teaching assistants*

In this context, teaching assistants have an important role. In the eyes of the students, they mainly compensate their weaknesses in terms of concentration, handwriting and comprehension of tasks. Although most students considered this support as useful, others seemed to be annoyed. Teaching assistants mean additional observation from an adult during the lesson and less possibility for distraction. Former studies suggest that the presence of a teaching assistant can hinder social contacts among the students (Humphrey and Symes, 2011; Sharma and Salend, 2016). This risk was expressed by one student who stated to be relieved that his teaching assistant did not intervene during the breaks: ‘*Otherwise I wouldn’t have a friend!*’ (Student 17, T2). Some students felt the need to clarify that the teaching assistants are only an additional help and that they do not do the work for the students. This might reflect that the students have experienced the jealousy of classmates who do not understand the specific measures taken for autistic students.

#### *Teacher personality as indicator for motivation and achievement*

Another interesting finding was that students often referred to their teachers’ personalities. Their motivation for a certain subject often depended on the teachers and, more precisely, their behaviour towards the students, their physical appearance or their style of teaching. That teachers’ attitudes can have an impact on students’ motivation and achievement has been found out in former studies (Mojavezi and Tamiz, 2012; Kim, Dar-Nimrod and MacCann, 2018) and seems to be the case in this study, too. This is an essential result since former studies suggested that many teachers do not feel prepared to work with autistic students because of a lack of knowledge and experiences (Flavier and Clément, 2014; Young, Mannix McNamara and Coughlan, 2017). Existing literature indicates that this gap may have an impact on teachers’ feeling of self-efficacy and can lead to burnout, but also rejection of students (Boujut *et al.*, 2017; Desombre, Lamotte and Jury, 2019).

This study did not determine whether teacher personality had an impact on academic achievement. Instead, students indicated their preference for certain subjects based on the teachers’ personalities. Further research would be needed to examine this link.

#### *Students’ positive self-image*

The students, in general, preferred being at secondary school, an observation similar to Stack *et al.* (2020). The problems they encountered such as social difficulties, fatigue or concentration issues are typical for autistic students and can be linked to the ASD characteristics or comorbidities. However, only a few students made this reference in the interviews. This observation must be taken with caution since some students in the sample were not informed about their ASD-diagnostic themselves; thus, they were unable to make a link between autism and the particularities they experienced at school. Instead, the students described the difficulties as being ‘*a new one*’ (student 3, T2) at secondary school, as writing slowly or being distracted easily. Two students explicitly rejected their ASD-diagnostic. Humphrey & Lewis (2008) describe similar situations in their study and state that students felt forced to adapt in school, which may have led to ‘autistic masking’. Masking or camouflaging is a phenomenon that has recently received increased attention from researchers, as it is considered one of the main reasons for under- or misdiagnosing of autistic girls and women (Allely, 2019). Identifying its implications in the school context could be a fruitful contribution to the discourse on school transitions.

The students’ positive self-image allows for a strength-based perspective on the primary-secondary transition and contrasts with the existing literature, which focuses more on the deficits. Furthermore, secondary schools

provide advantages such as clear structures (one subject, one teacher), a more specific curriculum and freedom of movement that may benefit autistic students (Stack, Symonds and Kinsella, 2020). Instead of regarding autism as a problem for the transition, individualised strategies for each student (having an autism diagnosis or not) could facilitate the situation and reduce the stress that is perceived by most stakeholders (Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2006; Topping, 2011; Deacy, Jennings and O'Halloran, 2015; McNerney, Hill and Pellicano, 2015; Makin, Hill and Pellicano, 2017; van Rens *et al.*, 2018; Stack, Symonds and Kinsella, 2020). Although the students had difficulties in the interviews identifying the strategies, their recommendations showed that they have developed strategies that helped them to overcome obstacles and that they would be willing to share them: *if they don't understand it all, I can help them, for example. (S14, T1).*

### Limitations

The student interviews were rather short and focused on what the students found interesting. This gave a rather deep insight in terms of how the students perceived themselves at secondary school. This information adds a perspective that is missing in the existing literature, especially in France, and could not have been obtained through other participants. However, information on strategies or obstacles concerning the transition process in France is rather scarce.

Former literature (Trautmann, 2010) shows that children tend to be more positive in interviews by giving socially desired answers and are easier to manipulate. This could partly explain the positive results. However, it is important to notice that the parents were often present during the interviews and, in some cases, became additional interviewers. In this case, some students opened up which allowed the actual interviewer to obtain further data.

In general, the sample was quite small, which is due to the strict sampling criteria (e.g., the ethical guidelines did not allow direct sampling). All participants were boys, although recent research suggests that there are actually more autistic girls than previously thought (Allely, 2019). However, these findings are relatively new and not yet reflected in this study which is based on participants who were diagnosed approximately one decade ago. Only three students in this study were taught by special needs educators, and they did not refer to the teachers in a different way. In order to see whether there is a difference between special needs educators and regular teachers, as former studies suggest (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Desombre, Lamotte and Jury, 2019), a larger sample of students and teachers would be necessary. This would be required in order to get a complete picture of the situation

in France, where a certain number of students with special needs is not constantly attending mainstream classes.

### Conclusion

The students in this study did not consider the transition to secondary school as a major problem. This might be due to the fact that families, schools and other professionals are closely monitoring this transition; thus, the students are probably not aware or even shielded from potential obstacles. The adult stakeholders are taking the challenge of this transition seriously and are preparing for it, which may allow the students to develop a feeling of capability and self-efficacy in this situation. In addition, the students have shown that they can assess their situation well, that they know what is expected of them and how they can use their strengths to meet these expectations despite the individual weaknesses they have identified.

This study shows that students' participation in research is difficult but useful. The students in this study perceived the transition as less problematic than many former studies suggest. Their positive experiences can be seen as an affirmative sign for the changes in the French education system favouring inclusive education. In order to support this idea, the triangulation with research including other stakeholders such as parents, teachers, teaching assistants, school principals would be necessary in order to give a holistic picture.

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### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict.

### Ethics Statement

The sampling was presented to the ethical guidelines of the University of Strasbourg and has been entered in the processing register by the data protection officer (no. 240; <https://cil.unistra.fr/registre.html#proc-240>). Additionally, the project was validated by the ethics committee of the University of Strasbourg.

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### Data availability statement

Research data are not shared due to restrictions in the ethical guidelines.

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