Longitudinal transition between regular and special education in autistic children: predictors and policy effects.

Chantal van den Helder 1,2, Rachel Plak 2,3, Martijn Meeter 1, Sander Begeer 1,2
1: Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam; 2: Netherlands Autism Register; 3: Universiteit Leiden

Questions? Please send an email: g.e.m.van.den.helder@vu.nl

Background

- The proportion of children with special educational needs (incl. autism) placed in special schools varies across countries with inclusive education policies [1-3].
- Autistic children in special schools tend to have lower IQ scores [4, 5].
- Disruptive problem behaviors can lead to transitions from regular to special school [5-7].
- Co-occurring conditions can affect access to education [8, 9].
- Effect of age on school placements and transitions among children with autism not yet identified [4, 10].

Objective

Explore differences in the proportions and characteristic of children with autism in special and regular schools since the implementation of inclusive education policy (2013-2021).

Hypotheses

2. With introduction of education policy, children with autism transfer at later age from regular to a special school than before the policy.

Methods

- Participants: 1523 adult caregivers of autistic children reported on their child (M age = 11.8 yrs (20.6% girls))
- Design: 8-year (2013-2021) study with 8 waves

Data collected via the Netherlands Autism Register (NAR), yearly questionnaires. Nederlands Autisme Register – ENG

- Measures
  - School placement (current type of education)
  - Transition (education attendance reported from one wave to the next)
  - Predictors (gender, family SES, IQ, autism traits, behavioral indicators, co-occurring conditions, age, year (number of the wave), inclusive policy).
- Analysis: hierarchical logistic analysis

Results

School placement:

![Graph showing school placement transitions]

**Fig. 1. Number of children in regular and special school in each wave**

- Proportion of special school placements slightly increased.
- Boys and autistic children with co-occurring conditions, lower IQ scores, or behavioral / peer relation problems were more likely to be placed in special schools.

Findings do not support hypotheses 1.

School transitions:

- Too little transitions to test hypothesis 2 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Transitions per year

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No transition</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular to special</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special to regular</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 383 287 255 247 251 163 185

- Likelihood of special-to-regular transitions remained unchanged, but regular-to-special transitions were more prevalent during the years just after the policy change.

Transitions regular to special:

- Younger autistic children with lower IQ scores, difficulties in behavior, especially behavioral or peer relation problems transferred more often from regular to special schools.

Transitions special to regular:

- The transition from special to regular settings was more common in older autistic children and those with higher IQ scores.

Conclusions

- These results indicate that the inclusive policy had little impact on autistic children’s school placement, and at most led to a delayed drop in referrals to special schools.
- Behavioral difficulties that are perceived as disruptive by the environment may contribute to special school placement.

Discussion

- Commanding legislative mandates and clear pathways in the policy for families of autistic children may contribute to more impact of the policy.
- More knowledge about autism and more awareness of the interaction of the autistic child with their school environment might lead to better understanding of the evolving educational support needs of autistic children throughout life.

References

Note: The preference for ‘person with autism’ (PFL, person first language) and ‘autistic person’ (IFL, identity first language) differs. Therefore, we have chosen to alternate between the two.

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