

Practitioner-focused article

# Successful Transitions Through Transdisciplinary Working: Enhancing Educational Experiences and Wellbeing for Neurodivergent Children and Young People

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## Abstract

Transitions are a critical aspect of human development, encompassing changes such as starting school, moving between classes, moving between activities and people, progressing to further education, progressing to university or vocational courses, leaving home, or navigating healthcare and community settings. This reflective practice-based piece presents a range of effective strategies and resources that have been co-produced and refined through ongoing collaboration with neurodivergent learners and their families. It highlights how integrated, sensitive, and co-produced practices and transdisciplinary approaches, drawing on the strengths and perspectives of learners, parents, educationalists and clinicians, can significantly improve the experience of transitions. This can ultimately enhance effectiveness of professional practice, and lead to improvements in the overall quality of life. Transdisciplinarity is a collaborative, solution-focused approach that transcends traditional discipline specific boundaries to address complex societal challenges. It aims to integrate scientific knowledge with practical, real-world expertise. Grounded in the practice of four independent Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools in the United Kingdom (UK), this article focuses on how transdisciplinary work enhances collaboration, personalization, and consistency, aligned with the strategies and methodologies which are characteristics of a transdisciplinary approach.

## Keywords

Transdisciplinary Approaches, Neurodiversity, Autonomy, Wellbeing, Transitions; SEN

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## 1.0 Introduction

Transitions are a critical aspect of human development, encompassing changes such as starting school, moving between classes, moving between activities and people, progressing to further education, progressing to university or vocational courses, leaving home, or navigating healthcare and community settings. This reflective practice-based piece presents a range of effective strategies and resources that have been co-produced and refined through ongoing collaboration with neurodivergent learners and their families. It highlights how integrated, sensitive, and co-produced practices and transdisciplinary approaches, drawing on the strengths and perspectives of learners, parents, educationalists and clinicians, can significantly improve the experience of transitions. This can ultimately enhance effectiveness of professional practice, and lead to improvements in the overall quality of life. Transdisciplinarity is a collaborative, solution-focused approach that transcends traditional discipline specific boundaries to address complex societal challenges. It aims to integrate scientific knowledge with practical, real-world expertise. Grounded in the practice of four independent SEN schools in the UK, this article focuses on how transdisciplinary work enhances collaboration, personalization, and consistency, aligned with the strategies and methodologies which are characteristics of a transdisciplinary approach.

## 2.0 Literature: Transitions as Universal Experiences

While transitions are universal experiences, they can be particularly demanding for neurodivergent children and young people (CYP), especially autistic young people. Difficulties may arise from heightened anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty (Tu et al., 2025), sensory processing and communication differences, and a lack of predictability and familiarity within environments (Roncaglia, 2022). When transitions are insufficiently supported, they may negatively affect wellbeing, emotional regulation, participation, engagement, and motivation, impacting both short-term and long-term outcomes.

Liñares-de-Marcos et al. (2026) highlight the need for an integrative approach with neurodivergent populations, which is based on participation-based and non-deficit oriented practices, where support promotes autonomy, belonging and growth without enforcing normalization. Neuroaffirmative approaches reshape applied practice by framing neurodiversity not as a deficit to be changed and 'cured', but as a respected neurological difference that enriches diversity.

Pellicano et al. (2013; 2014) explored the views of autistic people, families, practitioners, and researchers regarding their roles as co-producers in research. While the primary aim of research should be contextualizing findings within real-world settings to enhance clinical application, Pellicano and colleagues noted that this view was often not shared by autistic people and their families, highlighting a significant gap in participatory practice.

It is well known that transition from primary to secondary school is a source of stress for autistic learners. Yates et al. (2023) looked at the transition of parental experiences, specifically mothers' perspectives on the psychological impact of the transition to secondary education for their autistic children and their families. Lack of available support and negative psychological impact on the family were reported, highlighting the need for individualized guidance.

In another study by Nuske et al. (2019) parents rated their autistic child's transition to secondary school as extremely difficult, with high levels of anxiety and stress considered the most significant challenge.

Within educational psychology and allied disciplines, there is increasing recognition that effective transition support requires more than isolated interventions or discipline-specific responses (Richter et al., 2019; Stack et al., 2021). This article explores how collaborative transdisciplinary approaches offer a coherent framework for supporting neurodivergent CYPs through transitions within and beyond school settings.

## 2.1 Aims and Core Principles of Transdisciplinary Working

The transdisciplinary framework is grounded in a set of interconnected principles: personalization, collaboration, co-production, and predictability. Predictability is emphasized as a critical protective factor, supporting reductions in anxiety, distress, intolerance of uncertainty, and dysregulation. These principles align with psychological needs of autonomy, belonging, and competence. Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits these three fundamental psychological needs as central elements to nurturing wellbeing, motivation, and sustained engagement.

This article examines how an embedded transdisciplinary model functions in practical settings and how it can be applied within educational contexts at different levels. This involves every staff member, regardless of role or specialty, working together with a school-wide approach. In this model, everyone shares responsibility for supporting learners, with co-production at the core. One goal of transdisciplinarity is to move beyond the limitations of a single discipline, creating new possibilities for organizing knowledge (Blassnigg & Punt, 2013) and, as Johnston (2008) states, "expanding thinking into limitless possibilities."

## 2.2 Defining the Transdisciplinary Team

A transdisciplinary team consists of professionals who come together from the outset to jointly communicate, exchange knowledge, and co-create solutions to complex challenges and facilitate and nurture opportunities for learning. This moves beyond multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary models by reducing professional silos and encouraging shared ownership of assessment, planning, and evaluation.

In practical terms, this means that every staff member is regarded as part of the transdisciplinary team. Educational staff, clinicians, and support professionals work collaboratively rather than hierarchically, embedding supportive strategies and tools across environments, classrooms, and routines. This model reflects broader transdisciplinary frameworks that emphasize integration, reflexivity, and shared purpose (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2016).

## 3.0 Methodology

### 3.1 Identifying Barriers and Differences Through Provision Mapping

Central to effective transdisciplinary working is a clear understanding of the educational and therapeutic offer within a setting. Provision mapping offers an organized approach to recognizing obstacles in accessing learning. Learners' involvement in education planning has been shown to strengthen curriculum engagement (Shogran et al., 2012), improve educational outcomes (Shogran et al., 2015), and enhance quality of life (QoL) indicators (Dyer et al., 2025; Kim, 2019).

Collaboration between educational, clinical and senior leadership teams in identifying the different levels of support needs across the learners' population was implemented. The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021) Code of Ethics and Conduct guidance was followed throughout the drafting and design of this provision mapping in conjunction with institutional ethical approach. This was mapped through several focus group meetings over a period of 3 months. As learners' population changes across academic years, recognizing the need for flexible approaches was also important without taking away the need for clarity and structure. The provision mapping model (s) are widely recognized within the SEND Code of Practice (2014; 2015). As primary statutory guidance in England it mandates all schools to use evidence-based interventions and helps maintain clear records of provision for pupils with special educational needs. Reflective notes from these group discussions which were mainly unstructured, aimed to explore the following:

- What system/mapping can efficiently and efficaciously be used to embed practice evidence-based support in transitions for neurodivergent CYPs?
- How can an inclusive, structured system facilitate enriching transitions points?
- Who should be involved?

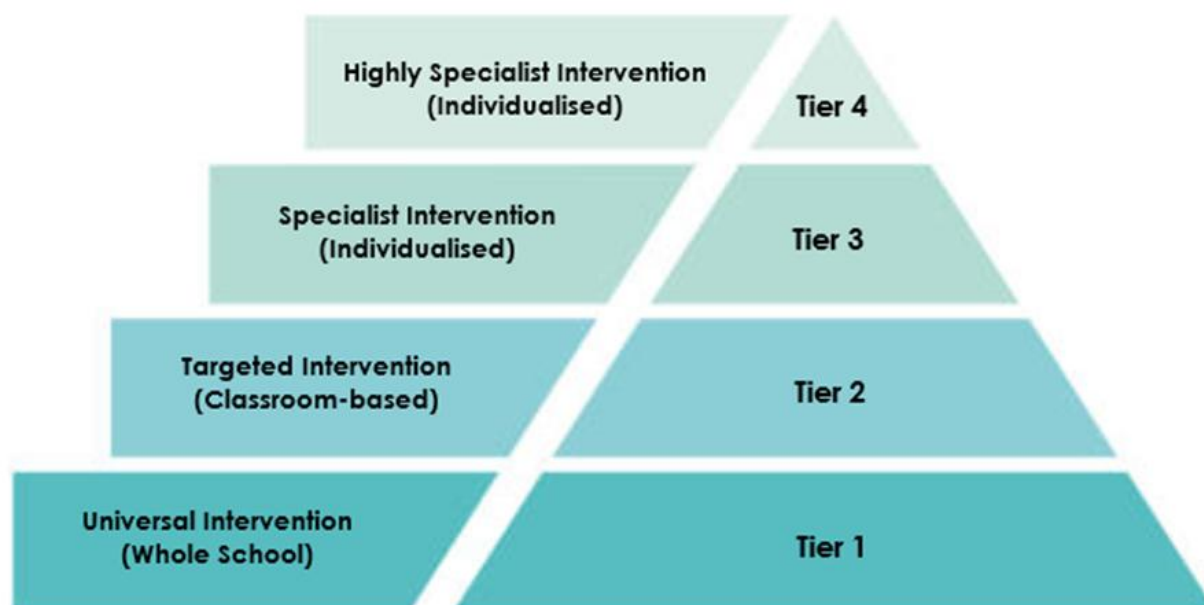
The reflective notes were thematically analyzed, reflected upon holistic and evolutionary perspectives. Neurodivergence is viewed not as a deficit to be cured, but as a natural variation in the human genome and an essential part of our collective adaptability. Within this framework, the issue of transition is reframed from focusing on the individual's response to emphasising the mismatch between their distinct neurological profile and an inflexible environment. The following levels were subsequently mapped.

#### *3.1.1. Provision Mapping is conceptualized across four levels:*

- **Universal (Tier 1):** Support systems available to all learners that form the foundation of inclusive practice. These include environmental adaptations, generic programs, clinical resources, and staff training or advice relating to individual CYPs.
- **Targeted (Tier 2):** Support systems involving direct input from the transdisciplinary team, designed to become embedded and self-sustaining. Examples include clinical groups overseen by clinicians but delivered by education staff, alongside individualized programs and targeted training.
- **Specialist (Tier 3):** Systems where clinicians collaborate directly with individuals or groups alongside key staff. The clinician remains actively involved in embedding, adapting,

monitoring, and adjusting the co-produced support. This level is often applied during baseline assessment when a new learner joins the school.

- **Highly Specialist (Tier 4):** Bespoke systems designed for learners requiring highly individualized adaptations and neuroaffirmative support. These often involve close collaboration with external agencies, such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and/or social services.



**Figure 1.** Provision Mapping for Neurodivergent Learners

This mapping was co-created amongst participating in-house professionals and adapted from existing models used in SEN and the National Health Service (NHS) (NASEN, 2014). While the overarching mapping was not validated directly with autistic learners, the individual practice-based tools used at each tier have been evaluated through consultations with neurodivergent students. This graduated model supports clarity and continuity, reducing fragmentation and enhancing predictability. Learners can move between tiers based on their individual circumstances, pace of learning, and ability to generalize new skills.

## 4.0 Discussion

### 4.1 Practical Strategies and Toolkits Supporting Transitions

A defining feature of the transdisciplinary approach is the consistent use of shared strategies and toolkits designed to support transitions and wellbeing. These resources are purposeful and accessible, supporting both immediate regulation and long-term development.

#### 4.1.1 Solutions Boxes

Solutions Boxes serve as a central resource used regularly across the school. Each box contains materials to support solution-focused practices and regulation, including tension and release exercises, choice boards to support communication differences, relaxation options, and key sensory

tools. These boxes are present in every classroom from Early Years through to post-19 provisions, maintaining consistency across developmental stages. A consistent green label allows for easy identification and reinforces a shared school-wide language.



**Figure 2.** Example of visual label for the Solution Box

#### *4.1.2 Problem-Solving Tools*

All staff members across school sites consistently use structured visual tools to support solution-focused approaches. Booklets and forms guide neurodivergent learners through identifying feelings, locating where a problem occurs, recording relevant details, exploring solutions, and reflecting on resolution. Each page of the booklet covers a single topic, making it easier for individuals with different sensory or information processing needs to use.

Problem-solving choice boards offer a simplified alternative, supporting differentiation, individualization, and personalization. They enable neurodivergent learners to identify solutions without the overloaded cognitive demands of more detailed forms.

Both booklets and problem-solving choice boards can be used at different times and through different developmental stages. The familiarity and effectiveness of these tools are facilitated by the consistency with which these tools are embedded throughout the school day. The key role played by teaching assistants and subject specialist teachers is of relevance throughout the positive and trusty relationships established with the learners. Trust and confidence then translate into embedding those jointly shaped solutions, effectively and positively. This is where learning (and teaching) styles differ from a controlling and authoritarian pedagogy to a participatory, relational and collaborative endeavor.

## **4.2 Supporting Regulation Through Movement**

Yoga, dance, and exercise cards provide activities for regulation and co-regulation (Laurie, 2023). Yoga focuses on calming and grounding, while exercise cards support higher-intensity movement. Dance fosters self-regulation, emotional literacy, and coordination, helping to mitigate cognitive overload. These activities align with occupational therapy sensory-motor programs, providing essential proprioceptive, interoceptive, and vestibular input.

These movement-based practices are most effective when familiarized while the learner is calm, allowing them to be utilized successfully during transitions to new classes or into the community. Breath work is also introduced with daily and familiar routines as part of 'circle time', supporting neurodivergent learners to tap into the parasympathetic nervous system and facilitate self-regulation and co-regulation. Role-modelling these breathing activities provides a visual and

concrete teaching and learning style that is easily accessible and effective. Again, relational approaches between learners and teaching assistants and teachers remain key.



**Figure 3.** Examples of Visual Symbols for Movement Exercises and Yoga

### 4.3 The Leavers' Toolkit

When learners prepare to leave their educational settings and come to the transition to other establishments, the Leavers' Toolkit aims to assist neurodivergent learners as they make the transition to adulthood. It includes a learner's profile, an individual support plan, an individualised communication and sensory profile, and visual representations of preferred items. A photographic 'Record of Achievement' can document key moments, achievements, awards, and significant relationships across the learner time at school.

The physical toolkit may include a backpack, a water bottle, an individualized communication book, a mini-Solutions Box, individualized sensory tools, tension and release activities, yoga resources, and a yoga mat.

Written information about and with the learner in the form of 'passports', can support adults collaborating with the individual in future settings, promoting continuity and understanding beyond school. These physical toolkits can be highly personalized, providing meaningful reminders of learners' accomplishments and developmental journeys.

### 4.4. Applying Transdisciplinary Working Across Contexts

Transdisciplinary approaches are used to support many diverse types of transitions, such as moving within school, moving to a new school, progressing from school to college, relocating to a new home, attending hospital or dental appointments, and participating in community activities. Visual support such as transitions key rings, pictures of the new school, resources, and tailored transition materials enhance predictability and accessibility (Neill-Smith, 2021). These resources and those discussed above, are jointly created and persons' centred tools which emphasise how transdisciplinary embedded support can effectively enhance learners' experiences, skills and development when faced with the challenges associated with transitions.

The approach emphasizes that transdisciplinary working is applicable across settings and contexts. When we focus on supporting individuals as wholes, instead of their parts or solely focusing on their educational achievements, we acknowledge transitions as a natural part of daily life. These approaches are designed specifically for each person, addressing unique requirements and offering

personalized solutions. These resources are created collaboratively with neurodivergent CYPs and their families. A collaborative framework ensures that interventions are not isolated, *done to*, but *with* the learners and embedded throughout the school day and across different environments (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). This collaborative approach strengthens and enhances autonomy, including providing choice and meaningful rationales for learning activities, acknowledging learners' feelings and minimising pressure and control (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

#### 4.5 Lessons Learnt, Limitations and Future Research

There are several lessons and limitations that should be highlighted alongside suggestions for further research. As this is a retrospective, reflective, practice-based piece, the results and recommendations are situated within the context of collaborative practice rather than empirical evidence. Although the author aimed to abide by methodological rigour, the provision mapping and related tools were not empirically validated. This is a consideration for future research designs and methodologies.

However, several positive outcomes for neurodivergent learners were observed when stressors—such as pressure, emotional dysregulation, and communication or sensory differences—were addressed individually. These interventions resulted in higher educational engagement, increased motivation, and more positive transition experiences overall. Moving forward, it may be beneficial to embed standardized measures of wellbeing for neurodivergent learners at various points in their educational journeys (McConachie et al., 2020).

Furthermore, future research should involve revisiting neurodivergent learners who have left the education system. This would allow for an evaluation of the transdisciplinary approach and determine whether a unified pedagogical and clinical therapeutic strategy facilitates a more effective common language across educational, social, and school communities.

#### 5.0 Conclusion

Transitions are inevitable, but their impact is shaped by the quality of support provided, particularly when wellbeing is addressed through collaborative, transdisciplinary practice. Embedded transdisciplinary work offers a coherent and practical framework for supporting neurodivergent CYPs through change (Roncaglia, 2021). By moving beyond isolated clinical or educational silos, this approach treats the learner as a whole person existing within a complex ecosystem.

By identifying barriers, prioritizing predictability, and remaining purposeful, educational settings can enhance wellbeing, motivation, engagement, and overall quality of life. This enhances equality in accessibility, celebrates diversity, and nurtures inclusion. Key observed contributions included improved accessibility, knowledge co-production with families, and the development of holistic support ecosystems. Recommendations focus on mandating collaborative planning time and implementing neurodiversity-affirming and neurodiversity-sensitive training. Transdisciplinary approaches demonstrate how collaboration across roles and disciplines can support positive transitions—not only within schools but across the wider contexts that shape the lives of neurodivergent individuals and their families.

Key recommendations for potential change include:

1. Shift from 'management' to 'environmental design': Rather than attempting to correct a learner's response to change, schools should implement transdisciplinary audits of both physical and sensory environments. This proactive approach identifies and eliminates potential stressors before transitions occur.
2. Establish 'shared language' protocols: Discipline-specific jargon should be replaced with a unified, person-centered vocabulary shared by parents, educators, and clinicians. This ensures neurodivergent CYPs experience a single, consistent, and coherent support narrative across all life contexts.

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## Data Accessibility

No human subject's data was collated for the writing of this article.

## Ethics and Consent

No ethics approval or consent was required for the completion of this article. These were operational workflows rather than external empirical research.

## Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare in respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Authors' contributions

IR: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Investigation, Writing – review and editing.

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