



Where are they now?

A long-term follow-up study of students with autism graduating from Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) satellite classes

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Project Summary

This summary outlines the findings of a research study undertaken to ascertain whether Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) satellite class program is achieving its core goal of successful long-term outcomes for students with ASDs in more inclusive educational placements. Satellite classes are ASD-specific classes for five-six students operated by Aspect in mainstream education 'host' schools. The aim of the model is to provide a stepping-stone for students with ASDs to transition to more inclusive educational placements. The satellite class program commenced in 1992 and there are currently 73 satellite classes in mainstream schools.

The first stage of the research comprised a survey questionnaire sent to families of students who had graduated from satellite classes between 1994-2002; the second stage utilised a multiple-case study design to obtain comprehensive, qualitative data for a smaller group of satellite class graduates.

122 questionnaires were distributed to families with a response rate of 52% (N = 63). Results revealed that 70% of students entered a satellite class during kindergarten, the remainder in grades 1 – 4. The mean length of stay was 22 months. 70% of the students transitioned to regular classes, 28.5% to non-ASD specific support classes in regular schools and 1.5% to a school for students with a moderate degree of intellectual disability. 94% of families reported their child received transition support from Aspect. 92% of families reported that receiving schools developed specialised educational support during the year following transition, which gradually decreased over the years.

At the time of the research, 78% of students who transitioned to support classes were in similar placements, 11% in more supported options and 11% in more inclusive placements (regular class). 89% of graduates who transitioned directly to regular classes were still in similar placements. 92% of parents reported their satisfaction with the satellite class program as good to excellent.

Parent satisfaction (N = 63)

Service	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Aspect Satellite class program	42	13	3	3	2
Transition planning from satellite class	26	16	12	4	5
School following transition from satellite class	15	25	7	11	5
Current educational/work placement	13	20	13	11	6

Analysis of the optional comments part of the survey suggested three key themes; 1) the value of satellite classes as providing a firm foundation for their child's development, 2) the ongoing importance of collaboration between staff at all periods of their child's education and between parents and educators, and 3) issues around secondary schooling such as planned transition from primary school, teacher knowledge of autism and the increasing importance of social skills and the influence of the peer group.

Four young adults, whose parents had given prior consent to participate in the second stage of the investigation, were selected in sequential order of graduation to be involved in the case studies. This methodology derived insight into the experiences of the earliest satellite class graduates who had transitioned over a decade previously. The broad findings conform to the statistical data from the parent survey, in that the four students entered the satellite class between the ages of four and a half and five and a half, were enrolled an average of 18 months and graduated to regular classes in grade one or two.

The case studies also provide a more detailed account of the students' progress, current functioning and quality of life. The four students made rapid progress in satellite classes; progress with language, communication and social skills were remarked on particularly by parents, and intellectual ability tested in the average or above range. Analysis suggested that the provision of information on the child and on ASD to the receiving school staff appeared to promote the utilisation of appropriate support strategies following transition from the satellite class. Student progress was maintained throughout primary school; albeit with some ups and downs in one case, when he changed primary schools. In high school three students made even better progress, two especially in social terms.

At the time the research was conducted when the young people were aged 19 or 20-years-old, three had completed their HSC, two of them were enrolled in tertiary education and the third working full-time prior to going to a further education college. The fourth

young man had left high school at the end of grade 9, mainly due to anxiety caused by teasing and bullying. To his credit, after some employment training and work he returned to his studies and at age 20 is completing his HSC at a senior college, where his parents report he is better supported, secure and happier about his life. Two of the other young people have also had full or part-time employment before and/or during their tertiary studies. Two of the young men have a wide circle of friends from school, university and outside interests. The other two have fewer social groups but have interests and get on with people at college/university. One of the young men also has a girlfriend. Perhaps one of the most surprising elements was just how well three of the young people described friendship in terms of trust and companionship. All also have interests and have obtained drivers' licences.

The findings of the research appear to endorse the satellite class model. 92% of parents who completed the survey reported their satisfaction with the satellite class program as good to excellent. The value of satellite class placement was also noted in the optional comments on the survey and was one of the key factors that were deemed to contribute to student progress across all four in-depth case studies. An overwhelming majority of satellite class graduates maintain a similar type of placement in the long-term to that accessed on transition.

The research results also support the theory (Howlin, 2005), which suggests factors that predict success in adulthood for more able individuals with ASDs may involve language and social skills, educational support, peer support, family support and specific skills that allow individuals to find their 'niche' in life and that it is likely to be a combination of these factors. The acquisition of social and communication skills, strong support throughout school and a supportive peer network all contributed to the sense of wellbeing of the young men involved in the case studies. In particular, the importance of carefully planned educational transitions and collaboration between special and regular educators and with parents were highlighted.

“I suppose my social life has just gone off the charts”. He has several groups of friends, those from university, those who share musical interests, his soccer friends and a few old school friends he “still catches up with”. He suggested that with close friends, as opposed to acquaintances there was a bond and trust, “where you would feel comfortable talking about your private life or secrets”. Tom aged 20.

Case study

TOM

Tom¹ was aged 20 years and 8 months at time of interviews and had graduated from a satellite class 14 years previously. He had recently commenced his third year at university on a full-time basis.

Early history

During early childhood Tom was referred for developmental assessment due to concerns about his lack of speech and social and behavioural issues. He was identified with autism and a mild degree of developmental delay at age three-years-old. Following diagnosis he received home visits from Aspect early intervention teachers, attended pre-school part-time and received speech therapy. He subsequently enrolled in an Aspect school part-time for one year from age four and a half.

Satellite class

Whilst Tom had made good progress, when he transferred to a satellite class at age five and a half his language was delayed and he was shy and withdrawn; his IEP prioritised these areas. Reading ability was used to aid verbal comprehension and facilitate social skills. His class participated in afternoon small group activities with the kindergarten. Within 12 months Tom made significant gains in language and IQ testing revealed he was in the average range of ability. With increasing time spent in the mainstream he was beginning to respond to his peers and the kindergarten and first grade teachers remarked on what a delightful, amenable child he was.

Tom's parents elected to keep him in the school where the satellite class was located as they fairly lived close by and he had begun to make some friends at the school. The teachers worked closely and Tom spent more and more time in the first grade class until he enrolled full time mid-year after 18 months in the satellite class.

Primary and secondary school

Tom made good progress through primary and secondary school and teacher aide support was not provided after first grade. He got on well with teachers and was liked by his classmates. Tom received many school awards for his attitude and achievement at high school. When it came to the Higher School Certificate (HSC), the only special assistance he received was some tuition on writing techniques from the

special education teacher. During primary school, Tom sometimes played with peers in the playground, peers were invited to play at his home and vice versa, and he participated in extra-curricular activities. Tom was involved in more social interaction, had more friends and wider circle than during childhood and was involved in a range of extra-curricular and leisure activities.

Current

Tom did well in the HSC and at the time of the interview was undertaking third year Bachelor of Arts degree/Diploma of Education. Tom spoke clearly and eloquently about university. He particularly enjoyed the special education units and believed he possessed the insights to be able to teach children with autism. He found university completely different to high school. "To be honest with you, I absolutely love it" – It had also been good getting to know people with different values and attitudes.

Tom has had a part-time job as a retail assistant for three years and drives himself to work and university. He has a range of sporting, musical and recreational activities and the move to university heralded another broadening of his social network.

He suggested that with close friends, as opposed to acquaintances there was a bond and trust, "where you would feel comfortable talking about your private life or secrets". Tom also has a girlfriend who he met at university and has been seeing for several months. Throughout the interview Tom sounded natural and displayed good conversational ability and awareness of the listeners' perspective.

Factors in Tom's progress

Tom's parents suggested that the major factor that contributed to his progress was their commitment and involvement. This included his early speech therapy, community access, involvement in team sports and encouraging friends to visit. A second factor was enrolment in the satellite class – "After he started in the satellite class it just seemed to click" – he had benefited from the language rich learning environment, intervention for social skills and time spent in the regular class. It was also evident that Tom's parents had a good working relationship with his primary and secondary school teachers. Finally, a developing social network has provided support, interest and companionship.

¹ Pseudonym

References

- Howlin, P. (2005). Outcomes in autism spectrum disorders. In F.Volkmar, R. Paul, A. Klin & D.J. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of autism and pervasive developmental disorders* (3rd Edition, pp. 201-222). New Jersey: J.Wiley.
- Roberts, J.M.A., Keane, E. & Clark, T.R. (2008). Making inclusion work: Autism Spectrum Australia's Satellite Class Project. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 41 (2), 22-27.

The Aspect vision for research

Aspect is committed to improving the lives of individuals with ASDs through service provision and research. As the largest ASD-specific service provider in the country and one of the largest in the world, Aspect is well positioned to facilitate and conduct research. Aspect undertakes and supports research to evaluate Aspect's and other programs, practices and interventions in order to provide improved services and interventions for children and adults with ASDs. Aspect also promotes research at state and national levels and facilitates tertiary students' research. As our mission is to develop our knowledge of what can be done to support individuals with ASDs, research findings will also make a significant contribution to the field of international research into ASDs. Aspect requires ongoing funding to support these key initiatives and is always keen to talk to potential new partners and donors.



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