

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Moving up to secondary school is a rather significant change that children have to go through and this happens at the same time when students are also experiencing puberty (Al-Ghani & Kenward, 2009; Hyland, 2005; Alexander, 2004). Akos (2010, p. 126) has made the remark that “aside from infancy, no other phase of life is characterized by greater, more rapid, and diverse development than early adolescence”. Therefore, as stated by Potter (2009) pupils are dealing with a huge amount of change in a relatively small amount of time and due to this reason academic standards often plateau for some time after the transition to secondary school or there can even be a dip in academic attainment during transition (Jindal-Snape, 2010). As the above have been formulated regarding the mainstream population, it can be easily understood that this transition can be even more challenging for students having special needs, such as teenagers with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) (Steer & Horstmann, 2009). However, transition from primary to secondary school can be a particularly traumatic experience for students with autism, due to their inflexible way of thinking which leads to high levels of stress and behavioural outbursts (Lennard-Brown, 2003). Al-Ghani & Kenward, (2009, p. 9) express the opinion that this inescapable step in school life can be “*a time of great fear and dread*” for students with autism. A social activity group mixing children with social communication difficulties with mainstream peers could be argued to be likely to help in the transition process because students will be supported before and during this transition through the creation of a student network where emphasis will be given on the protection of the most vulnerable students. It is worth noting that the possibility of being bullied is a major cause of concern for all students, whether they have special needs or not (Potter, 2009; Alexander, 2004). More specifically the main aim of this research project is to establish whether being part of a Social Art Group (SAG) supports children with autism during their transition from primary to

secondary school through an arts activity programme with mainstream peers. The particular research questions were:

*A) In relation to the perceived children's inter-group relationships*

- i) Will there be found mutuality of expressed feelings between children of the Social Art Group?
- ii) If yes, will there be found mutuality of expressed feelings between students with C.D. and their mainstream peers?

*B) In relation to the approach*

Will there be any differences found in the assessment of children's concerns and expectations before and after each part of the approach, as these are reported by the children themselves?

*C) Regarding peer relationships of SAG students in secondary school*

- i) Will the relationships being developed in the SAG in primary school be maintained in secondary school?
- ii) If yes, will these be helpful in the transition of children to secondary school, according to the perspective of children themselves, their parents and the relevant practitioners?

*D) Regarding the experience of taking part in SAG*

Will the experience of taking part in the SAG be perceived as positive, according to the perspective of children themselves, their parents and the relevant practitioners?

The design of the research project included a series of art group activities taking place before and after the transition within a school setting; participants were children with social communication difficulties and mainstream peers. The perceptions of parents and teachers and other mainstream pupils were also sought. Activities were about a range of aspects related with the transition. Engagement and progress were monitored by questionnaires and reflective activities. This would then allow developments pre and post transition to be monitored through comparisons between questionnaire responses and through emerging friendship and activity patterns.

Regarding the form of this thesis, it is being consisted by 10 chapters. Chapter 2 is related to literature review and in chapter 3 methodology is being described and justified. In Chapter 4 some baseline data are being presented. Subsequently there are

4 chapters of results (5-8). In chapter 9 the most significant results are being highlighted. In the final chapter there is a discussion about the conclusions which can be derived from this research project.

In the part of literature review some basic information about autism will be provided, the disorder's definition and its suggested etiology. The variety of educational interventions available to children with autism will be studied, too. However, the focus of this chapter will be on the topic of transitions for individuals with autism and how this is related to the rationale of the present research project. In the final part of introduction, the aim and the research questions of this project are being presented.

Methodology is being presented in the third chapter. In this part of the thesis the whole procedure of the research project is being described and the methodological options are being justified. Additionally, the activities of SAG sessions are being reported in a rather detailed way; this information is included in the thesis in this way, because it provides guidance to other practitioners on how to combine a certain transitional theme with a specific art activity or group game. If this research project is to be replicated by a practitioner or a researcher, this information will be very helpful.

In the fourth chapter some baseline information is being presented about all students who participated in the Social Art Group. Data have derived from 2 diagnostic tools: Spence Test (1995) and "The Pragmatics Profile of Everyday Communication Skills in Children" of Dewart and Summers (1995). Spence Test examines the social skills of children, such as social competence with peers and social worries. In this case data are being collected by students, teachers and parents. The semi-structured interview of Dewart and Summers (1995) gives emphasis on the following factors of everyday communication skills in children: A) Communicative functions, such as range of functions expressed, B) Response to communication, such as type of input typically responded to, C) Interaction and conversation, such as child's contribution to initiating and maintaining interaction and D) Contextual variation in accordance with time, topic, situation and partner. Data are collected by parents or teachers. Furthermore, baseline data are being gathered through an initial questionnaire which examined children's ability to cope with changes and move

from primary to secondary school, according to the views of students themselves, their parents and their teachers.

In the fifth chapter research results are related to the educational programme which was implemented. More specifically the following research question is being examined: “Will there be any differences found in the assessment of children’s concerns and expectations before and after each part of the approach, as these are reported by children themselves?” The themes examined in SAG sessions were: secondary school building (exterior), relationship with peers, new uniform, new teachers, lunch time, subjects and secondary school building (interior).

The sixth chapter is associated with sectors A and C, as it is focused on peer relationships developed in the SAG. Initially these are being explored in primary school and afterwards it is examined whether these relationships are maintained in the secondary setting. In this chapter research questions are being addressed in 2 ways, by comparing students’ self-reports in 3 stages and by analyzing video-recording of group sessions.

Chapter 7 refers to Sector C (effectiveness of peer relationships developed in SAG during adjustment to secondary school setting). The research questions examined are the following: 1) “Were the relationships being developed in the SAG maintained in secondary school, according to the perspectives of children themselves, their parents and the involved practitioners?” and 2) “Were these relationships helpful in the transition of children to secondary school, according to the perspectives of children themselves, their parents and the involved practitioners?” Hence, in this chapter participants’ perspectives are being presented.

The following chapter, chapter 8, is associated with Sector D. It explores the experience of taking part in SAG by the point of view of all students, professionals and parents. More specifically the research question examined is the following: “Was the experience of taking part in the SAG perceived as positive, according to the views of all SAG students, the professionals involved and parents of all SAG students?”. This whole chapter is devoted once again on exploring participants’ perspectives.

In chapter 9 the most salient results are being presented synoptically and the thesis ends with the chapter of discussion (chapter 10), the references and the appendices.