Hi, everyone. It's a pleasure to join this Autism MOOC. My name’s Chris Varney. I'm national director of an organisation called the I CAN Network, which is a movement of young people on the spectrum driving a rethink of autism from 'I can't' to 'I can'.

I guess, firstly, I just wanted to define what the transitions to focus on are. Really, for anyone, for any young person, transitions from kindergarten to primary school, from primary school... So, depending on where you are in the world listening, I'm in the Australian context, so that occurs for an 11- or 12-year-old into what we call our secondary system - that's known as elementary school in countries like the US, so we're looking at the years of about 10 to 14 commonly, if you look at different education systems around the world. There's that transition, and then thirdly, the transition from school to a post-school qualification - so, that's around the ages of 17, 18, heading into either a tertiary qualification of some sort and then, of course, into employment and into the labour market. And so these four transitions, if you like, are really key to focus on, because young people on the autism spectrum tend to fall through the cracks, and I want to unpack why that is. It's...that case because, for a lot of young people on the spectrum, when they appear out of sync, whether it might be that their talents and strengths are different to the norm, if they're not sports stars, if they're not geniuses, sometimes it can be hard to find your place in a school. And schools very much are built around a particular curriculum that every kid needs to receive. Some schools are not adaptive to the individual needs of the individual learner. And this is where I think young people on the autism spectrum can really change their schools, if we leverage their individual strengths and tailor our curriculum around their talents so that we actually really get to see the 'awe' in 'autism'.

My work on transitions involves focusing on the 10 to 14 years and on the, kind of, 17 to 25 years, where university, post-school qualifications and employment all take place. And this is a really key time for young people across the board. Firstly, when you're looking at the kind of 10 to 14 years, we know based on data that across young people in general, from the transition to middle school to
high school, confidence drops from about 72% to 55%. Now, that's just for your everyday young people. For young people on the spectrum, who often appear quite different and have different needs, they can experience quite low self-esteem because they're often forgotten and not catered for, and sometimes the system doesn't really work for them on an individual basis. And what's really key to focus on is creating platforms for these kids that make them more visible in their school and community life, and what that looks like is leveraging their strengths. So, you might have a kid that has a unique obsession. It might be on astronomy. It might be on animals. The more you profile the uniqueness, authenticity and incredible memory and detail that that kid might have about that obsession, and turn it from something that might seem a little bit weird in a school into something that's quite wonderful, you are doing a world of good for that kid.

The four key strengths of young people on the spectrum that I see all the time in my work in schools is their amazing memory, their detail, their visual perception or linguistic skills, and also their incredible ability to focus. Being on the spectrum - and for me, I have Asperger's - being on the spectrum simply involves living a focused life, and when you can get inside the different orbit of these kids and really start to understand them and see the different way that their mind processes information, then you catch, you know, what some people call 'the autism bug' and you relentlessly want to understand the incredible uniqueness and authenticity that they have. And I really think that their creativity can change a school and can change the human perception and awareness of kids around them and expand their understanding of what the human being can achieve. But it does always start with meeting that young person where they're at and creating a positive profile for them in the school that sees them going from just someone that's tolerated to someone that's celebrated.