A gradient border model for cell fate decisions at the neural plate border

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Abstract

The vertebrate 'neural plate border' is a transient territory at the edge of the neural plate containing precursors for all ectodermal derivatives: the neural plate; neural crest; placodes; and epidermis. Elegant functional experiments in a range of vertebrate models have provided an in-depth understanding of gene regulatory interactions within the ectoderm. However, these experiments conducted at tissue level have raised seemingly contradictory models for fate allocation of individual cells. Here, we carry out single cell RNA sequencing of chick ectoderm from primitive streak to neurulation stage, to explore cell state diversity and heterogeneity. We identify and characterise the dynamics of gene modules containing key factors known to regulate ectodermal cell fates, allowing us to model the order in which these fates are specified. Furthermore, we find that genes previously classified as neural plate border specifiers typically exhibit dynamic expression patterns and are biased towards either placodal or neural crest fates. Instead, given its transient and heterogenous characteristics, the neural plate border should be defined based on the co-expression of alternative placodal and neural crest gene modules. Finally, we propose a 'gradient border' model for cell fate choice at the neural plate border, with the probability of cell fate allocation closely tied to the spatiotemporal positioning of cells.

Introduction

The vertebrate nervous system is arguably the most complex organ of our body. During development, it arises from only three progenitor populations: the neural plate generates the entire central nervous system, while neural crest and sensory placodes jointly form the peripheral nervous system. Placode derivatives are confined to the head contributing to sense organs and cranial ganglia, while neural crest cells form along the entire body axis to generate various cell types including neurons and glial as well as parts of the craniofacial skeleton, cartilage and teeth (for review: Baker & Bronner-Fraser, 1997; Baker & Bronner-Fraser, 2001; Grocott et al., 2012; Patthey et al., 2014; Pla & Monsoro-Burq, 2018; Prasad et al., 2019; Simoes-Costa & Bronner, 2015).

The neural plate becomes morphologically distinct shortly after gastrulation. However, neural, neural crest and placode precursors continue to be intermingled at its edge, in a territory termed the neural plate border (NPB) that is characterised by the co-expression of neural and non-neural markers as well as so-called NPB specifiers (Pla & Monsoro-Burq, 2018; Roellig et al., 2017; Streit, 2002; Thiery et al., 2020). As the neural plate invaginates, placode precursors remain in the surface ectoderm, while neural crest cells are largely incorporated into neural folds from where they delaminate and migrate to their final destination. Although the induction of these three fates has been studied for decades, some of the most fundamental questions remain unresolved. For example, we do not know when and how these lineages segregate, whether they do so in a specific order and how individual cells make these decisions.

Modulation of different signalling pathways plays a crucial role in controlling the fate of all ectodermal cells. FGF signalling is required for the specification of neural, neural crest and placode precursors and for positioning the NPB (Ahrens & Schlosser, 2005; Litsiou et al., 2005; Londin et al., 2005; Monsoro-Burq et al., 2003; Streit et al., 2000; Streit & Stern, 1999; Stuhlmiller & García-Castro, 2012; Wilson et al., 2000; Yardley & Garcia-Castro, 2012). While BMP signalling must be inhibited for neural development (Hemmati-Brivanlou et al., 1994; Linker & Stern, 2004; Londin et al., 2005; Sasai et al., 1995), it is necessary for placode precursor formation at gastrulation, but must be switched off thereafter (Ahrens & Schlosser, 2005; Kwon et al., 2010; Litsiou et al., 2005). Likewise, neural crest cells need BMP activity early, but unlike placodes continue to do so as they are specified (Barth et al., 1999; Kwon et al., 2010; Liem et al., 1995; Marchant et al., 1998; Steventon et al., 2009). Finally, Wnt activity is required for neural crest cell induction (Garcia-Castro et al., 2002; Steventon et al., 2009) but must be inhibited for neural and placode precursors to form (Heeg-Truesdell & LaBonne,

2006; Litsiou et al., 2005; Patthey et al., 2008). These signals activate different transcription factor networks in a temporally and spatially controlled manner that in turn impart cell identity and have therefore been termed fate ‘specifiers’. For example, *Msx1* and *Pax3* have been implicated as NPB specifiers (Milet et al., 2013; Monsoro-Burq, 2015; Plouhinec et al., 2014), while *Pax7* (Basch et al., 2006) and *Six1* (Brugmann et al., 2004; Chen et al., 2009; Christophorou et al., 2009; Ozaki et al., 2004) are involved in neural crest and placode precursor specification, respectively. These factors appear to act in feed forward loops, upregulating their own expression while simultaneously repressing factors that specify alternative fates (for review: Grocott et al., 2012; Thiery et al., 2020).

Based on these studies combined with tissue transplantation experiments, two apparently contradictory models for the segregation of neural, neural crest and placodal fates have emerged. The ‘binary competence model’ suggests that an initial step in lineage segregation entails a subdivision of the ectoderm into neural/neural crest and placode/epidermal territories (Pieper et al., 2012; Schlosser, 2014). This implies a closer relationship of neural crest cells with the central nervous system and of placodes with the epidermis. In contrast, the ‘NPB model’ suggests that cells at the border of the neural plate have mixed identity and retain the ability to generate all ectodermal derivatives until after neurulation begins (Roellig et al., 2017; Schlosser, 2014; Thiery et al., 2020). Studies in *Xenopus* have taken this idea a step further, revealing that unlike other ectodermal cells, neural crest or NPB cells retain pluripotency markers and that this is key for their ability to contribute to multiple fates (Buitrago-Delgado et al., 2015; Prasad et al., 2012). In support of this idea, the NPB region is initially characterised by co-expression of neural and non-neural markers (for review: Grocott et al., 2012; Pla & Monsoro-Burq, 2018; Thiery et al., 2020). Fate specifier genes are activated within this territory in partially overlapping patterns to resolve into distinct domains as neurulation begins. While both models are attractive and provide working hypotheses, the underlying experiments were analysed at cell population, rather than at single cell level. They therefore do not address how individual NBP cells make decisions, nor whether they are multipotent or a population of mixed progenitors that are already biased towards their later identity. Recent findings have proposed that prior to fate commitment cells show increasing levels of heterogeneity in gene expression and do not exhibit a definitive transcriptional signature (Soldatov et al., 2019). It is therefore possible that NBP cells represent such undetermined progenitor cells.

Recent studies in chick have begun to explore these questions. Single cell analysis at the NPB reveals considerable heterogeneity of gene expression: factors previously thought to be fate-specific are co-expressed in individual cells even as late as neural tube stages (Roellig et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2022). Furthermore, lineage tracing using a ‘neural-specific’ Sox2

enhancer shows that Sox2⁺ cells can contribute not only to neural tissue but also to neural crest and epidermis (Roellig et al., 2017). Together, these findings suggest that cell fate allocation at the NPB occurs over a much longer developmental period than previously thought and that NPB cells retain plasticity until early neurulation. However, although some factors have been identified, the underlying molecular mechanisms of how individual cells make decisions at the NPB remain poorly understood.

Here, we explored the transcriptional changes as cells transit from the neural plate border at early primitive streak to definitive neural, neural crest and placodal fates at single cell level. In total we present single cell RNAseq (scRNA) data for 17,992 high quality cells. Rather than using 2-3 molecular markers to assign cell identity, we established a binary knowledge matrix using previously published *in situ* hybridisation expression data. This allows us to classify cells at each developmental stage, despite the high levels of heterogeneity observed. We find that prior to head fold stages cells do not fall into transcriptional distinct groups but are characterised by graded and partially overlapping gene expression. Their organisation largely reflects their position along the anterior-posterior and medial-lateral axis in the embryo. As expected, cell diversity increases as development proceeds, with a division of neural and non-neural fates becoming apparent at the first somite stage together with the emergence of neural crest cells. By the 8-somite stage, neural, neural crest and placodal cells are largely segregated, although even at this late stage we find cells with heterogenous expression profiles.

Our analysis reveals that NPB cells can already be identified at primitive streak stages by the overlapping expression of neural and non-neural genes, suggesting that this cell state is established before NPB specifiers are activated. Using a gene module approach, we identify groups of genes with dynamic changes in our dataset that are characteristic for neural, neural crest and placodal fates. Comparing co-expression of whole gene modules (rather than individual transcripts) reveals that NPB cells co-express gene modules which later become restricted to placodal or neural crest states. This suggests that NPB cells are in an undecided transcriptional state and may have the potential to give rise to both (or more) fates. Interestingly, although we did not find NPB cells as defined by classical NPB markers at ss4, we did identify cells that co-express competing placodal and neural crest programmes. These cells connect segregating cell populations, resembling of previously characterised bridge cells in the differentiating murine neural crest which exhibit high heterogeneity prior to segregation (Soldatov et al., 2019). Here, we propose that ‘bridge cells’ between placodal and neural crest populations continue to be plastic, maintaining the ability to contribute to different fates. Overall, our analysis has led us to revisit the definition of the NPB and propose that NPB cells

may be better defined by the co-expression of competing gene modules rather than a particular gene signature.

Results

Classification of ectodermal cells using a binary knowledge matrix of known marker genes

Neural, neural crest and placode progenitors arise from the embryonic ectoderm. However, how individual cells diversify and the sequence and timing of these events remain to be elucidated. To capture their segregation, we carried out 10x Genomics single-cell mRNA sequencing (scRNAseq) on cells taken from a broad region of the chick epiblast at six developmental stages: HH4/4 (primitive streak), HH5 (head process), HH6 (head fold), HH7 (1 somite), somite stage (ss) 4 and ss8 (Figure 1A). These stages were chosen because they encompass the initial formation of the neural plate to the beginning of neurulation when these fate decisions are thought to take place. After integration across batches, stringent quality control and removal of contaminating cell populations (see methods and Figure 1–figure supplement 1A-I), we captured a total of 17,992 high quality cells with approximately 2500 – 4000 cells per stage and an average of 3924 genes per cell. Dimensionality reduction and UMAP embedding showed that cells were organised primarily by stage (Figure 2E). Later stages displayed higher cell diversity as compared to earlier stages where most cells were transcriptionally similar (Figure 1B-E and Figure 2A-D).

Typically, scRNAseq cell states are classified using a small number of definitive marker genes which exhibit mutually exclusive expression patterns. However, this approach is difficult to apply to the NPB for several reasons. Firstly, the early NPB cannot be classified using definitive markers as it emerges in the region of overlap between neural and non-neural genes. Secondly, the NPB is a transitory state through which cells are thought to pass prior to acquisition of any of the four ectodermal fates (neural, neural crest, placodal and epidermal). Finally, cells at the NPB appear to be highly heterogeneous, with precursors for the different ectodermal fates found intermingled, even at late stages of neurulation (Bhattacharyya et al., 2004; Roellig et al., 2017; Streit, 2002; Williams et al., 2022). To overcome these challenges, we categorised cells using a binary knowledge matrix based on expression data obtained from the literature (Supplementary File 1). We examined available *in situ* hybridisation data of 76 genes with known regionalised expression patterns and binarized their expression within each

defined cell state. This allowed us to define a total of 24 cell states spanning primitive streak to neural tube stages.

We first unbiasedly clustered cells from each developmental stage at a high resolution to ensure capturing the full diversity of cell states (Figure 1–figure supplement 1J). Clusters were then classified based on the similarity between their gene expression and the knowledge matrix (see methods). Next, cells from all stages were clustered together and cell state labels transferred to the entire data set (Figure 2F). This classification approach successfully identified 22 distinct cell states within the ectoderm. As expected, cell diversity increases as development proceeds. Early NPB and early neural cell states can already be identified at primitive streak stages, while placode progenitor and neural crest states emerge at head process and ss4, respectively (Figure 1B and Figure 2A-B).

Figure 1. Cells at stages HH4 – HH6 reflect the anterior-posterior and medio-lateral axes in the embryo. (A') Dorsal view schematics of chick embryo at stages HH4-ss8 depicting the ectodermal tissue region dissected for 10x scRNAseq (red dotted line). Purple shading illustrates previously characterized region of *Pax7* expression (Basch et al. 2006). **(A'')** Schematic of a 1-somite stage (HH7) chick embryo illustrating the pre-placodal region (PPR),

neural crest (neural crest) and neural tube (NT). **(B-D)** UMAP plots for cells collected at HH4 /4 (primitive streak), HH5 (head process), HH6 (head fold) stages. Cell clusters are coloured and labelled based on their semi-unbiased cell state classifications (binary knowledge matrix available in Supplementary File 1). **(E)** Dot plots displaying the average expression of key marker genes across cell states at HH4, HH5 and HH6. The size of the dots represents the number of cells expressing a given gene within each cell population. **(F)** Feature plots revealing the mediolateral segregation of key marker genes at HH6.

Cell states emerging from primitive streak to head fold stages

To explore the changes in cell diversity within the embryonic ectoderm over time, we compared cell states present at different stages and identified the time point when each emerged. We visualised cell transcriptomes in low dimensionality space using UMAPs, in turn allowing us to infer relationships between cell states and explore the distribution of gene expression across the dataset. We first examined stages HH4-HH6 to characterise events as the neural plate is established and placodal and neural crest cells are thought to be specified.

An early NPB state is identified at primitive streak stages prior to the expression of NPB specifiers

By primitive streak stage, mediolateral (M-L) gradients of molecular markers demarcate pre-neural and non-neural territories within the chick epiblast (Pera et al., 1999; Rex et al., 1997; Sheng & Stern, 1999; Streit et al., 2000; Streit et al., 1998). At HH4, unbiased clustering clearly organises cells in a pattern reminiscent of this M-L axis (Figure 1B; from left to right) as evidenced by the expression of node (*ADMP*), pre-neural (*Yeats4*, *Sox3*, *Sox11*) and non-neural (*Dlx5*, *Bmp4*, *Msx1*, *Tfap2a*) genes (Figure 1B, E and Figure 1-figure supplement 2A). Cell states can be broadly characterised based on combinatorial gene expression (Figure 1E) and we identify five cell states: node, early neural (eN), early neural plate border (eNPB), non-neural ectoderm (NNE) and extraembryonic ectoderm (EE) (Figure 1B). While some genes are shared between many cells, early neural plate cells are defined by high levels of pre-neural transcripts while the non-neural and extraembryonic ectoderm are characterised by increased non-neural gene expression. Notably, we find that an early NPB state can be identified by the co-expression of both neural and non-neural genes. Thus, NPB cells are already apparent prior to the differential upregulation of genes previously characterised as NPB specifiers (*Msx1*, *Pax7*, *Tfap2a*, *Bmp4*, *Dlx5*, *Pax3*) (Basch et al., 2006; Ezin et al., 2009; Hong & Saint-Jeannet, 2007; McLarren et al., 2003; Rothstein & Simoes-Costa, 2020; Streit & Stern, 1999) (for review: Simoes-Costa & Bronner, 2015; Thiery et al., 2020).

The first emerging NPB and PPR cells have regional identity

At HH5, cell positions in the UMAP continue to reflect organisation along the M-L axis in the embryo (Figure 1C), but new transcriptional states emerge. Whilst non-neural ectoderm cells display a similar expression profile at HH5 compared to HH4, neural plate cells differ from early neural cells in their expression of definitive neural (e.g., *Sox2*) and regional markers (Figure 1E; Figure 1–figure supplement 2B). Like at HH4, many cells continue to co-express neural and non-neural transcripts (Figure 1–figure supplement 2B). Within the latter cell group, we observe the upregulation of PPR genes (*Six1*, *Eya2*; Figure 1C, E: aPPR, anterior PPR) and for the first time NPB specifiers (*Msx1*, *Pax3*, *Pax7*; Figure 1C, E: pNPB, posterior NPB). These observations correlate well with gene expression in the embryo. *Msx1* is initially expressed in the extraembryonic and non-neural ectoderm, and together with *Pax7* begins to be upregulated in the NPB thereafter (Basch et al., 2006; Streit & Stern, 1999), while PPR markers are first expressed at HH5. Notably, the first NPB cells to emerge have posterior character, while placode precursors have anterior identity based on their expression of *Gbx2* and *Six3*, respectively (Figure 1E; see also below).

Anteroposterior organisation of cells at head process and head fold stages

Cells with distinct anteroposterior (A-P) character are first observed at HH5 through the restricted expression of various homeobox transcription factors. *Rax* and *HoxB1* are highly confined to distinct cell groups, whilst in contrast *Six3* and *Gbx2* exhibit broader negatively correlated expression gradients across cell clusters with some degree of overlap (Figure 1E and Figure 1–figure supplement 2B). The organisation of cells within the UMAP reflects the A-P expression gradients of these genes in the embryo (Chapman et al., 2002; Hidalgo-Sanchez et al., 2005; Ohuchi et al., 1999; Paxton et al., 2010). The overlap of A-P factors was used to distinguish different NP, PPR and NPB regions during unbiased cell state classification (Supplementary File 1).

Within the NP we can distinguish intermediate neural plate (iNP) states from the anterior and posterior neural plate (aNP, pNP) and from early caudal neural (eCN) states. However, within the PPR and NPB we identify only anterior (aPPR; *Six3*⁺) and posterior (pNPB; *Gbx2*⁺) cell states, respectively. While in UMAPs aPPR cells are located between the NNE and anterior NP, the pNPB cluster resides between the iNP and pPPR clusters (Figure 1C, E Figure 1–figure supplement 2C), reflective of both its A-P and M-L position *in vivo*.

Between HH5 and HH6, posterior *Gbx2*⁺ PPR (pPPR) cell states emerge (Figure 1D), as do PPR cells that appear to lack regional identity. At this stage, *Otx2* and *Gbx2* expression domains in the embryo abut (Steventon et al., 2012), suggesting that cells with generic PPR character might be intermingled with those already biased towards axial identity and either

retain the potential to contribute to multiple axial levels or will later become intermediate PPR cells.

Together, our data show that the emergence of cells with divergent transcriptional profiles resembles patterning of the ectoderm *in vivo*. However, unbiased cell clustering forces cells into discrete clusters which may not fully reflect heterogeneity in gene expression and cell diversity. Indeed, our single cell data reveal the heterogenous nature of gene expression: markers are broadly expressed and are not confined by cluster boundaries or by neighbouring expression domains (Figure 1F-J, Figure 1-figure supplement 2C). Despite this heterogeneity, our cell classification approach successfully identifies increased ectodermal cell diversity over time, with neural, posterior NPB and anterior PPR cells emerging when the definitive neural plate forms. Importantly, the relative positions of these cell states in the UMAPs reflect their location in the embryo.

Increasing cell diversity from 1-somite to 8-somite stages

At HH7, the neural folds begin to elevate indicating the start of neurulation, while during early somitogenesis neural crest cells start to migrate and placode precursors begin to diversify. We therefore sought to characterise the transcriptional changes at single cell level as neural, neural crest and placodal fates emerge.

Emergence of neural crest cells and segregation of neural/non-neural fates

Following clustering, we identified two major superclusters at HH7, one containing neural tube and neural crest and the other placodal and future epidermal clusters (Figure 2A). These superclusters appear to be largely separate, both by their UMAP embedding and the restricted expression of definitive fate markers (Figure 2A, D). Whereas at earlier stages many cells co-express non-neural and neural markers (Figure 1E, F, J), at HH7 cells expressing non-neural/placodal (*Dlx5*, *Six1*) and neural transcripts (*Sox21*, *Sox2*) are largely confined to their respective supercluster (Figure 2-figure supplement 1A). It is at this stage that anterior NPB cells can first be identified transcriptionally, and together with posterior NPB cells they connect the two superclusters (Figure 2A; aNPB, pNPB).

Adjacent to the NPB clusters, we observe a neural crest cell cluster expressing early definitive neural crest markers including *Tfap2b*, *Snai2* and *Axud1* (*Csrnp1*) alongside NPB markers (*Msx1*, *Pax7* and *Tfap2a*) (Figure 2D; NC and Figure 2-figure supplement 1A). Thus, neural crest cells first emerge as a distinct cell population at HH7. Although many genes are shared between the NPB and neural crest cell clusters, NPB cells also express PPR and non-neural

markers (*Six1*, *Eya2* and *Dlx5*) which are in turn downregulated in neural crest cells (Figure 2D and Figure 2–figure supplement 1A). Furthermore, we find that *Msx1* and *Pax7* are never strongly expressed within placodal cell clusters. It is therefore possible that these NPB specifiers may not represent NPB markers, but rather an early bias towards neural crest fate.

‘Bridge cells’ identified as putative undetermined cells undergoing fate decisions during neurulation

At ss4 and ss8, NPB cells can no longer be identified using the above criteria. Instead, we observe an increasing diversity of cells classified as placodal, neural crest or neural (Figure 2B, C). Within the neural cell population, forebrain, midbrain, and hindbrain (FB, MB, HB) clusters are clearly distinguishable. *Six3* and *Gbx2* expression define cells with fore- and hindbrain identity, respectively, whilst the upregulation of the dorsal midbrain marker *Wnt4* (Hollyday et al., 1995) and mid/hindbrain boundary marker *Pax2* (Hidalgo-Sanchez et al., 1999) defines the midbrain-like cells (Figure 2D and Figure 2–figure supplement 1B). As development progresses, neural, neural crest and placode cells become increasingly distinct, with neural crest cells beginning to express a suite of definitive neural crest markers, including *Sox10* in the delaminating neural crest (dNC) cluster (Figure 2D and Figure 2–figure supplement 1B, C).

Despite the apparent segregation of neural, neural crest and placodal fates during ss4 and ss8, connecting cells bridge PPR clusters with both neural crest and forebrain clusters, as well as neural crest with midbrain cell clusters in a four-way pattern reflecting their A-P and M-L segregation *in vivo* (Figure 2B, C). To predict the directionality of transcriptional change within these bridge cells, and hence their potential developmental trajectory, we performed RNA velocity analysis (Bergen et al., 2020; La Manno et al., 2018). This analysis predicts that bridge cells move away from cluster boundaries, towards definitive cell states (Figure 2G, H). This observation implies that bridge cells do not have a definitive transcriptional signature and may retain plasticity to contribute to different fates, despite the absence of a distinct NPB state from ss4 onwards.

Together our data show that whereas cell states at HH4–HH6 exhibit broad overlapping gene expression, definitive fate markers are upregulated from HH5 onwards and subsequently gene expression is refined at the boundaries between cell clusters. At HH7 and ss4, placodal, neural crest and neural fates begin to segregate. However, even as the neural tube closes, bridge cells continue to straddle cluster boundaries; these cells may be transcriptionally indeterminate and therefore still actively undergoing fate decision processes.

Figure 2. Increased cell diversity and lineage segregation from HH7 to ss8. (A-C) UMAP plots for cells collected at HH7 (1 somite stage), ss4 (4 somite stage) and ss8 (8 somite stage). Cell clusters are coloured and labelled based on their semi-unbiased cell state classifications

(binary knowledge matrix available in Supplementary File 1). **(D)** Dot plots displaying the average expression of key marker genes across cell states at HH7, ss4 and ss8. The size of the dots represents the number of cells expressing a given gene within each cell population. **(E)** UMAP plot for the whole dataset (HH4-ss8 combined) coloured and labelled by stage. **(F)** UMAP plot for the whole dataset coloured by cell state classifications. Cell state classifications were calculated independently for each stage and transferred across for visualisation of the full combined dataset. **(G-H)** UMAP plots for ss4 and ss8 overlaid with RNA velocity vectors depicting the predicted directionality of transcriptional change. Cells are coloured by cell state classification (shown in B and C). Schematics summarise the key fate segregation events taking place at these stages predicted by RNA velocity analysis.

Dynamic changes in gene module expression over time

Many transcriptional regulators and their interactions have been implicated in cell fate decisions as the ectoderm is specified and differentiates into its derivatives. However, in this context studies have largely taken a gene candidate approach. To explore the full transcriptional dynamics of both known and new transcriptional regulators during the specification of neural, neural crest and placodal cells, we modelled the dynamics of whole gene modules rather than individual candidate genes. This allows us to investigate transcriptional dynamics in an unbiased manner whilst simultaneously minimising the loss of potentially important factors.

Defining neural, neural crest and placodal gene modules

To investigate the segregation of neural, neural crest and placode fates, we first sought to identify gene modules that characterise each population. Gene modules are groups of genes that display similar expression profiles across a dataset. We calculated gene modules using the Antler R package (Delile et al., 2019), which iteratively clusters genes hierarchically based on their gene-gene Spearman correlation. This approach reveals 40 modules each showing highly correlated gene expression across all stages (HH4-ss8). To focus on gene modules which may include candidates for fate segregation, we included only those that are differentially expressed between any cell state and the rest of the dataset, and then filtered to remove those with differential expression between sequencing batches. Finally, since our data show that the segregation of neural, neural crest and placodal cell states is almost complete at ss8 (Figure 2C), we kept those gene modules that show differential expression between at least one of the three fates at ss8 (see methods). This resulted in nine modules that were considered further (Figure 3—figure supplement 1A and Figure 3—Source Data 1). Of these, four gene modules (GM21-24) are specifically expressed in the PPR at ss8, one (GM13) in

neural crest cells, and the remaining four (GM7, 9, 11, 20) are upregulated primarily in neural clusters (Figure 3—figure supplement 1A).

When examining the genes within each module, we noticed that GM20 and GM22 include genes with widespread expression or expression in the lateral mesoderm and/or the extraembryonic region (*Epas1*, *Nkx2-5*, *Tnnc1*, *Pgk1*) (Adams et al., 2008; Bell et al., 2004; Liberatore et al., 2000; Ota et al., 2007) (Figure 3—Source Data 1). We therefore removed these modules from subsequent analysis. GM7 contains well characterised anterior markers including *Otx2*, *Six3* and *Pax6*, whilst GM11 contains midbrain/hindbrain markers including *Pax2*, *Nkx6-2* and *Wnt4* (Figure 3—Source Data 1). We find that at ss4 and ss8 these gene modules are indeed upregulated in the forebrain/aPPR and midbrain/hindbrain, respectively (Figure 3—figure supplement 1A). To focus on our analysis on the segregation of neural, neural crest and placodal cells rather than on A-P patterning, A-P restricted modules were removed. The remaining five modules show broadly pan-neural (GM9), pan-placodal (GM23, GM21, GM24) or neural crest cell (GM13) expression at ss4 and ss8 (Figure 3A).

Latent time analysis suggests late emergence of neural crest cells

Given the cellular heterogeneity observed at early timepoints, discrete developmental stages do not necessarily accurately represent the developmental progression of individual cells towards a given fate. In contrast, latent time can measure the biological clock of individual cells as they differentiate and thus represents the order of cells along a developmental trajectory. To explore the expression dynamics of the five selected gene modules as neural, neural crest and placodal fates emerge, we first ordered cells across latent time using scVelo for the entire dataset (Figure 3B and Figure 3—figure supplement 1B). To investigate the segregation of all three fates, three separate trajectories need to be distinguished. To do this we calculated the probability of each cell to transit towards one of three terminal states (fate absorption probability) (Figure 3—figure supplement 1C). These probabilities were obtained using CellRank (Lange et al., 2022), which leverages RNA velocity and transcriptomic similarity information to predict transitions between cells. Mapping the fate probabilities of each cell onto UMAP plots of the full dataset (Figure 3C-E, see Figure 3B and Figure 2E-F for reference) shows that cells with low latent time values (i.e., early cells) have low probabilities of becoming neural, neural crest or placodal cells. As cells ‘age’ their fate probabilities increase as they become more transcriptionally like the terminal state. Unlike placodal and neural, neural crest fate probabilities are only high in ‘late’ cells (Figure 3B-C), reflecting the fact that defined neural crest cell clusters only appear at HH7.

Figure 3. Gene module dynamics reveal key differences between the segregation of the PPR, neural crest and neural fates. (A) Heatmap of gene modules that display fate-specific expression (full list of gene modules available in Figure 3-Source Data 1). Gene modules were first unbiasedly filtered based on their differential expression between cell states (see methods and Figure 3-figure supplement 1A). Gene modules were further manually filtered based on

expression patterns described in the literature (see results section: *Defining neural, neural crest and placodal gene modules*). Key genes of interest are highlighted on the right (for full gene list see Figure 3–Source Data 1). **(B)** UMAP plot of the full dataset (HH4–ss8) showing cell latent time values. **(C–E)** UMAP plots of the full dataset showing the fate absorption probabilities of each cell towards one of the three defined terminal states: neural crest, neural and placodal. **(F–J)** Gene module dynamics plots and feature plots for 5 gene modules: GM24, GM21, GM23, GM13 and GM9. Gene module dynamic plots display generalised additive models (GAMs) of scaled gene module expression across latent time. GAMs are weighted by the fate absorption probability of each cell towards one of the three terminal states (placodal, neural crest and neural). Feature plots show average scaled gene module expression on UMAPs of the full dataset.

Gene module dynamics reveals key differences in the activation of the transcriptional programmes associated to neural, neural crest and PPR specification

Having predicted the developmental trajectory of cells using scVelo and CellRank, we next modelled the expression of the five selected gene modules as a function of latent time with the aim to characterise their dynamics. Gene expression dynamics were modelled using generalised additive models (GAMs). GAMs were chosen because gene expression is highly dynamic and does not change linearly over time. For each gene module we fitted three separate GAMs, one for each fate (Figure 3F–J). The three fates were distinguished using the previously calculated fate absorption probabilities. This modelling approach reveals dynamic changes of gene expression. Three gene modules – GM9, GM13, GM23 – are initially inactive and are upregulated at different points across latent time in cells with neural, neural crest and placodal character, respectively (Figure 3H–J).

GM9 becomes upregulated in all neural clusters and includes neural markers like *Lmo1* and *Sox21* (Figure 3A, I; Figure 3–Source Data 1). Although the expression of different genes within this module correlates broadly, there is some gene-gene variation. For example, *Lmo1* is the first gene to be expressed and exhibits highly dynamic expression over time (Figure 3A). It is first found at HH5 within the eCN, pNP and iNP, before being upregulated across the entire neural plate at HH7 and ss4. At ss8, *Lmo1* is specifically downregulated within the MB. In contrast, *Sox21* is first upregulated at HH5/6 and is consistently expressed throughout all neural cell clusters (Figure 3A).

In contrast, modelling reveals that GM13 is upregulated in cells with neural crest identity (Figure 3J). Indeed, it contains well known neural crest markers *Pax7*, *Snai2*, *Sox10* and *Tfap2b* (Figure 3A, Figure 3–Source Data 1) and is initially broadly activated in the NPB and neural crest clusters at HH7. At ss4 and ss8, this module remains strongly expressed within

neural crest and delaminating neural crest clusters (Figure 3A). Within GM13 individual genes are activated at different time points: *Pax7* is the first gene to be expressed in the pNPB at HH5, while *Sox10* starts to be expressed only from ss4 onwards.

Finally, modelling the expression dynamics of GM23 shows that it is activated early and becomes upregulated in cells with placodal character across latent time (Figure 3H). This prediction is supported by the fact that GM23 is highly expressed in PPR clusters at ss8 and contains *bona fide* placodal genes like *Six1* and *Eya2* (Figure 3A, Figure 3–Source Data 1). At HH4, most GM23 genes are not expressed, but are broadly activated at HH5 in PPR, non-neural and NPB clusters, where they remain active until becoming restricted to PPR cells at ss4 (Figure 3A). Comparing the onset of activation of these three gene modules across latent time reveals a clear temporal order with the placodal module being activated first, followed by the neural and neural crest gene modules.

In contrast to these modules, modelling of GM24 and GM21 shows that they are initially expressed in all three cell populations before being rapidly downregulated within neural crest and neural cells (Figure 3F, G). Indeed, genes in GM24 are broadly expressed across the epiblast at HH4, and then become gradually restricted to PPR, non-neural and NPB clusters at HH6/7, and to PPR cells at ss4/8 (Figure 3A). GM21 displays similar dynamics but is restricted to non-neural clusters somewhat earlier (HH5; Figure 3A). Although some genes within these epiblast modules have been described as non-neural/PPR specific based on *in situ* hybridisation (*Tfap2c*, *Bambi*, *Homer2*, *Tspan13*) (Bell et al., 2004; Hintze et al., 2017; Mehdizadeh et al., 2021; Reichert et al., 2013; Rothstein & Simoes-Costa, 2020), others are found to be expressed within the early neural territory (*Epcam*, *Sall4*, *Cited4*) (Barembaum & Bronner-Fraser, 2007; Bell et al., 2004; Trevers et al., 2021) (Figure 3–Source Data 1).

In summary, modelling the expression dynamics of selected gene modules provides new insight into the sequential activation of fate-specific developmental programmes, as well as proposing key differences in the mechanism by which neural, neural crest and placodal cells are specified. We show, using an unbiased gene module approach, that a placodal gene module is activated first, followed by neural and neural crest modules. While neural and neural crest modules are specifically activated in the relevant cell clusters alone, two modules that are later restricted to the PPR are initially broadly expressed across the epiblast. We therefore propose that the specification of neural and neural crest states may require the downregulation of epiblast modules which later become confined to placodal cells.

Redefining the NPB cell state

NPB cells are thought to retain the potential to give rise to neural, neural crest and placodal lineages, and recent single cell analysis suggests that they can do so even at late neurulation stages (Roellig et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2022). So far, our analysis reveals an early NPB cell population identified by the overlapping expression of non-neural and early neural markers at primitive streak stages, albeit being transcriptionally highly heterogeneous. In contrast, *Msx1* and *Pax7* which have previously characterised as NPB specifiers, are only upregulated at the NPB at head process stage, have posterior character and are largely absent from placode precursors (Figure 1E, F, Figure 1—figure supplement 2B, C). At ss4, NPB cells can no longer be identified based on the expression of these specifier genes, yet we find continued presence of bridge cells that connect neural, neural crest and placodal cell clusters. Thus, among the key questions remaining are whether NPB cells have a unique transcriptional profile and whether bridge cells have NPB character with the potential to give rise to multiple fates.

To explore this idea, we focused on the decision between neural crest and placode precursors. Neural crest and placode specific transcription factors cross-repress each other while enhancing their own expression (for review: Thiery et al., 2020). It is therefore likely that co-expression of such genes may cells which are still plastic. We therefore examined the co-expression of neural crest and placode specific gene modules in a subset of cells composed of neural crest, placodal and NPB cell states between HH5-ss8 (for workflow explanation see Figure 3—figure supplement 2).

Defining neural crest and placode specific gene modules

First, we sought to identify gene modules that are specifically restricted to neural crest and placode cells at late stages. GM analysis in cells collected from ss8 identified 15 modules (Figure 4 and Figure 4—Source Data 1) that are differentially expressed in at least one cell state. GM9-13 and GM16-17 are characteristic for neural cells with different A-P identities. Seven gene modules are absent from neural populations but expressed in placodal cells (GM4-6), neural crest (GM1-2) or both (GM7-8). GM5 contains well characterised placodal markers including *Six1*, *Homer2* and *Znf385c* (Figure 4—Source Data 1) and is expressed in both aPPR and pPPR clusters. This module was therefore selected as a pan-placodal module. GM2 is expressed in both neural crest and delaminating neural crest clusters (Figure 4; NC, dNC), contains neural crest specifiers like *FoxD3*, *Snai2*, *Sox9*, *Pax7* and *Msx1*, as well as the Wnt ligands *Wnt1* and *Wnt6* (Figure 4—Source Data 1) and thus represents a *bona fide* neural crest specific module. Although GM1 contains multiple neural crest markers (*Ets1*,

Sox10, Sox8; Figure 4–Source Data 1), it is only expressed in delaminating neural crest cells (Figure 4) and was therefore excluded for further analysis. Thus, GM5 and GM2 were considered as pan-placodal and pan-neural crest module and used for co-expression analysis.

Figure 4. Gene modules calculated at ss8. (A) Heatmap showing gene modules calculated from ss8 cells and then filtered to include only those that are differentially expressed between cell states (see methods; full list of gene modules available in Figure 4–Source Data 1). GM5 and GM2 are highlighted as the selected pan-placodal and pan-neural crest gene modules used for subsequent analysis in Figure 5.

Placodal and neural crest bridge cells exhibit NPB-like co-expression

To investigate the co-expression of these modules in NPB cells and their derivatives, we first selected NPB (aNPB, pNPB), neural crest (NC, dNC) and PPR (aPPR, pPPR, PPR) cell states from HH5-ss8 (Figure 5A, red cells; thereafter referred to as NPB subset). Next, we re-clustered this subset of cells based on the expression of all genes (Figure 5B). UMAP analysis suggested a bifurcation of neural crest and placodal fates taking place between HH7 and ss4, with NPB cells located at the boundary between neural crest and aPPR cell clusters (Figure 5B, C).

To examine the relative expression of pan-placodal and pan-neural crest modules across the entire cell subset, we ordered cells according to the expression ratio of both modules and

grouped them into 10 evenly sized bins (Figure 5D and Figure 5—figure supplement 1). Cells at the extreme ends exclusively express the pan-neural crest (Bin 1) or the pan-placodal gene module (Bin 10). As expected, these cells represent mostly delaminating neural crest or placodal cells, respectively. However, cells in Bin 3 show equal expression levels of both modules and contain a mixture of NPB, PPR and neural crest cell states (Figure 5D). We then mapped Bin 3 cells back to the NPB subset UMAP (Figure 5B) and find that they indeed correspond to NPB cells located specifically between PPR and neural crest cell clusters (Figure 5E). This contrasts with Bin 1 and 10 cells, which map to the opposite ends of the UMAP and their respective fates (Figure 5E). Thus, most cells expressing intermediate levels of both neural crest and placodal gene modules are classified as NPB.

Bin 3 cells contain a mixture of cells collected from HH5-ss8. To evaluate which cell states express similar levels of pan-neural crest and pan-placodal modules at different developmental times, we mapped Bin 3 cells back to the UMAPs of individual stages (Figure 5G). At HH5 and HH6, neural crest cell states are not defined yet (Figure 5F colour coded according to Figure 1B-D and Figure 2A-C), and Bin 3 cells consist of a mixture of aPPR and pNPB cells (Figure 5F, G). At HH7, Bin 3 contains almost no PPR cells, instead these cells are mostly neural crest and NPB (Figure 5F, G). At ss4, the number of cells expressing similar levels of the pan-placodal and pan-neural crest modules decreases sharply. Although at this stage a NPB state based on the expression of NPB specifiers cannot be classified, Bin 3 cells are found at the boundary between neural crest and PPR clusters. In fact, they represent the bridge cells predicted to be in an undetermined transcriptional state by RNA velocity (Figure 2G). Once placodal and neural crest lineages are largely segregated at ss8, only very few scattered cells express similar levels of pan-neural crest and pan-placodal modules (Figure 5G).

The analysis above only focuses on cells of the NPB subset expressing pan-placodal and pan-neural crest modules at a similar level, which are likely to be transcriptionally indeterminate and not yet committed to either of the two fates. To identify cells with varying levels of co-expression and those that may transit to either fate, we visualised cells that co-express these modules at different levels. We calculated pan-neural crest and pan-placodal module co-expression per developmental stage and filtered cells below a minimum threshold of 0.3 (Figure 5H). At HH5/6 almost all cells classified as NPB and placodal cells co-express both modules above the threshold. However, this changes at HH7, when co-expressing cells are largely restricted to the NPB and neural crest clusters (Figure 5H). By ss4, they are only found in bridge cells between placodal and neural crest clusters (Figure 2G).

Given the different proportions of cells co-expressing these modules at each stage, we investigated whether the distributions in co-expression levels varied between them (Figure 5I). From the early to late stages, the distribution gradually changes from a normal distribution towards a negative binomial distribution. This suggests that at HH5-HH7 cells co-express pan-neural crest and pan-placodal modules at similar levels, while only a small proportion of co-expressing cells express these modules at high levels later.

Our analysis proposes that NPB cells are transcriptionally indeterminate, co-expressing gene modules that characterise both neural crest and placodal cells. This expression profile is likely to endow them with the potential to give rise to both, if not all NPB fates. The proportion of these cells decreases over time, but bridge cells at ss4 retain this characteristic and are therefore likely to retain bi- or multipotency even as the neural tube closes.

Figure 5. Cells at the NPB co-express placodal and neural crest gene modules. (A) UMAP plots of from each stage with all PPR, neural crest and NPB cells highlighted in red, which were selected as the ‘NPB subset’. **(B)** UMAP plot of the NPB subset coloured by cell state. **(C)** UMAP plot of the NPB subset coloured by developmental stage. **(D)** Average

normalized expression of placodal and neural crest gene modules (GM5 and GM2, respectively) identified at ss8 (see Figure 4). Cells are ordered by their expression ratio of these two modules and coloured by cell state. Cells were grouped into 10 evenly sized bins (background shaded regions). Three bins (1, 3 and 10) are overlaid to highlight cells with high neural crest/low placodal (bin 1), equivalent levels of both (bin 3) and high placodal/low neural crest (bin 10) gene expression. **(E)** UMAP plots of the NPB subset displaying the cells captured within bins 1, 3 and 10. **(F-H)** UMAP plots from each developmental stage, displaying only cells in the NPB subset (equivalent to red cells in A). **(F)** Cells are coloured by cell state. **(G)** Cells which are captured in bin 3 are highlighted. **(H)** Co-expression analysis of the pan-neural crest and pan-placodal modules (see methods). Cells which co-express both modules above 0.3 are coloured. **(I)** Histograms revealing the distribution of co-expression of the pan-neural crest and pan-placodal modules at each developmental stage. At later stages (ss4-ss8), the distribution of co-expression shifts from a normal to a negative binomial distribution.

A temporal hierarchy of gene module expression in neural crest and placode precursors

To investigate the mechanism by which NPB cells segregate into the neural crest and placodal fates, we modelled gene module dynamics across the NPB subset alone (for workflow explanation see Figure 3—figure supplement 2). Previous modelling dynamics (Figure 3) analysed gene modules across the whole dataset to uncover sequential activation of placodal, neural and neural crest gene programmes at higher level. In contrast, focusing on the NPB subset provides a higher gene module resolution and consequently allows modelling of multiple placodal and neural crest gene modules and establishing the order in which different genes are activated.

As before, we first defined gene modules characteristic for neural crest and placodal cells. Gene modules were calculated using the neural crest, placodal and NPB cell state subset from HH5-ss8 as described above. Only 10 modules with differential expression between the neural crest and placodal fates were considered. These were filtered further to include only those that contained genes defined in the binary knowledge matrix as present in neural crest, delaminating neural crest or PPR cell states. This analysis identified three modules (GM12-14) upregulated in placodal and four in neural crest cells (GM40 and GM42-44) between HH7 and ss8 (Figure 6E, Figure 6—Source Data 1).

To predict cell trajectories towards neural crest or placodal terminal states prior to GM modelling, we performed scVelo analysis on the NPB subset (Figure 6B-D). As before, we used velocity and CellRank to calculate latent time and determine the probability that each cell

will become neural crest or placodal (Figure 6A-D). In turn, latent time and fate probabilities were used to model gene module dynamics (Figure 6F-H).

Of the placodal modules, GM14 and GM12 are expressed as early as HH5. GM12 is expressed throughout both aPPR and pNPB and contains early non-neural/PPR markers like Gata2/3 (Figure 6E, Figure 6–Source Data 1). At HH6, GM12 is downregulated in the NPB and remains confined to the PPR clusters until ss8. Unlike GM12, GM14 is initially restricted to the PPR and only activated in the NPB at HH7. At ss4 and ss8 its expression is confined to the PPR, with a higher expression in anterior cells. This module contains pan-placodal genes like Dlx5/6 as well as anterior markers Six3 and Pax6 (Figure 6E, Figure 6–Source Data 1). GM13 is the last placodal module to be activated and contains the definitive placodal transcripts *Six1* and *Eya2*. It is first expressed at low levels at HH6 before being broadly activated across the PPR at HH7 through to ss8. We also observe weaker expression of this module within NPB cells at HH7 (Figure 6E). To visualise the sequential activation of these modules across latent time, we used the same approach described above (Figure 3F-J), whereby gene expression of each cell was weighted based on its placodal fate probability. This analysis shows that GM12 is activated before GM14 and GM13 in latent time (Figure 6F). Whilst the expression of GM12 and GM14 does not change dramatically, GM13 is highly upregulated over latent time within the placodal cells (Figure 6F).

The four neural crest gene modules each contain *bona fide* neural crest transcriptional regulators including *Msx1*, *Zic1*, *Zeb2*, *Lmx1b* (GM40), *Pax7*, *Snai2*, *Axud1*, *Foxd3*, *Tfap2b*, *Sox9* (GM42), *Sox5*, *Id1/2* (GM44) and *Sox10*, *Ets1*, *Lmo4* and *Sox8* (GM43) (Figure 6E and Figure 6–Source Data 1). Interestingly, our analysis groups these factors unbiasedly into four modules, and visualisation of their expression across latent time weighted by neural crest fate probability shows a clear sequential activation from GM40 to GM42, GM44 and GM43 (Figure 6G). GM40 is activated first, initially broadly across aPPR and pNPB clusters at HH5 and HH6, before becoming restricted to neural crest and NPB clusters from HH7 onwards. By ss8, it is downregulated in the delaminating neural crest population. GM42 and GM44 are highly upregulated only in neural crest and delaminating neural crest cells, with GM42 first expressed at HH7 and GM44 at ss4. Lastly, GM44 is activated specifically within the delaminating neural crest cells at ss4 where it is further upregulated at ss8 (Figure 6E). This order suggests a hierarchical relationship between these factors in the neural crest gene regulatory network.

Figure 6. Co-expression analysis suggests neural crest specification requires downregulation of placodal genes. (A) UMAP plot of the NPB subset with cells coloured by latent time. (B) UMAP plot with cells coloured by cell state classifications and overlaid with RNA velocity vectors depicting the predicted directionality of transcriptional change. (C-D) UMAP plots showing the fate absorption probabilities of each cell towards the specified

terminal states (placodal or neural crest). **(E)** Heatmap showing gene modules calculated across the NPB subset (full list of gene modules available in Figure 6-Source Data 1). To identify gene modules potentially involved in placodal or neural crest specification, gene modules were filtered to include those that show differential expression between placodal and neural crest cell states (see methods). Genes specified as neural crest or placodal in our binary knowledge matrix (Supplementary File 1) were selected as bait genes to further filter the gene module list for visualisation. **(F)** Heatmap displaying predicted scaled expression of placodal gene modules (GM12, GM13 and GM14) within the placodal lineage across latent time. Gene expression was predicted by fitting a GAM which models scaled gene expression as a function of latent time. Gene expression was weighted in the GAM using the placodal fate lineage absorption probability. **(G)** Heatmap displaying predicted scaled expression of neural crest gene modules (GM40, GM42, GM43 and GM44) within the neural crest lineage across latent time. Gene expression was modelled as in (F) but using neural crest fate absorption probabilities to weight gene expression. **(H)** Gene module dynamics plots for all 7 gene modules: GM40, GM42, GM44, GM43 (neural crest) and GM12, GM14, GM13 (placodal). Gene module dynamic plots display GAMs of scaled gene module expression across latent time calculated as in (G) and (H). GAMs were weighted by the fate absorption probabilities of each cell towards either placodal or neural crest terminal states.

While gene module selection was based on prior knowledge of marker genes, this analysis also allows us to predict novel factors with similar expression profiles. These include *Nfkb1*, *Ass1* and *Fam184b* in placodal cells and *Enc1*, *Rftn2* and *Olfml3* in neural crest clusters. Modelling their expression across latent time reveals highly conserved dynamics with known factors (Figure 6-figure supplement 2), thus raising the possibility that they may play a role in placode and neural crest cell specification.

In summary, analysing gene module dynamics across the NPB subset identifies reveals the sequential activation of different co-regulated genes in placodal and neural crest cell. Many genes within these modules have been previously characterised and are known to form part of the neural crest or placode gene regulatory network (for review: Grocott et al., 2012; Pla & Monsoro-Burq, 2018; Schlosser, 2006, 2014; Simoes-Costa & Bronner, 2015; Thiery et al., 2020). This unbiased approach groups these factors and predicts a hierarchical order, as well as identifying new candidate factors which may play important roles in the segregation of the neural crest and placodal fates (Figure 6-figure supplement 2).

Emergence of neural crest cells may require the downregulation of definitive placodal genes

Various factors within the placodal and neural crest gene modules have previously been implicated in conferring neural crest and placodal identity. To assess their temporal activation,

we modelled their dynamics across both developmental trajectories simultaneously and assessed their co-expression in individual cells.

As with the previous analysis (Figure 3F-J) we found that gene modules varied in their expression dynamics across both fates over latent time. Of the neural crest modules, GM40 (containing *Msx1* and *Zic1*) is the first to be activated in both the neural crest and placodal cells before being downregulated in placode precursors at HH6/7 (Figure 6E, H). In contrast, GM42, GM44 and GM43 are exclusively upregulated in the neural crest lineage (Figure 6H). Of the placodal modules, GM12 and GM14 are initially highly expressed in both cell types and then downregulated in the neural crest lineage. In contrast, GM13 is not initially expressed, but starts to be upregulated in both neural crest and placodal cells as time progresses, before being rapidly downregulated in neural crest cells as its expression increases in placode precursors. Interestingly, GM13 contains definitive placodal markers *Six1* and *Eya2* which in turn repress neural crest factors including *Pax7* (Brugmann et al., 2004; Christophorou et al., 2009). Its initial upregulation within the neural crest cells suggests that their specification requires the downregulation of this module. In contrast to GM13, placodal cells never upregulate definitive neural crest modules (GM42-44).

Since neural crest precursors initially appear to express the late placodal module GM13, we sought to investigate which cells co-express GM13 with each of the four neural crest modules. As expected from the expression of the early neural crest module GM40 in placodal precursors, we find broad co-expression of both modules (Figure 6I) within neural crest and placodal cell clusters both, at the bifurcation point and in segregated clusters. In contrast, the later neural crest modules are not co-expressed with GM13 extensively within the placodal branch. However, we do find co-expression within the neural crest branch. This suggests that some residual placodal gene expression remains in the neural crest clusters even at ss8. This supports our previous finding that the specification of the neural crest state may require the downregulation of placodal gene modules (Figure 3).

Figure 7. Gradient border model resolves conflicting models of lineage segregation at the neural plate border. (A) Schematic illustrating the neural plate border model. This model illustrates that cells at the neural plate border are multipotent and able to give rise to neural, neural crest, placodal and non-neural ectoderm (NNE) lineages. **(B)** Schematic illustrating the dual competence model. This model suggests that the neural plate border is first defined into non-neural/placodal and neural crest/neural competence domains prior to further subdivision into each of the final four cell lineages. **(C)** Schematic illustrating the gradient border model. This model proposes a probabilistic model of cell fate allocation which is intrinsically linked to the spatiotemporal positioning of a cell. We suggest that cells located within the medial neural plate border (yellow cell lineage) will give rise to neural and neural crest, cells within the lateral neural plate border (blue cell lineage) to non-neural ectoderm and placodes, whilst subsets of cells (including bridge cells) will remain in an indeterminate state and continue to give rise to all four lineages even at late stages of neurulation (green cell lineage). Shaded background colours represent the cell state space.

Discussion

The regulation of cell fate specification at the NPB has been extensively studied in a range of model systems, giving rise to a wealth of knowledge regarding transcriptional regulators and their interactions. Nevertheless, our understanding as to how individual cells undergo cell fate decisions has been limited by our inability to study transcription and gene regulation at a single cell level. Recent studies have demonstrated that in contrast to what was previously thought, cells co-express markers that specify either placodal, neural or neural crest fates, even during late neurulation (Roellig et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2022). This newly characterised cellular heterogeneity requires us to revisit models for cell fate specification at the NPB and reconsider our definition of the NPB cell state itself.

Our study unbiasedly characterised ectodermal cell states and cellular heterogeneity from primitive streak stages through to late neurulation in chick. We demonstrate that although significant transcriptional differences are apparent between cells at primitive streak stages, due to high levels of heterogeneity, cells do not cluster into discrete cell states exhibiting restricted expression patterns until the 1-somite stage. Instead, cell states are initially characterised by the overlapping expression of broad early neural and non-neural genes, as well as axial patterning markers. We identify increased cell state diversification during neurulation, and segregation of neural, neural crest and placodal lineages taking place across 1-somite to 8-somite stages. High resolution transcriptional analysis of cells at the NPB reveals that by the 4-somite stage, placodal and neural crest lineages have largely segregated. However, despite this segregation, we continue to identify high levels of co-expression of placodal and neural crest genes within bridge cells which are predicted to be in a dynamic transcriptional state.

Specification of neural and neural crest cell lineages requires downregulation of broad epiblast modules

Although specification networks for the neural, neural crest and placodal lineages are well established (for review: Betancur et al., 2010; Grocott et al., 2012; Pla & Monsoro-Burq, 2018; Stundl et al., 2021; Thiery et al., 2020), the order in which these lineages are specified remains unclear. Our unbiased gene module analysis has identified groups of genes which correlate and are specifically upregulated within each cell fate. Our gene modules support the specification networks established in previous studies. *Pax7*, *Tfap2b*, *Snai2* and *Sox10* cluster together and are upregulated in neural crest states, while *Six1*, *Eya2*, *Gata2/3* and *Dlx5/6* are activated within placodal states and *Lmo1* and *Sox21* in neural states.

We also find putative novel regulators of these cell states, as well as the order in which these cell fates are specified. We note the sequential temporal activation of placodal, neural and neural crest specific gene modules, suggesting that these states are specified in that order. However, there is also asynchrony in the initiation of cell specification; although we identify placodal cells as early as HH5, we also observe indeterminate NPB cells which are only later specified. We suggest cell fate allocation at the NPB is a gradual process, with the NPB narrowing over time as cells within this population are specified.

Alongside characterising placodal, neural and neural crest gene modules, we observe the expression of two modules which exhibit initial broad pan-epiblast expression at primitive streak stages, but which are confined to placodal cell states at the 4 and 8-somite stages. Within these epiblast modules, unsurprisingly we note the expression of important placodal and non-neural genes *Tfap2c*, *Homer2* and the BMP inhibitor *Bambi*. Alongside these markers, we also find the pluripotency marker *Sall4* and *Tspan13*, with the latter shown to be positively regulated by *Six1* (Mehdizadeh et al., 2021). A recent study in chick suggests that based on transcriptional profiling a ‘pre-border’ state can already be defined prior to gastrulation. In vitro experiments show that the pre-gastrula epiblast is specified as NPB; once cells have acquired a ‘pre-border’ state they can become neural and placodal precursors depending on the signalling input (Trevers et al., 2018). Given that the expression the epiblast modules becomes confined to the placodes, we speculate that the specification of the neural crest and neural states requires the downregulation of these modules.

Redefining the neural plate border based on the co-expression of competing gene modules

Members of *Zic*, *Tfap2*, *Pax*, *Msx* and *Dlx* transcription factor families have been termed NPB specifiers (for review: Stundl et al., 2021; Thiery et al., 2020). *Tfap2a* has been identified as a pioneer factor which triggers the expression of other NPB specifiers and is required but not sufficient for both neural crest and placodal cell fates (Bhat et al., 2013; Rothstein & Simoes-Costa, 2020). The cell fate switching role of *Tfap2a* depends upon its association with its co-factors, *Tfap2b* and *Tfap2c*. *Tfap2c* is necessary for the induction of NPB specifiers *Msx1*, *Pax7* and *Zic1*, whilst *Tfap2b* is later required for downstream neural crest specification (Rothstein & Simoes-Costa, 2020).

Gene module analysis across the neural plate border highlights the sequential activation and restriction of previously characterised NPB specifiers to neural crest cells. Early NPB specifiers *Msx1* and *Zic1* are initially broadly expressed across pNPB and aPPR cells at HH5,

but later become downregulated in the placodal lineage and upregulated in the neural crest. The gene module containing *Pax7* is activated slightly later and contains other NPB specifiers *Axud1* and *Tfap2b*, as well as definitive neural crest markers *FoxD3* and *Snai2*. Unlike the *Msx1* module, which is initially upregulated in both aPPR and pNPB clusters at HH5, the *Pax7* module is specifically restricted to the NPB and subsequent neural crest clusters (Figure 6F, H, and Figure 6–figure supplement 1). This analysis reveals that despite these markers having been previously characterised as NPB specifiers, their expression becomes restricted to the neural crest. In contrast, *Dlx5/6* and *Tfap2a* are both found within a gene module that is later restricted to the placodes (Figure 3A).

Although *Tfap2a* is grouped in the same module as placodal specifiers *Six1* and *Eya2*, it is expressed in both placodal and neural crest cell states, even at later stages. This expression reflects the key role that *Tfap2a* plays as a pioneer factor in both neural crest and placodal specification, however its expression alone is not sufficient to classify the NPB state. At HH5, although *Tfap2a* is expressed within the pNPB cluster alongside other NPB specifiers, it is also expressed within aPPR cells which never appear to be exposed to NPB specifiers including *Pax7*, *Pax3* and *Tfap2b* (Figure 1E).

To classify the NPB as a discrete state, NPB markers need to be uniformly upregulated in NPB cells which give rise to neural, non-neural ectoderm, neural crest and PPR fates. Given the non-uniform expression of previously characterised NPB specifiers (Basch et al., 2006; Ezin et al., 2009; Hong & Saint-Jeannet, 2007; McLarren et al., 2003; Rothstein & Simoes-Costa, 2020; Streit & Stern, 1999), and the expression of *Tfap2a* in both the NPB and early aPPR cells which are unlikely to give rise to other fates, we propose that the NPB state cannot be accurately classified using just these previously established genes. Instead, we suggest that the NPB is better defined by the co-expression of markers regulating alternative cell fates.

Gradient border model resolves the neural plate border and binary competence dilemma

The ‘binary competence’ and ‘neural plate border’ models have provided useful frameworks for understanding cell fate determination during neural, neural crest and placodal segregation (Figure 7A, B). The binary competence model suggests that the ectoderm is subdivided into non-neural/placodal and neural/neural crest domains (Pieper et al., 2012), whilst the neural plate border model suggests cells at the border remain multi-potent and can differentiated into all ectodermal fates (Roellig et al., 2017). Due to the limitations of studying cell fate competence at a population level, transplantation experiments have failed to resolve these two models.

Our co-expression analysis of pan-neural crest and pan-placodal gene modules found that at early stages, most cells at the NPB co-express these modules at similar levels. At later stages, we see a divergence in the level of co-expression between cell populations, with the highest co-expressing cells located at the branching points between the neural crest and placodal lineages (Figure 5H and I). In summary, we find that over time, the putative indeterminate cell population reduces in size until it is restricted to only a small number of bridge cells which lie at the boundary between placodal and neural crest cell clusters at the 4-somite stage. Cell fate allocation within these bridge cells is likely to be driven via transcription factor cross-repression, given the previously characterised cross-repressive interactions taking place between placodal, neural crest and neural specifiers (Brugmann et al., 2004; Christophorou et al., 2009; Schlosser et al., 2008; Wakamatsu et al., 2004).

Given these findings, we propose a 'gradient border' model for cell fate allocation (Figure 7C). This model suggests that cell fate allocation is probabilistic and intimately linked to a cells spatiotemporal positioning. In accordance with the binary competence model, cells located within the lateral NPB will give rise to epidermal and placodal fates, whilst those found medially give rise to neural and neural crest fates. However, instead of a binary segregation of the NPB into neural/neural crest and non-neural/placodal domains, we suggest that a subset of cells at the NPB are kept in an indeterminate state whilst they continue to co-express factors involved in the specification of alternative lineages. Both our co-expression analysis and previous documentation of heterogeneity at the NPB support this model.

Materials and Methods

Data collection and alignment

Single cell dissociation and 10X single-cell mRNA sequencing

Fertilised chicken eggs were incubated at 38°C for 24-32 hours depending upon the developmental stage collected. Embryos were pinned and had the endoderm and mesoderm removed using dispase (10mg/ml) before dissecting the ectodermal region of interest (Figure 1A). Multiple embryos from the same stage were pooled prior to dissociation. Samples were then dissociated in 250µl pre-heated FACsmax cell dissociation solution (Amsbio, T200100) with papain (30U/ml; Sigma, P3125) for 20 minutes at 37°C. Samples were gently pipetted every 5 minutes to facilitate dissociation. After dissociation, 250µl resuspension solution was

added to prevent any further dissociation (HBSS; non-acetylated BSA (1mg/ml; Invitrogen, 10743447); HEPES (0.01M); non-essential amino acids (1x; Thermo Fisher Scientific, 11140050); rock inhibitor Y-27632 (10 μ M; Stemcell Technologies). Cells were passed through a 20 μ m cell strainer (Miltenyi Biotech, 130-101-812) to remove any debris, before pelleting and resuspending in 500 μ l resuspension buffer. To remove any dead or dying cells as well as any remaining doublets, 1 μ l 0.1mg/ml DAPI was added to the cell suspension before FAC sorting. Given the low number of cells obtained from each embryo, samples for each stage were collected over multiple days and stored in 90% MeOH with 10% resuspension solution after FAC sorting. Prior to sequencing, samples from the same stage were pooled and resuspended in DPBS with 0.5% non-acetylated BSA and 0.5U/ μ l RNase inhibitor (Roche 3335399001).

Cells underwent single-cell mRNA sequencing at the Francis Crick Institute, London. Library preparation was carried out using the 10x 3' single-cell mRNA v3 kit (10x Genomics), before sequencing on the HiSeq 4000 (Illumina) to a target depth of 50k reads/cell. Samples were sequenced in two batches (batch 1: HH4, HH6, ss4, ss8; batch 2: HH5, HH6, HH7, ss4), with two stages (HH6 and ss4) sequenced in both batches to allow for the correction of any potential batch effects. Data from the first batch has previously been used for the characterisation of neural induction (Trevers et al., 2021) (ArrayExpress accession number: E-MTAB-10408).

Read alignment

A custom pipeline was developed in Nextflow (v20.07.1) (Di Tommaso et al., 2017) to handle all GTF processing and read alignment whilst maintaining full reproducibility.

Prior to scRNAseq alignment, the GalGal6 ensembl 97 GTF file was modified to prefix genes from the Z and W sex chromosomes with their respective chromosome IDs (Z- and W-). Furthermore, we noticed several mitochondrial genes in the GTF were missing their chromosome ID, in turn preventing accurately calculating cell percentage mitochondrial content downstream; mitochondrial genes were therefore also prefixed in the GTF (MT-). Finally, we annotated the key neural crest specifier *Snai2* in the GTF (ENSGALG00000030902). Reads were processed and aligned to GalGal6 using CellRanger 4.0.0 (10x Genomics).

The aligned reads from CellRanger (BAM) were re-counted using Velocyto (La Manno et al., 2018) to generate spliced and unspliced counts for each gene, which are used in subsequent RNA velocity analysis.

Downstream pre-processing

All downstream analysis was wrapped into a custom Nextflow pipeline to simplify re-running the analysis by handling parallel processing of data subsets.

Data filtering

Quality control, data filtering, cell clustering, dimensionality reduction and initial data visualisation was carried out using Seurat v4.0.5 (Hao et al., 2021). Data filtering was carried out on each sequencing batch separately before data integration. To ensure the removal of poor-quality cells whilst also minimising over-filtering, we first applied a medium filtering threshold (cells expressing fewer than 1000 genes, more than 6500 genes, or had more than 15% mitochondrial content were excluded from subsequent analysis) followed by the removal of remaining poor-quality cell clusters.

Dimensionality reduction and clustering

Linear dimensionality reduction was carried out using principal component analysis (PCA). The number of principal components (PCs) used to construct the subsequent shared-nearest-neighbour (SNN) graph was determined unbiasedly, using an approach developed by the Harvard Chan Bioinformatics Core (HBC). First, we calculate the PC at which subsequent PCs contribute less than 5% of standard deviation, and the point where the cumulative variation of PCs exceeds 90%. The larger of these two values is selected. Second, we calculate the PC where the inclusion of consecutive PCs contributes less than 0.1% additional variation. The smaller value from these two steps is selected as a cut-off.

Louvain clustering was carried out with varying resolutions depending upon the data subset in question. A high clustering resolution (resolution=2) was used to identify poor quality clusters and contaminating cell states. This was to ensure that only poor-quality cells were filtered from the dataset. All other clustering was carried out using a resolution of 0.5.

Filtering of poor-quality clusters

Cell quality was measured using unique gene and UMI counts. Clusters in which both metrics fell below the 25th percentile relative to the rest of the dataset were considered poor quality and excluded from further analysis.

Data integration

After the removal of poor-quality cells, cells from the two separate batches were integrated into a single full dataset (Figure 1–figure supplement 1H-I). To avoid over-correction and removal of stage differences, we integrated the data from the two sequencing batches using STACAS v1.1.0 (Andreatta & Carmona, 2021). This R package allows for alignment of datasets containing partially overlapping cell states.

Regressing out confounding variables

Before downstream analysis, we regressed out percentage mitochondrial content, cell sex, and cell cycle. After regressing out percentage mitochondrial content, we identified a residual sex effect whereby cells clustered according to the expression of either W or Z chromosome genes. This resulted in a duplication of cell clusters, most apparent at HH4 (Figure 1–figure supplement 1A, B). Cells were k-means clustered according to their expression of W chromosome genes and classified as either male or female. This classification was used to regress out cell sex. Cell cycle was observed to have a strong effect on cell clustering and was therefore also regressed out during data scaling (Figure 1–figure supplement 1C, D).

Removal of contaminating clusters

We found small contaminating clusters of primordial germ cells, blood islands, mesoderm and endoderm within the dataset (Figure 1–figure supplement 1F, G). To semi-unbiasedly remove these clusters, we calculated the average expression of candidate markers for each of these cell states and removed clusters in which the median expression of any of these modules was greater than the 90th percentile relative to the rest of the dataset (Figure 1–figure supplement 1F", G).

Downstream analysis

Unbiased cell classification

Cell states were classified on each stage independently using a binary knowledge matrix (Supplementary File 1). First, the full dataset was split by stage and then re-scaled and re-clustered as described above. Our binary knowledge matrix consists of binarized expression of 76 genes across 24 cell states. For each gene, published *in situ* hybridisation expression patterns were used to determine expression within each defined cell state. Given that gene

expression can vary dramatically between stages, and some cell states are known to not be present at specific timepoints (i.e., delaminating neural crest at HH4), we restricted the possible cell states at specific stages. At HH4 there were 7 possible cell states, including non-neural ectoderm (NNE), node, streak, extra-embryonic (EE), early NPB (eNPB), early neural (eN), early caudal neural (eCN). At HH5 there were 17 potential states, this included all cell states in the binary knowledge matrix, except for the later counterparts to the earlier cell states which are ventral forebrain (vFB), forebrain (FB), midbrain (MB), hindbrain (HB), neural crest (NC), delaminating neural crest (dNC) and presumptive epidermis (pEpi). At HH6 we included the same cell states as HH5 except for EE and eNPB given that no cell clusters were classified as such at HH5. For stages HH7, ss4 and ss8 we included 17 cell states, excluding the following states which are only found at earlier stages (NNE, node, streak, eN, eCN, eNPB, EE).

For each cell, we calculated the average scaled expression of the genes expressed in each cell state according to our binary knowledge matrix. Cell clusters were then assigned a cell state, depending on which cell state exhibited the highest median expression in that given cell cluster. Assigned cell states at each of the 6 sampled developmental stages were then transferred to the full dataset.

Gene module identification and filtering

To calculate groups of highly correlated genes, we first filtered genes which do not correlate (Spearman correlation < 0.3) with at least 3 other genes. Then we calculated gene modules using the Antler R package (Delile et al., 2019), which iteratively clusters genes hierarchically based on their gene-gene Spearman correlation. After each iteration, gene modules were filtered to remove gene modules which are not highly expressed (expressed in fewer than 10 cells) or which do not show consistent high expression across genes (fewer than 40% of genes in the module are expressed after binarization). Gene modules were calculated on different subsets of cells: the full dataset (Figure 3 and Figure 3–figure supplement 1), ss8 (Figure 4 and Figure 5), and the NPB subset (Figure 6). Calculating gene modules on different subsets allowed us to zoom in on specific aspects of ectodermal lineage segregation (for workflow explanation see Figure 3–figure supplement 2).

Many genes correlate across the dataset, but do not show differential expression between cell states and therefore do not provide useful information regarding lineage segregation. Therefore, to identify which gene modules correlate with lineage segregation, modules were filtered to only include those in which more than 50% of their genes were differentially expressed ($\log_{2}FC > 0.5$, adjusted p-value < 0.001) in at least one cell state relative to the rest

of the dataset. For the NPB subset, this filtering of differential expression was just between the neural crest (NC, dNC) and placodal (aPPR, pPPR, PPR) states rather than between all cell states ($\log_{2}FC > 0.25$, adjusted p-value < 0.001).

To remove gene modules which correlate with technical variation, we filtered those in which more than 50% their genes showed differential expression between sequencing batches ($\log_{2}FC > 0.25$, adjusted p-value < 0.001).

For the gene modules calculated on the full dataset, we were particularly interested in gene modules that segregated into one of the three lineages (neural, neural crest or placodal) at later stages. To focus our analysis on these gene modules, we applied an additional filtering step to only keep gene modules in which more than 50% of genes were differentially expressed between one of the three lineages at ss8 ($\log_{2}FC > 0.25$, adjusted p-value < 0.001). After filtering 9 gene modules remained (Figure 3—figure supplement 2A, Figure 3—Source Data 1). Modules were further manually filtered for visualisation (Figure 3A).

For the gene modules calculated on the NPB subset we wanted to focus on the co-expression and sequential activation of gene modules that contain well-characterised neural crest and PPR markers. We therefore further filtered NPB gene modules to include only those that had genes that were defined within neural crest, delaminating neural crest or PPR cell states in the binary knowledge matrix. After this final filtering step, 7 gene modules remained (Figure 6E, Figure 6—Source Data 1).

Identification of undetermined cells at the NPB

To identify which cells expressed competing pan-placodal and pan-neural crest modules at similar levels, we calculated the average expression (normalised counts) of these two gene modules in each cell and then ordered cells by their ratio of pan-placodal to pan-neural crest module expression. Cells were then grouped into 10 evenly sized bins and visualised on UMAPs.

Co-expression distribution plots

To investigate the distribution of co-expression between cells, co-expression histograms were plotted (Figure 5I). Co-expression values were calculated by multiplying the average normalised expression of the pan-placodal and pan-neural crest gene modules.

Co-expression visualisation

The average normalised expression of each gene module was scaled between 0 and 1. A 100x100 two-colour matrix was created using Seurat's BlendMatrix function. Each cell was assigned a colour from this matrix based on their scaled average expression of the gene modules (see Figure 5H and Figure 6I legends). Only cells which express both modules above a threshold of 0.3 after scaling were visualised.

RNA velocity

Spliced and unspliced matrices obtained from Velocyto (La Manno et al., 2018) (see *Read Alignment*) were analysed using scVelo (Bergen et al., 2020) to generate cell velocity vectors. Velocyto matrices were intersected with each of the data subsets generated in Seurat. First and second order moments were then calculated for each cell across its 20 nearest neighbours using the top 20 PCs. RNA velocity was ran using the dynamical model whilst accounting for differential kinetics; this allows for differential splicing rates between genes as well as differential splicing kinetics between cell states.

Latent time was calculated and used downstream as a measure of a cell's internal clock. When calculating latent time, cells were rooted to the earliest timepoint present in the data subset; in cases where only one stage was present, the cell root was calculated automatically. For all latent time estimates, we used a diffusion weighting of 0.2.

Modelling gene expression dynamics

Lineage inference was calculated using CellRank, which uses a probabilistic approach to assign cell lineage (Lange et al., 2022). Cell transition matrices were calculated using RNA velocity (0.8 weighting) and nearest neighbour graph (0.2 weighting) kernels. A softmax scale of 4 was set to prevent transitions tending towards orthogonality. When predicting cell transitions, terminal states were specified according to the lineages which we were wanting to model gene dynamics across. For the full dataset, we predicted cell transitions towards either neural, placodal or neural crest lineages. Terminal states were specified as: delaminating neural crest and neural crest cell states at ss4 and ss8 for the neural crest lineage; hindbrain, midbrain, and forebrain cell states at ss4 and ss8 for the neural lineage; anterior PPR, posterior PPR and PPR cell states at ss4 and ss8 for the placodal lineage (Figure 3—figure supplement 1C). For our NPB subset we predicted cell transitions towards either placodal or neural crest lineages, with terminal states specified as: delaminating neural crest and neural crest cell states at ss8 for the neural crest lineage; aPPR and PPR cell states at ss8 for the placodal lineage.

Gene expression dynamics were calculated by fitting general additive models (GAM), which modelled scaled gene expression as a function of latent time using the mgcv package in R. Lineage absorption probability obtained from CellRank were used to weight a GAM for each of the predicted lineages. To generate a smoothed prediction of gene expression change, a cubic spline was fitted with knots=4. When modelling the dynamics of entire gene modules, all genes within a given module were included in the GAM.

Data availability and reproducibility

10x single cell RNAseq was carried out in two batches and is available under two separate accession numbers (ArrayExpress: E-MTAB-10408 and E-MTAB-1144). Our NGS alignments and downstream analysis have been wrapped into custom Nextflow pipelines allowing for full reproducibility. For the code used in this analysis, including links to our Docker containers, see our GitHub repository at https://github.com/alexthiery/10x_neural_plate_border.

Acknowledgements

We thank Teresa Rayon for assistance with establishing our single cell dissociation protocol and the Advanced Sequencing Facility at the Francis Crick Institute for the single cell RNA sequencing. We would also like to thank Igor Adameyko and Artem Artemov for guidance on co-expression analysis, Chantal Hubens for technical support, Alessandra Vigilante for comments on the manuscript, and Streit and Luscombe lab groups for helpful discussions. This work was supported by the Wellcome Trust (108874/B/15/Z) and the BBSRC (BB/S005536/1; BB/R006342/1).

Author contributions

A.T., A.S., J.B. designed study. A.T., A.B., E.H., A.S. collected samples and processed for scRNAseq. A.T., C.C. developed analysis pipeline and carried out data alignment. A.T., E.H. carried out downstream computational analysis of scRNAseq data. A.T., A.B., E.H., A.S. made figures and wrote manuscript. All authors provided feedback on the manuscript.

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1393 Dotplot for the expression of genes used for identification of contaminating cell clusters. **(H)**
 1394 UMAP of all cells after filtering of contaminating populations and regressing out confounding
 1395 variables. Cells are coloured by developmental stage. **(I)** UMAP plots showing successful
 1396 integration of two sequencing batches at stages HH6 (I') and ss4 (I"). **(J)** UMAPs displaying
 1397 cell clusters calculated at each developmental timepoint. Individual stages are subset from the
 1398 full filtered dataset displayed in (H).
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Figure 1-figure supplement 2. Feature plots showing expression of marker genes on UMAPs of developmental stages HH4 (A), HH5 (B) and HH6 (C).

Figure 2-figure supplement 1. Feature plots showing expression of marker genes on UMAPs of developmental stages HH7 (A), ss4 (B) and ss8 (C).

Figure 3-figure supplement 1. (A) Gene modules calculated across the full dataset (full list of gene modules available in Figure 3-Source Data 1). Gene modules were unbiasedly filtered to include those that only display differential expression between cell states and not between sequencing batches and then further filtered to include only those that are differentially expressed between the neural, neural crest and placodal cell states at ss8. 9 gene modules remained after filtering. **(B)** UMAP plot of the full dataset overlaid with RNA velocity vectors depicting the predicted directionality of transcriptional change. Cells coloured by cell state. **(C)** Selected terminal states (placodal, neural crest and neural) used for CellRank lineage inference.

A

Figure 3-figure supplement 2. (A) Workflow diagram illustrating the different dataset subsets used in each of the main figures.

Figure 5-figure supplement 1. (A) UMAPs of the NPB subset. Cells from the NPB subset were ordered by their expression ratio of placodal and neural crest gene modules and then separated into 10 evenly sized bins (Figure 5D). Cells belonging to each of these 10 bins are displayed on the UMAPs.

Figure 6-figure supplement 1. (A-E) Feature plots of average gene module expression used for the co-expression analysis in Figure 6I.

Figure 6-figure supplement 2. (A-F) GAMs are weighted by the absorption probability of each cell towards one of the two fates (placodal or neural crest). Well-characterized genes are shown on the left and novel genes with similar expression dynamics are shown on the right of each panel.