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Published in:
British Educational Research Journal

DOI:
[10.1002/berj.3561](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3561)

Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Jindal-Snape, D., & Cantali, D. (2019). A four-stage longitudinal study exploring pupils' experiences, preparation and support systems during primary-secondary school transitions. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(6), 1255-1278. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3561>

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This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Jindal-Snape, D. & Cantali, D. "A four-stage longitudinal study exploring pupils' experiences, preparation and support systems during primary–secondary school transitions", *British Educational Research Journal* (2019), which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3561>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

A four-stage longitudinal study exploring pupils' experiences, preparation and support systems during primary-secondary school transitions

Abstract

A longitudinal study was conducted over four stages of three school years across the primary-secondary transitions. The purpose was to understand the dynamic transition experience of pupils, investigate the effectiveness of preparation by schools to support transitions, and to understand pupils' most important support networks. Using online questionnaires, data were collected from pupils at four time points, twice from secondary school professionals and their parents, and once from primary school professionals. Results highlight the ongoing and dynamic nature of transitions. What pupils were excited about were still seen to be good once they were in secondary school and aspects that worried them declined over time. Some pupils experienced problems and adapted at different times, whereas for some, problems emerged later. It seems that those who anticipated problems when in primary school were more likely to experience problems; this has implications for the discourse around transitions and its impact on pupils' anticipation of transition experience. Although transition planning and preparation by schools were important and varied, they were not always effective, not provided in a timely manner, and did not tap into their naturally occurring support networks in the home and community. This study makes unique contributions in terms of highlighting the dynamic transitions process and change in pupils' experience over time; various aspects of transitions that children are excited and concerned about and how these changed over time; professionals' conceptualisations of transitions; pupils' and parents' views of the effectiveness of transition practices at various stages; and pupils' real support networks.

Introduction

The primary-secondary school transition is viewed as a crucial and significant period in much of the existing literature (Coffey, 2013; Maras & Aveling, 2006) and is one of the most researched educational transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2016). Several studies over the years have identified that there is a 'dip' in attainment at the time of primary-secondary transitions with a lack of expected progress and sometimes regression, especially in literacy and numeracy (e.g. Galton, Gray & Ruddock, 1999). Various reasons have been given for this dip in academic attainment, including lack of curricular continuity between schools, differences in pedagogical approaches, difference in expectations of teachers in the two contexts, alongside lowering of self-esteem and lack of stage-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993; Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Alexander (2010) reported this dip in attainment based on data from various countries, namely Germany, Ireland, Italy, Scotland, Spain, Tasmania and England. However, West, Sweeting and Young (2010) have argued that this evidence can be contested as *co-existing* but not providing a *causal relationship*. Also, perhaps this focus on academic attainment is unfortunate at a time when children and indeed parents are more focused on the social and emotional aspects of transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2018).

In recent years, three literature reviews have been conducted that focus on primary-secondary transitions (Hanewald, 2013; Symonds & Galton, 2014; Topping, 2011). Symonds and Galton, and Topping concluded that there is a rise in anxiety at this transition which soon reduces to lower levels once the children have settled into school. While Hanewald comments that there can be a rise in anxiety, she does not comment on the resolution of this once the

transition has taken place. Our own systematic review of existing literature over the last 10 years (2008-2018) found that there is a relatively small body of literature that focused on the *holistic* transition experiences of children *over time*, with previous research focussing on the period immediately before and/or after the transition (Jindal-Snape, Cantali, MacGillivray, & Hannah, 2019). McLellan and Galton (2015) and Waters, Lester and Cross (2014a) also highlight the paucity of literature which focuses on the lived experiences of children moving to secondary school, with most research focussing on either one aspect of transitions or on identifying hopes and fears. This then presents a fragmented and ‘in the moment’ account of what is happening for the child, suggesting conceptualization of transition as a one-off event rather than an ongoing process (Jindal-Snape, 2018). Further, much of the existing literature suggests that primary-secondary transition is a negative experience for the child and the focus is on what has/might go wrong, including dips in attainment, self-esteem and wellbeing. Jindal-Snape et al.’s (2019) systematic literature review found that only two out of 96 studies had a positive discourse about transitions and their impact on children’s experiences, and educational and wellbeing outcomes; 60 studies had a negative discourse; 25 had a mixed discourse although even then 15 leaned towards a negative discourse; and nine papers had a neutral discourse. Therefore, pupil’s excitement at the prospect of moving on with increased choices and opportunities can be missed (e.g., Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). Jindal-Snape (2010, 2018) argues that, not only do most children anticipate these transitions positively they also navigate them successfully.

Conceptualisations and theorization of transition

To understand authors’ conceptualisation, Jindal-Snape, Symonds, Hannah and Barlow (under review) had to interpret the conceptualisation based on theories and research designs used by researchers, and concluded that 86 papers had presented the conceptualisation either implicitly or explicitly. However, it is difficult to know the rationale for the conceptual lens used by them. Similarly, participants’ conceptualisation was limited in the literature and there was no evidence that they had been asked a direct question about it.

Children moving to secondary school are likely to be experiencing pubertal changes and so experiencing a ‘developmental’ as well as a ‘systemic’ transition (Anderson et al., 2000), along with educational and social transitions (see Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory, Jindal-Snape, 2016). Similarly, they will experience a change from one identity to another (Lam & Pollard, 2006), suggesting that transition is not only a change in physical or social contexts but also a change in who the person thinks they are or are seen to be by others. Ecclestone and colleagues suggest that transitions lead to complex processes of ‘becoming somebody’ but also ‘unbecoming’ (Ecclestone, 2007; Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010), therefore primary-secondary school transition, should be conceptualised as mainly positive and exciting, which can also be a period of uncertainties and grieving for *some* at *some* point in that journey (Jindal-Snape, 2016).

In this paper, transition is conceptualised as a dynamic and ongoing process of psychological, social and educational adaptation over time due to changes in context, interpersonal relationships and identity, which can be both exciting and worrying at different times for different people, and requires ongoing support from a range of significant others (Jindal-Snape, 2018). The theories underpinning this conceptualisation are Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory (MMT Theory, Jindal-Snape, 2016), and Educational and Life Transitions Theory (E<, Jindal-Snape, 2016). MMT and E< theories propose that transitions are not linear and are an ongoing process (Jindal-Snape, 2016), and people experience different transitions at the same time within multiple domains. We have

considered the educational and life transitions of the pupils. The life transitions are in the context of friendships, navigating school culture, and support systems across the domains they occupy. Further, using a Rubik's cube analogy with each colour representing one child's ecosystem and significant others in those systems, we can understand how a small change for one person can lead to unintended changes for others. The MMT Theory highlights that one person's transitions trigger transitions of significant other's and vice versa. In this paper we have only presented the findings about the transitions of pupils; those of parents and professionals will be reported elsewhere.

As we believe that professionals' conceptualisation of transitions is crucial and that it will inevitably influence their transition practice, this study also provides unique insights into that.

Transition experiences – anticipation and reality

According to previous research, hopes and worries expressed by children seem to remain constant over time and aspects that they are worried about, such as bullying (Zeedyk *et al.*, 2003) and finding their way around the new school (Ashton, 2008; Mizelle, 2005; Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008) being reported in various studies. This anxiety about the move combined with excitement and anticipation is described as 'readiness' (Lucey & Reay, 2000) with Rice *et al.* (2011) noting that initial anxiety dissipates quickly once the children have settled into their new schools, and Waters, Lester and Cross (2014a) suggest that approaching the transition with a positive attitude leads to a positive transition for most children. However, as none of these studies followed children over time and primarily focused on their views before and/or immediately after starting secondary school, it remains to be seen whether these views are constant across the first year of secondary school or indeed when moving to the second year of secondary school. Further, none of these studies have tracked whether the anticipation and reality (both positive and negative) matched, especially over time. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first study that has tracked the anticipation and reality over four stages and three school years.

Preparation for and through transition

Preparation by school

Although the importance of providing transition support for children moving from primary-secondary school has been widely acknowledged (see Hanewald, 2013), the focus is on providing transition support immediately before or after the move to secondary school. This support has primarily been provided by primary and secondary schools, with some acknowledgement of support from families, professionals and communities (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). This, however, diminishes the role and agency of the child actively developing, and tapping into, their own support systems. The latter becomes even more important given the importance of the various aspects of transition, described as bridges of transfer by Galton, Grey and Rudduck (1999) and Galton and McLellan (2018), differences between children and adults' views (Topping, 2011), with children being more concerned about the social aspects such as making new friends (Akos and Galassi, 2004; Ashton, 2008; Mellor and Delamont, 2011), and teachers focussing on the academic aspects and expressing worries about dip in academic attainment (Galton, 2010). According to Galton and McLellan (2018), teachers are more concerned with pupils' familiarisation rather than focussing on building relationships with peers and teachers. Social aspects of transition have not, in the view of Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013), been explicitly explored in the existing literature. Previous research has not captured in full this support provided by schools over time, nor

have they looked at its effectiveness from the perspectives of children and parents or through the actual impact on the transition experience.

Although the role of teachers in supporting children to make the transition to secondary school is seen to be important (Bokhorst, Sumter & Westenberg, 2010; Coffey, Berlach & O'Neill, 2013; Furman & Burhmeister, 1992; Hanewald, 2013), previous research has not examined the training they receive for this. Most importantly there is no acknowledgement of their own transition and associated support needs. These gaps in literature have been addressed in this study.

Preparation by family and peers

Families and peers provide support for children making the transition to secondary school, with Waters, Lester and Cross (2014b) suggesting that parental support has a more enduring impact than that provided by peers. Parents provide emotional as well as practical support for their child's transition, in most cases sharing their own memories of having moved to secondary school. Coffey (2013) suggests that it is important that parents have an understanding of school processes and getting to know their child's teachers, with good communication between the stakeholders being crucial (Elias, Patrikakou, & Weissberg, 2007). However, this naturally occurring support system is overlooked in most research with no clarity on whether, and in what way, they might be providing support to the child. In this study we focus on the different support systems that the *child has prioritized* and how these change over time.

Research Questions

- What was the dynamic transition experience of pupils across three school years, and why?
- What planning and preparation was put in place by schools across the three school years, and whether that was effective and why?
- What were the pupils' most important support networks during transitions, and what support did they provide?

Methodology

Research design

In keeping with our conceptualization of transition as an ongoing dynamic process, we undertook a longitudinal study. Rice, Frederickson and Seymour (2011) also argue that the focus of research on the first year of secondary school is inappropriate as transition will likely happen over a longer period of time with children needing this extended time to adapt. However, most studies, including their own, have collected data at two time points (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Rice et al., 2011; Waters, Lester and Cross, 2014a) and where data were collected over three points, this was usually either over two school years within a 12-month period (Jindal-Snape, Baird and Miller, 2011) or across one school year within a 12-month period (Ng-Knight *et al.*, 2016). West et al. (2004) and Benner and Graham (2009) are an exception as their studies span over a number of years. However, West et al. did not collect data repeatedly over the period closest to the move to secondary school and Benner and Graham's study focused on collecting quantitative data only. Both studies only used pupil data. A study, like ours, collecting quantitative and qualitative data over four stages, across three school years (the last year of primary, P7 and first two years of secondary

school, S1 and S2- twice in first year of secondary school) is unusual. The design of this study, therefore, makes a valuable and original contribution to the existing literature and provides insights that were not available before.

Further, we used multiple sources of data for crystallisation of a complex and rich array of perspectives (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). One secondary school and 14 feeder primary schools in Scotland participated in the study. Data were collected over three school years at four stages from the children, twice from parents and secondary school professionals, and once from primary school professionals (see Table 1). Children move to secondary school between 11.5 to 12.5 years in Scotland; therefore pupil participants ranged in age from 11 to 13.5 years. The same cohort of children were followed throughout the period of this study. However, not all children chose to participate in every stage (see Table 1). Voluntary participation was important; we asked schools not to ‘tell’ the children to complete the questionnaire in class time as a ‘class’ activity. This did not allow us to see the entire trajectory of each child and we were only able to present group level data. Nevertheless, we were able to glean an insight into the pupils’ lives over this period.

An iterative data collection process allowed us to develop the later stage questionnaires through the initial analysis of earlier data collected, for example in Stage 2 removing explicit mention of ‘bullying’ to gauge whether children had highlighted it in Stage 1 as that was an option presented by us. Questions were also included which required the children to reflect on their views about the same aspects at different times.

Sample and recruitment

As explained earlier, the participants in the study were children moving to a particular secondary school, their families and professionals working with them (see Table 1).

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

Pupils

All children who were due to move to the participating secondary school were invited to participate via email by the primary school headteachers including non-cluster schools (i.e., primary schools that do not normally feed into that secondary school) which included a link to the online questionnaire. As can be seen from Table 1, number of pupils varied across the stages. The participation is lower than expected. However, it reassured us that participation was voluntary and still provided unique insights about their transition experiences

Parents

All parents were invited to participate via email by the primary school headteachers including non-cluster schools. At Stage 1 the sample size was very small which then went up in Stage 2; although this was still small. The sample size for parents, although small, provides some useful perspectives. In Stage 2, the guidance teacher sent the link for the online questionnaires to parents. Jindal-Snape and Cantali attended the parents’ night and engaged with parents waiting for their appointments to explain the focus of the study and provide assistance with completing the online questionnaire if required. This led to some increase in participation (See Table 1).

Professionals

Schools were also asked to invite all their staff who worked with children in P7, S1 and S2 depending on the stage the children were at. This included a link to the questionnaires,

Participant Information Sheet and consent forms. The primary school professionals included three teachers and three headteachers. In Stage 2, the secondary school professionals included three pupil support workers, two guidance staff, one depute/assistant headteacher and one education resource worker. In Stage 3, three guidance staff and one pupil support worker participated in the study.

Questionnaire design

Based on discussions with the headteachers and guidance staff, and a previously successful questionnaire used to investigate children's primary-secondary transition experiences (Jindal-Snape et al., 2011), data were collected from all participants using online questionnaires. Although not ideal when collecting data from children, this was seen to be the best way to capture views of all children across a school cluster (and, as it happened, non-cluster) by the relevant stakeholders, to allow all participants to share their experiences of transition openly and fully. This also meant that no identifiers were collected from children and families apart from the name of the primary school the child had attended. Some demographic data were collected from professionals to allow us to understand the context of their views.

The questionnaires were designed using an iterative process and aimed to gather data which would respond to the research questions over time. Although some questions required a choice to be made from a list of options given, many were designed so that there was opportunity to give more details to allow participants to provide 'illuminating clarification' (Bucknall, 2014, 76) of their views so as to not inadvertently silence participants' voices as well as giving opportunity for unique and unexpected views. Where questions required an opinion, these were phrased objectively and as neutrally as possible to avoid 'leading' the participants into a response (see Table 2). Questionnaires were piloted at each stage and the drafts shared with the school's Principal Teacher for Guidance and the Chair of the School Cluster Headteachers Group for feedback.

<INSERT TABLE 2 HERE>

Data Analysis

Data were analysed immediately after each round of data collection across all participant groups to inform the next stage of data collection. The authors familiarised themselves with the data at each stage by reading the collective response but also going into individual responses to get the complete picture. The authors separately explored and analysed the same and different subsets of data. Through an iterative process over time the themes were expanded and fine-tuned. This led to the identification of key themes, especially from the qualitative data. For the purposes of this paper, data were analysed longitudinally, especially pupil data to understand their dynamic transitions. However, it is worth noting that this is at a group level as we were not allowed to use any identifiers by the schools. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and in a few cases cross-tabulated across particular questions within the same dataset, such as view of effectiveness of transition planning and transition experience. This was done to understand if there was any relationship between different variables. However, due to the small sample size we could not undertake full statistical analysis. As mentioned earlier, qualitative data were analysed thematically, with a focus on explanation of the quantitative data, but more importantly, to look for new, emerging themes that were unique due to the longitudinal research design.

The volume of data from four stages was such that only a subsection of the dataset has been presented in this paper. The write up of results includes presentation of longitudinal group level data and cross-sectional presentation of data at particular stages.

Ethics

This study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee and conducted within the professional standards of our professional body. As children were in the age group of 11 to 13.5, we required pro-active written consent of parents before children were invited to participate. Ongoing voluntary participation was crucial with this age group and informed consent was sought from all participants (including parents and professionals) at each stage. The first page of the online questionnaire had information about the study and they were asked to press the 'Continue' button to indicate their consent. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured and data were managed using our organisation's data protection protocol.

Results and Discussion

Results have been presented in line with the research questions and literature review themes. The first theme links with the first research question and presents findings about pupils' experiences and the reasons behind them, anticipation and differences. In line with the second research question, second main theme is divided into subsections to present results related to preparation by the primary school and view of its effectiveness from the child and parent perspective, as well as children's advice on how the preparation can be improved. This structure is also used to present secondary school related results. Within this we have also presented professionals' conceptualisation and training for transitions as it might have direct bearing on the transition support they provide to pupils. In the final results section, in line with the third research question, findings related to pupils' support systems are presented.

Pupils' Transition experiences and potential reasons behind them

In this section we have focused on data from Stage 2, i.e., approximately five months after starting secondary school, with a sample of 61 pupils. In response to the question whether they believed that there were no problems with their transition, 40 pupils reported that they had experienced no problems with transition, 16 had experienced problems, and 5 said they did not know (see Table 3). To understand the reasons behind their experiences, we cross-tabulated the data with five other questions based on previous literature (see Jindal-Snape et al., 2019), i.e., moving with friends, anticipation of problems with transition, sibling/cousins already in the same secondary school, helpfulness of preparation by primary school and helpfulness of preparation by secondary school. The results were quite interesting but should be considered with caution in light of the variance in sample sizes in different categories. For ease of comparison, the data have been presented as percentage of pupils in a particular category, such as anticipated problems. Limitations of the difference in the percentages across these groupings are acknowledged.

<INSERT TABLE 3 HERE>

Despite previous research highlighting that moving with peers is important for pupils (Galton,

2010), we found that it did not influence whether they anticipated problems with the move or not, with equal proportions of those moving or not moving with friends indicating that they were not anticipating any problems. Further, moving with friends did not seem to have an influence on whether the transition was unproblematic or not, as of the 54 who moved with friends 34 said that they did not experience any problems whereas 15 did and 5 did not know. However, of the seven who moved with no friends, 6 had no problems and one did. Similar to Waters et al. (2014a), our data suggest that those who anticipated problems when in primary school were 2.6 times more likely to experience problems with the move to secondary school. Those with no siblings/cousins in the same secondary school were 3.7 times more likely to anticipate problems. Further, pupils with no siblings/cousins already in their new secondary school were 2.1 times more likely to experience problems than those who had siblings/cousins there. This is not surprising when we look at their support systems in Table 4.

In terms of preparation, 40 said that primary schools had prepared them well. Those who reported this, were 1.2 times less likely to anticipate problems and 1.5 times less likely to experience problems with the move. Forty six pupils reported that secondary school had prepared them well for the move, however anticipation of problems was not influenced by their view of the helpfulness of this preparation. Similarly, there was no link with whether or not they experienced any problems.

The longitudinal nature of the study highlighted that the impact of transition is not linear, and issues can resolve and arise at different times. Of the 41 pupils who responded at Stage 4 (end of the second year of secondary school, S2), 13 indicated that they had problems at the start of S1 (first year of secondary school) that had been resolved by the end of S1, three said that they had problems at the start which had not been resolved, and most importantly four said that they had no problems at the start but were experiencing problems at the end of S1. Similarly, eight pupils said they had problems when they moved to S2 that had been resolved, two said they had problems at the start that had not been resolved, and most importantly five said they had no problems at the start but had some at the end of S2.

Anticipation and reality

This section presents longitudinal group data. At Stage 1 pupils were asked about what they were looking forward to and worried about, and in subsequent stages they were asked to indicate what was still good and/or worried them. They were most looking forward to having different subjects, making new friends, having more independence, more choices and opportunities, bigger school and variety of sports (Figure 1). The reality in S1 was even better for some pupils; aspects such as finding way around school, different teachers, travelling to school and moving away from old friends were chosen by some more pupils as they progressed through secondary school to S2.

Similar to previous literature, their main concerns in P7 were around losing old friends (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Ashton, 2008; Mellor & Delamont, 2011), bullying (Zeedyk et al., 2003) more homework, finding their way around school and moving away from some classmates (Figure 2). Similar to Rice et al. (2011) once they moved to the secondary school, these concerns seemed to have lessened for majority of the pupils. However, not documented in other studies is that for some pupils concerns about making new friends, moving away from some classmates and losing friends became apparent again when moving to the second year of secondary school that would have involved change in some classes and groupings.

Please note that anticipation of bullying was an option in Stage 1 questionnaire but was subsequently removed due to concerns of providing a negative discourse (see Jindal-Snape et al., 2019) and leading pupils to select that option as disproportionately high number of pupils chose it. Pupils experiencing bullying could instead use the ‘Other’ category to highlight any concerns about bullying),

<INSERT FIGURES 1 AND 2 HERE>

Preparation for, and through, transitions

This section focuses on data from professionals, focusing on timing of the planning and preparation and the support they had put in place for the pupils. As their understanding of what transition means could have an impact on when and how they provided transition support, this section presents that data too, starting with primary school and then captures the views of pupils and parents about the effectiveness of primary schools’ support and what can be improved. The data about secondary school have been presented in the same sequence.

Preparation by primary school

All six professionals indicated that preparation started in January/February of the calendar year in which pupils moved to secondary school in mid-August. Please note that school breaks at the end of June in Scotland. Two professionals highlighted that in the case of those identified as having Additional Support Needs (ASN, e.g., autism), in line with legislation (Richardson, Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2017), preparation started in the second last year of primary school with meetings between a range of professionals.

There was difference in views regarding optimum timing for transition preparation and planning, which is not surprising as overall there seemed to be a lack of shared understanding about what transitions mean among both primary and secondary school staff from the same cluster. Some conceptualised transition as a one-off event linked with major moves at specific time points and others emphasised that it was an ongoing process involving several visible and invisible changes, such as change in the child’s identity, the physical and social environment, or others’ expectations of the child (see also, Jindal-Snape, 2018; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008).

Seamless move from primary to secondary with a clear focus on teaching and learning. (Head Teacher, Primary School, Female, 11-15 years professional experience)

Any move between stages or establishment or settings or even classes. (Head Teacher, Primary School, Female, 20+ years professional experience)

All primary school professionals despite being from different schools, indicated that they supported pupils in the same way in terms of providing opportunities to discuss with pupils what to expect, what they were looking forward to, what they were concerned about, and meeting with other professionals especially in the case of pupils with additional support needs. Although some primary school professionals indicated that they had invited secondary school professionals to their class, secondary school teachers did not invite them to their class (see Figure 3).

<INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE>

Effectiveness of the preparation by primary school: Views of pupils and parents

Pupils' views of effectiveness

Pupils' views about effectiveness changed over time. In Stage 1, 69 (89.6%) said primary school had prepared them well. The themes that emerged were familiarization with the new physical and human context and environment starting in the second last year of primary school when they went for swimming lessons to the secondary school (reported by 15 pupils), being given more responsibility and independence through taking them on residential and class trips (n=30), induction visits (n=12), visit of the headteacher (n=11), secondary school pupils coming to speak with them (n=10), prepared academically through harder work (n=6), guidance teacher visit (n=2) and information booklet/handbook (n=4).

The following quote encapsulates several of these views.

They have prepared us for the type of work we are going to receive and have given us a challenge so we can cope with the work in secondary... the guidance teacher and a few S1's told us how they felt when were in our position ... I think this has helped me a lot. (Pupil, Stage 1)

However, this picture changed slightly in Stage 2, with only 40 (65.6%) saying primary school had prepared them well. The thematic analysis of their response suggests that different things seemed to have helped different pupils, with a majority focusing on familiarization with the context and people, including induction days (n=8) (note: Induction days are organized by secondary schools but primary school teachers accompany them), and visits from secondary school pupils, headteacher, guidance teacher and visiting the secondary schools (n=8), the importance of discussions with teachers about what to expect in secondary school (n=10), and that teachers' reassurance gave them more confidence and reduced their nervousness (n=7). Only one highlighted that the *academic* preparation in primary school helped them in secondary school.

Twelve indicated that the preparation by primary school was not helpful or not applicable.

Didn't really help, just became more strict and they said "the teachers at secondary are very strict" (Pupil, Stage 2)

By Stage 3, 34 (54%) said what primary school had done was helpful throughout S1. Most of the responses were similar to Stages 1 and 2. However, there was a shift for seven in focus to *academic* aspects.

Learning about higher up subjects in math (Pupil, Stage 3)

I can work a lot better in subjects like maths because of the teachers that I got in p7 (Pupil, Stage 3)

This shift is not surprising as previous research suggests that soon after moving to secondary school children are more focused on building new relationships and maintaining old with focus shifting to academic matters later on (Jindal-Snape, 2016)

By Stage 4, 15 indicated that nothing had helped them with the move to S2. The positive responses were similar to Stages 1 and 2 (i.e., familiarization) with only one pupil focusing

on academic aspects. Two focussed on skill sets that would help them throughout secondary schools

My primary teacher taught us skill that would help us in high school e.g. co-operation skills, preparing us for harder work and treating us like adults etc. (Pupil, Stage 4)

Friendships, respect, who to go to when upset and struggling. (Pupil, Stage 4)

Pupils' views of how preparation by primary schools can improve

Pupils' advice on what can be done to improve changed over time. In Stage 2, 22 pupils provided advice on improvement, including higher level academic work in P7 (n=5) and the rest that there should be more induction days, opportunities to meet others from the school and to discuss what will happen in secondary school. This continued in Stage 3; but interestingly six suggested that primary schools should give them harder work in P7 and one commented that they should have worried them less. In Stage 4, 17 pupils made suggestions for improvements, eight about things that might be out of the control of primary school, namely longer induction in secondary school, less homework, particular choices related to classes and privacy when discussing problems. Others included giving advice on maintaining friendships (n=2), more information about curriculum and lessons (n=1), more information on what to expect (n=2) including showing a video, invite pupils from S1 and S2 to speak with them, not scare them about secondary school (n=2) and provide opportunities for pupils to speak in private. These are highlighted in these quotes.

A teacher to speak privately to each pupil because some people might have problems but are too scared to go to there guidance teacher and speak to them so if the teachers goes to them it would be easier. (Pupil, Stage 4)

Parents' views of effectiveness

In Stage 1, only 6 parents responded to the questionnaire and all reported that preparation from primary school was helpful to their child and majority gave reasons related to familiarisation with the new context through induction days and visits and one highlighted the importance of regular contact between their child and teachers to be helpful.

I feel like the children have been pretty well prepared. My son's class did attend swimming ... The two days where my son's class attended (name of secondary school) ... He really enjoyed these days and came back excited about moving on to secondary. (Parent, Stage 1)

One parent recommended that schooling should be seamless and one that perhaps the discourse around transition needs to change.

I think the transition move can be a little over played at times... Wonder if their resilience in facing changes such as this is undermined a little by parental concerns possibly fueled by how this event is framed by the school. (Parent, Stage 1)

In Stage 2, 17 (81%) reported that the preparation was helpful, particularly visits to the secondary school and reciprocal visits by secondary school staff and pupils, good co-

ordination between parents, primary and secondary schools, preparing for the academic life of the secondary school, being there for support and advice on making friends.

Two parents, however, were dissatisfied with the preparation, with one saying that non-feeder school had not provided help with the move to this secondary and another thought that children were not prepared for the academic life.

None [nothing was effective] she and her friends struggled in Maths compared with other kids from other schools who have been taught more in the subject. (Parent, Stage 2)

Although seventeen parents reported that preparation by the primary school was helpful to their child only fifteen reported that it was helpful to them as a parent.

Preparation by secondary school

As mentioned above, secondary school related data have been presented next. Secondary school staff responded twice to the questionnaires, once in Stage 2 (n=7) and once in Stage 3 (n=3). In Stage 2, three pupil support workers, two guidance teachers, one education resource worker and one deputy headteacher responded to the questionnaire. They undertook multiple activities to support transitions, with all indicating that they had given pupils opportunities to discuss what to expect at secondary school and their concerns, and some reported that they had received social and academic information from primary school (Figure 3). Again there was a lack of shared understanding of what transition means.

Transition is physical, social and emotional adaptation to new environments and stressors. (Stage 2, Guidance teacher, 6-10 years experience)

The move on from one state to another where change can have a major impact on an individual. Moving out of ones (sic) comfort zone and meeting and overcoming new challenges. (Stage 2, Pupil Support Worker, 6-10 years experience)

They had mixed views of when transition planning and preparation began but echoed their primary school counterparts' views with the majority highlighting that it began in March of the year the pupils start with them in August. Similarly, there was no consensus about optimum start date.

Effectiveness of preparation by secondary school: Views of pupils and parents

Pupils' views of effectiveness

In Stage 1, 70 (90.9%) pupils said that the secondary school had helped them prepare for starting secondary school. By Stage 2, this went down to 46 (76.7%). It seems that what was seen as good preparation prior to starting secondary school was rated differently once they had started secondary school. However, we need to be cautious due to the difference in sample size. In Stage 3, 53 (82.8%) pupils reported that the secondary school had carried on with support throughout the year. Only two gave a reason to explain this with one indicating that transition days in P7 were still proving useful and one highlighting ongoing support systems such as from guidance staff.

Fourteen highlighted that secondary school had supported their transition to and through S2; this included support from guidance teachers (n=5), teachers talking with them (n=7,

although two highlighted this should be done privately), and helping them make new friends (n=2). However, eight pupils said that nothing had been done with one indicating

Nothing because they think we've settled in enough. (Pupil, Stage 4)

Again this suggests that schools consider transition to be happening at the start of secondary school with guidance staff supporting pupils in the main if they have any problems (Hanewald, 2013); this seems to be the case with teaching staff as well. This makes the support reactive and only made available to the few who seek it.

Pupils' views of what secondary schools can improve

In Stage 2, 29 pupils highlighted that the secondary school could improve the familiarization related activities, namely more induction days, clearer map of the school, being put in class with friends. In terms of transition to S2, of the 30 pupils who responded to what secondary school could do to improve, 19 said nothing differently, again some emphasized familiarisation,

pick some people [we already know] to be in classes with (Pupil, Stage 4)

although one suggested the opposite

they could have put us in groups in class with people we don't really know that well (Pupil, Stage 4)

One pupil emphasized the support needs of everyone and two the importance of ongoing checking of how pupils are dealing with transitions.

Just make life easier on us and not put so much pressure on us ... and stop focusing so much on all of the disabled kids and start thinking more about the ones who aren't disabled, because they might have problems too. (Pupil, Stage 4)

I think regular "check ups". Just to make sure we are okay and not struggling at all. (Pupil, Stage 4)

Parents' views of effectiveness

Of the 21 parents in Stage 2, 20 (95.2%) indicated that the preparation from secondary school was effective but one did not. When asked whether the preparation for *them* was helpful, however the numbers went down with 16 saying it was helpful, three (14.3%) that it wasn't and two (9.5%) did not know. Three parents who gave reason for lack of helpfulness focused on missed or lack of good communication with them. This is concerning as pupils and parents at all stages highlight what the family had done to prepare and support the children. If parents do not feel prepared and supported, how can they be expected to support the child?

Training for supporting transitions

Although professionals seemed to have been undertaking a range of activities to facilitate transitions and these were, in the main, seen to be effective, surprisingly everyone reported that they had received no training for this on the pre-qualifying programme; only one had

accessed post-qualifying training. Majority reported that they learned about facilitating transitions through staff meetings and discussions with peers and headteachers. A few reported that they had accessed online resources, read research around effective practice and two highlighted experiential learning. Not all felt supported with facilitating pupils' and their own transitions. Interestingly, unlike others believing the role of teachers to be important (Bokhorst et al., 2010; Coffey et al., 2013), pupils put them down the list of those providing support (see Table 4).

Pupils' view of support from others across the four stages

Throughout the three school years, pupils indicated that they discussed matters related to moving to, and through, secondary school (including their positive and negative experience as well as seeking advice and support) mostly with parents/grandparents (Table 4), followed by classmates and siblings/cousins.

<INSERT TABLE 4 HERE>

In response to an open question about what they discussed with others, in Stage 1, thematic analysis from 74 pupils indicated that preparation from parents/grandparents involved talking about their own experience of secondary school (n=52) including being positive about the move and emotionally supporting them; buying uniform, stationary etc. (n=17); giving directions to the secondary school (n=6); and knowing they could ask questions if need be (n=2).

It is of note that they spoke less frequently with primary and secondary school professionals. This could be due to pupils spending more time with family and friends, especially when the move is after six to seven weeks of summer holiday. However, it also highlights that schools need to tap into the support systems that pupils value highly and engage more effectively with them as partners in the transition planning and preparation.

In Stage 2, 33 pupils again indicated that families talked with them about secondary school and reassured them. By Stage 3, the conversations had shifted with pupils talking about how school was for them and what they liked or disliked (n=37), discussing stressors or concerns (n=4), seeking reassurance (n=2), and how to make friends (n=1). In Stage 4, it included how they were getting on at school (n=9), friends and friendships (n=4), about problems they were experiencing (n=2), about subjects (n=2), about teachers (n=2), discussions about how they had changed (n=1), and sharing their experiences with younger sibling (n=1).

Conclusions

This study has provided unique insight of the transition experience over three school years at four time points. Results highlighted the ongoing and dynamic nature of group transitions, with pupils experiencing problems and adapting at different times. When considering the reasons behind transition experience, it seems that those who anticipated problems when in primary school were more likely to experience problems with the move to secondary school. Despite previous research highlighting that moving with peers is important for pupils, the data suggest that it did not influence whether they anticipated or experienced problems with the move or not. Further, this anticipation of problems was more prevalent in those who had

no siblings/cousins in the secondary school, with those pupils being more likely to experience problems. This anticipation was also influenced by whether pupils felt that primary school had prepared them well; those who felt they had been prepared well were also less likely to experience problems with the move. On the other hand, preparation by secondary school did not seem to influence whether or not they experienced any problems when starting secondary school. However, preparation by secondary school became important when moving *through* secondary school, something that has been missed in other studies that stop collecting data in S1.

It is important to note that we cannot make a causal inference that positive and/or negative anticipation led to a particular experience. Firstly, the sample size is small, and secondly pupils' transition experiences were very complex and dynamic, with perceptions changing over time. However, anticipation of negative outcomes might suggest that the child might be already experiencing problems prior to the move which might make them believe that they will also face problems in the future. Their concerns can be unpacked by the family and professionals to understand how best to support them. This has implications for transition practice involving ongoing discussions with pupils over a longer period of time, perhaps as part of normal class discussions to keep the discourse about transitions balanced, as well as providing opportunities for familiarization through increasing visits to secondary schools starting a long time before the actual move, and for staff and pupils from secondary school to visit them for a similar period of time.

Further, this study highlighted that although transition planning and preparation by schools are important and varied, they are not always effective, not provided in a timely manner, and do not tap into the naturally occurring support network in the home and community. This has implications for transition practice in terms of effective collaboration between all stakeholders, including explicit discussions about their conceptualisation of transitions and how practice could be informed by a shared understanding of those.

Despite transitions triggering additional support needs for some pupils, it seems that the focus of transition support, perhaps for legislative reasons, is on those with already identified support needs. It is important for professionals to be mindful of transitions creating additional support needs for some pupils at different times in their school journey and creating specific support needs. Another practice implication emerges from a small number of pupils and parents indicating that the discourse in primary school about what to expect from secondary school staff can be worrying for pupils, such as teachers being stricter and work being harder. This suggests that careful attention needs to be paid to the discourse which might unconsciously be negative to ensure a balanced discourse.

Although the sample of professionals is small, it was concerning that they have not had formal training in supporting pupil transitions and rely on colleagues and meetings to provide effective transition practice. This has clear implications for teacher education policy and practice in HEIs and Continuous Professional Development of teachers.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. The sample size changed across the stages and in line with our agreement with schools children and parents were not asked to provide any identifiers in the questionnaires. Therefore, the main limitation of the study is that we are not clear how many of the same pupils responded to

each questionnaire. Therefore, the data are presented at a group level rather than individual level. Attrition is inevitable in longitudinal studies, especially where voluntary participation due to power differences are very important. Another limitation is that this study was carried out in one local authority in Scotland with one secondary school and fourteen primary schools connected to that secondary school. Therefore, these findings cannot be generalized despite the issues being similar to those found in international literature. Future research is required that has a larger sample from across Scotland and is able to include identifiers that might not be an issue with a larger sample. Further, data that can be collected more regularly, such as audio diaries either periodically or at turning points (when something changes from the child's perspective rather than an artificial school timeline) might be useful. As these will be resource intensive, they could be part of a mixed methods design: large surveys and some unique case studies.

Original and significant contribution

This study makes several original and significant contributions to literature and practice around transitions in general, and across primary and secondary in particular. This is the first study to capture the ongoing nature of transitions and is unique in presenting data from three school years at four time points and from all stakeholder groups, i.e., pupils, parents and professionals, summarizing the change in transition experience over time. It was also able to unpack some of the perceptual myths that exist in literature, such as those around moving with friends. Further, this is the only study to document various aspects of transitions that children are excited and concerned about. Not only that, we were able to report on how these changed over time. This study also captured professionals' conceptualisations of transitions, its potential impact on their transition practice, pupils' and parents' views of the effectiveness of transition practices at various stages and pupils' advice based on their lived experiences of how transitions practice can be improved. Further, it clearly highlights where in pupils support hierarchy formal transition systems lie, pointing to the importance of the organic support networks.

Acknowledgement: We are grateful to the school cluster network that commissioned this study, to the primary school head teacher and secondary school guidance teacher for reviewing all the material and providing feedback, and to all the research participants for their insightful response. We did not receive any funding for this study.

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