

Perception to Reality: Pupils' expectations and experiences of the primary-secondary school transition

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Abstract

Pupils moving from primary to secondary school encounter a number of challenges that can affect their social, academic and personal development. This paper explores the expectations and experiences of a group of 10-11 year old primary school pupils who made the transition to an inner-city secondary school in Wales from one of its 'feeder' primary schools during 2011. As an exploratory study, an ethnographic approach was adopted with 'pupil voice' a distinctive and central feature. Two phases of fieldwork were conducted. The first examined pupils' thoughts and feelings pre-transition; the second examined the extent to which their experiences matched their expectations in a local secondary school. There were four main findings from the study: the importance of academia; the opportunity to 'grow up'; social issues; and pupils' general feelings towards the transitional process (both pre and post-transition).

[137 words]

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Introduction

For most children in the United Kingdom (UK), the end of the school year of their 11th birthday marks the transition as they move from primary to secondary school. The significance of the primary-secondary transition has long been an area of focus in both England and Wales (The Plowden Report 1967; Gittins Report, 1967). It is one of the most important and significant steps in their young lives (Measor and Fleetham, 2005). There are physical, psychological and emotional maturational developments as well as significant changes in curricula (Galton *et al.*, 2003). The changes from Key Stage 2 (KS2) to Key Stage 3 (KS3) are also accompanied by different pedagogic practices which are embedded within the National Curriculum (Boyd, 2005), as well as new socio-spatial environments and interaction networks (Blatchford *et al.*, 2008). Inevitably, therefore, this is a challenging period and there is understandable importance placed on a smooth transition from primary to secondary school to ensure progress is enhanced and not hampered in the process (Farrell, 2001). Existing evidence indicates that although there have been attempts to ensure continuity from KS2 to KS3 (Tobell, 2003), there remains a 'hiatus in progression'

(Nicholls and Gardner, 1999). One of the problems associated with the primary-secondary transition, and a properly informed understanding of it, is that pupils' thoughts and feelings about the transition seem to be overlooked (Ashton, 2008). This study, therefore, focuses on 'pupil voice' to elicit a clear and nuanced appreciation of the complexity of the relationship between the expectations and experiences surrounding the primary-secondary transition. The notion of 'listening to learners' is a politically important policy imperative in Wales (where the research was conducted) and was also crucial to the design of the study. This approach dates back to the work of Piaget, Child Development and more recently the influential 'Plowden Report' by the Central Advisory Council for Education in England in 1967, which identified that 'at the heart of the educational process lies the child' (The Plowden Report, 1967).

This paper continues by providing an overview of the literature surrounding the primary-secondary transition, including social issues and academic issues, and a focus on pupils in transition. There then follows an account of the methodological and procedural approach adopted before outlining the four main findings: the importance of academia; the opportunity to 'grow up'; social issues; and pupils' general feelings towards the transitional process (both pre and post-transition).

Background and context

During the primary-secondary transition pupils move from one class to another, and also from one school to another which can be a daunting experience. This process is a significant part of a child's education, but this transition can be a source of discontinuity within the educational system (Capel and Piotrowski, 2000; West *et al.*, 2010).

As long ago as 1980, Her Majesty's Deputy Senior Chief Inspector of Schools in Scotland, Andrew Chirnside, used the metaphor of the pantomime horse to describe the attempts by primary and secondary schools to achieve progression and continuity in pupils' learning. He argued that, like the pantomime horse, primary and secondary schools would like to be moving in the same direction, but it was difficult to get their legs moving in rhythm, and it was not helped by the fact it was dark inside the costume (Boyd, 2005). In Wales it has been a similar story, the Welsh Government set out its commitment to improving continuity and progression for all pupils during the transition from primary to secondary school through a series of reports including *The Learning Country: Vision into Action* (2006). As a result of the Education Act of 2002 the Welsh Government (formerly the Welsh Assembly Government) introduced a requirement in 2006 that maintained secondary schools and their maintained feeder primary schools draw up transition plans jointly to support the transition of pupils from primary to secondary school. However, in a report entitled *The Impact of Transition Plans* (2008), Estyn confirmed that whilst positive steps have been made to improve pastoral support during transition, only a few schools in Wales have effective arrangements in place to secure an effective overall process.

The majority of the literature surrounding the primary-secondary transition centres on three sets of issues. These are, first, the emphasis placed on social issues over

academic issues during the transition to secondary school (Ashton, 2008; Measor and Fleetham, 2005); second, the vast structural, philosophical, social and educational differences between primary and secondary school (Boyd, 2005; Nicholls and Gardner, 1999); and third, pupils in transition (Anderson *et al.*, 2000; Graham and Hill, 2003).

Social and academic issues during transition

It has been reported that schools need to achieve a better balance between academic and social concerns at various points of transfer and transition (Morrison, 2005). The majority of studies have focused on the social adjustment of pupils to the change of school, rather than the impact of school change on academic performance (Galton *et al.*, 2000). Only a small number of studies, including two by Local Education Authorities, have considered the impact of these changes on pupils' academic progress (Galton *et al.*, 1999). For example, Measor and Fleetham (2005) reported that 90% of transfer initiatives involve social and organizational aspects of transition, but only 16 % of them tackle the academic ones. This imbalance can have a negative impact on pupils' academic progression during the primary-secondary transition. Pupils often slip back when they move from primary to secondary school because they do not receive teaching appropriate to their needs and abilities (Estyn, 2008). Moreover, Farrell (2001) claims that 'pupils should feel part of the school community, by ensuring that academic and pastoral structures work together' (p.133). Yet in spite of this widespread perception, Ashton (2008) found that in general, students' heads were full of the social and environmental aspects of moving school, and until these issues were resolved they were not ready to think about the content of the lessons.

One of the most pressing concerns, therefore, is the social issues that deflect pupils' attention away from academic progression during the primary-secondary transition. Youngsters typically come from small, 'familial' primary schools with well-established social groups into larger, less intimate secondary schools, and have to re-establish social relationships during a time when peer relations are particularly important (Pellegrini and Long, 2002). One of the most prominent of these social concerns is relationship building. Friendship features amongst the greatest worries for children even if making new friends is one aspect that many anticipate with excitement (Pratt and George, 2005), and dealing with these issues can be difficult. Strategies such as transition days and form group meetings prior to transition are thought to be essential to ensure pupils feel comfortable with the secondary school environment (Estyn, 2008). They allow pupils to become familiar with aspects of the school that they are concerned about, begin to form new social relationships with their new peers and experience some of the key differences between primary and secondary schooling.

Primary and secondary school: the differences

There are three important differences that pupils experience as they make the transition from primary to secondary education – they are linked to structure, philosophy and status (Boyd, 2005). Structure refers to the discrepancy in size between the two settings, having one teacher in primary school to having several in

secondary school, as well as a wider variety of subjects in the latter. Philosophically, the primary curriculum is based on broad areas, while in secondary school specific subjects dominate. There is also a general perception among the teaching profession as well as the population at large that secondary education is somehow of a higher status than primary education (Boyd, 2005). This final point is an issue that may seem to have little relation to the transition, but Boyd (2005) argues that if both stages of the educational system are not valued equally, this can have a direct impact on pupils during transition. These challenges are linked with different approaches to learning and teaching (Nicholls and Gardner, 1999), and are summarised succinctly in Table 1.

Table 1

Primary Education	Secondary Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual attention - One-third of the time in class teaching - A high degree of group work - Infrequent change of teaching style - Opportunities for the teacher to pursue projects, topics and themes based upon children's interests <p style="text-align: center;">(Geen, 2005, p.271)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase in whole class teaching - Higher proportion of time spent on clearly defined task work - Different expectations from different teachers and subjects - More teaching to meet external needs such as GCSE

Source: Adapted from Geen (2005, p. 271)

Together, these differences highlight a discontinuity between a primary school environment concerned with individual teaching, and a secondary school class environment concerned with promoting whole class teaching. Coupled with the differences in structure, this has the potential to contribute to a challenging experience for pupils.

Pupils in transition

In order to prepare pupils for the social turbulence of transfer to a new school, social/pastoral approaches require the involvement of pupils, parents and teachers (Capel *et al.*, 2007). There is near universal agreement amongst academics and practitioners that the majority of pupils express some concerns and anxieties about a range of issues associated both with the formal school system (e.g. the size of the school) and informal system of peer relations (Anderson *et al.*, 2000; Graham and Hill, 2003). Surprisingly the pupil voice has played a relatively small part in understanding transition arrangements, policy, practice and research related to the primary-secondary transition. In a report by Estyn entitled *The Impact of Transition Plans* (2008) pupils were questioned about aspects of transition they find useful and aspects of transition they would like to see improved. Pupils identified transition

activities, induction days, transition projects and planners useful during the transition process. Pupils also suggested that they did not like the varied expectations from teachers and doing work they have done before. A study by Ashton (2008) identified, perhaps predictably, that pupils' concerns included, friendships, bullying, getting lost and sole children.

In order to gain a complete overview of pupils' thoughts and feelings during this challenging time, it is important to discuss all aspects of the transition including academic issues, social concerns and, in particular, what the pupils are looking forward to about secondary school. It is for these reasons that an exploratory and flexible research design was chosen for this study – one for which ethnography is ideally suited (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Willis, [1990] 2012), and has provided some of the most significant landmark contributions to the sociology of education (e.g., Ball, 1981; Corrigan, 1979; Lacey, 1970; Willis, 1977).

A brief note on method

Two schools in metropolitan Wales were chosen for the fieldwork, City Comprehensive School (with pupils aged 11 to 18) and its 'feeder' Urban Primary School (with pupils aged 3 to 11) – both names are pseudonyms. Their selection was a combination of purposive sampling (ref) and logistical expediency. The ethnographic approach provided an opportunity to 'explore phenomena within context in the natural setting' (Morse and Richards, 2002, p.48). Eliciting the views of young people has been a feature of past school-based ethnographies (Ball, 1981; Corrigan, 1979; Fleming, 1995; Lacey, 1970; Bergin and Cooks, 2002). The use of 'pupil voice' in the present study meant it was important to develop dialogical practices in which young people wish to take part, and engage in a young person's own culture and communication (Christensen, 2010). For example, as well as questioning the young people about the topic of research (the transition), it was important to take an interest in the pupil's hobbies, whilst communicating on a personal level, which was made possible by the long-term immersion in the school – a characteristic of ethnography (O'Reilly, 2009). In order to manage this process the role of a Classroom Assistant was adopted by the Principal Investigator (first author) during two different seven-week phases of data collection that included daily observations and reflections on the transition process as well as interviews and informal discussions.

The intention was to gain a nuanced insight into pupils' thoughts and feelings during pre-transition at Urban Primary School during June and July 2011, and then explore their actual experiences post-transition having settled into day-to-day life at City Comprehensive School during October and November 2011.

Research that involves young people in a school-based setting requires thorough consideration of its ethical implications. Approval for the project was sought from and provided by the [REDACTED] Research Ethics Sub-Committee. The Principal Investigator had an enhanced Criminal Record Bureau check and provided a careful explanation of the project to both the members of staff and the pupils. Consistent with established good practice in educational research (BERA, 2011); appropriately different information sheets were prepared and distributed to the Headteachers of both schools, to the teachers, parents and pupils. Consent was

provided by parent(s)/guardian(s), and assent was given by the youngsters themselves.

In addition to observations and interviews, classroom activities were also conducted to enable pupils to express themselves through drawings and mind mapping. Whilst still at Urban Primary School pupils were first asked in groups to note positive and negative aspects associated with 'going to secondary school'. Later, at City Comprehensive School, they completed mind maps that focused on positive and negative aspects of 'being in secondary school'. The data were then subjected to an inductive thematic qualitative analysis (Gratton and Jones, 2004).

Discussion of findings

This following section addresses the four substantive findings from the study (see Figure 1). It draws upon data from pupil interviews, informal discussions, observations and mapping activities, and is set within an overall framework that centres on 'perception to reality'.

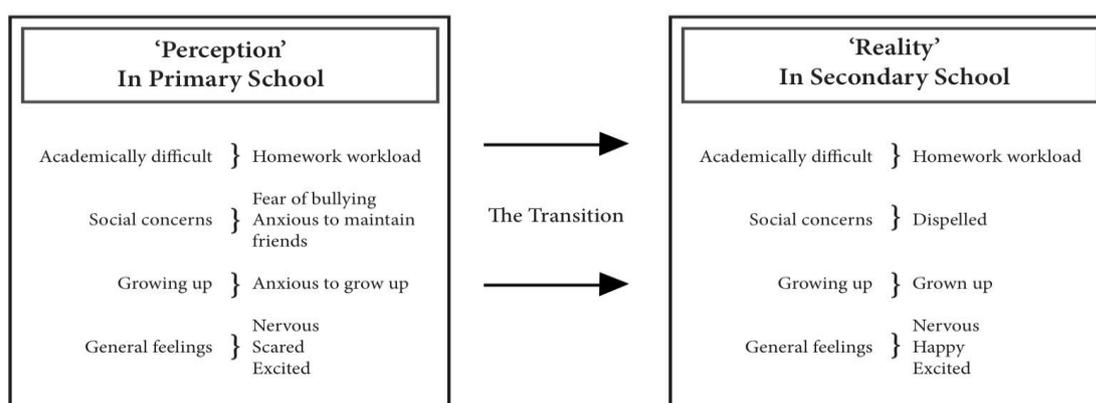


Figure 1. From perception to reality: The process of transition through the eyes of the pupils

The importance of academia

The present study revealed that during transition pupils placed a great deal of emphasis on 'academia' in its broadest sense – that is to say, academic achievement and attainment, workload, and homework. Previous studies have indicated that that only when social issues have been dealt with will academia come to the forefront of pupils' thoughts (Ashton, 2008; Measor and Fleetham, 2005), but for the youngsters who left Urban Primary School and who went to City Comprehensive School this was not the case.

There were two main reasons for the emphasis the pupils placed on academia. First, for the majority they were concerned that the workload and especially homework when they got to the secondary school would be too difficult for them, and that their work would not be to an acceptable standard. Jane explained: "I am going to have to

go up another level; it's nothing like primary school." Second, for others the transition to secondary school could not come quickly enough, they were looking forward to the challenge of secondary school and the increase in the difficulty of the work. Jack, one of the higher achieving pupils in the class at Urban Primary School, and seemed to relish the prospect of being challenged: "in primary school at the moment not a lot of things are challenging, it's boring and I want to do some harder tasks so I'm ready for secondary school."

By the time the pupils had settled in at City Comprehensive School they discovered that there had indeed been a 'step up' academically, as expected, and the reality was that for some it was a struggle with an increased amount of homework and elevated difficulty of work. Alex reflected: "it's a lot harder, like we don't get as much time and if we mess around we get detention." He was not alone, Mark concurred: "here [in secondary school] you don't get as much time to do your work, so you have to do it quickly and make sure it's good." The reality was that the pupils felt that they had gone from one extreme to another, having one piece of homework a week in primary school, to receiving several pieces of homework from a number of subject areas and teachers daily. It was also more demanding.

On a positive note, although some of the pupils found the work difficult, they really did enjoy the new level of expectation. Claire was forthright: "like here [the secondary school] the work is harder, but it's a challenge and it's more interesting than primary school."

Social issues during transition

Alongside the emphasis placed on academia were the social issues involved in the primary-secondary transition. Although they were cited by pupils less frequently than those linked to academia, they were still important and centred on two main issues – bullying and friendship. It was noticeable that myths and hearsay contributed to the expectations of the pupils while still at Urban Primary School. Some thought, as Luke did, that "the kids are more aggressive they might bully you there."

Perhaps in response to this there was an added emphasis placed on existing friendship patterns amongst the youngsters, and anticipated reliance on them. Luke was clear: "I want to be in the same class as my friends so I can settle in easier." This view was shared widely and the established social support networks were considered essential, and certainly preferable to forming new friendship groups. In short, evidence from the present study reinforces the suggestion from Pratt and George (2005) that friendship a source of comfort for the pupils and a shield against fears of bullying.

Bullying by older pupils is a frequently cited concern for pupils pre-transition (Boyd, 2005), as is name-calling from peers. Even for those who claimed to be unconcerned by the prospect of bullying, Ashton (2008) showed that they were still curious about it. Many of the pupils discussed the importance of talking to a member of staff if they had any concerns about bullying. In a discussion about moving to City Comprehensive School, Nick elaborated: "Yeah, they said it's good and gives you a good education and um they just said if people bully you in high school yeah you

have to go to the teacher straight away or it could get worse.” For some pupils being the youngest and smallest in a large and unfamiliar environment coupled with the myths that surround the transition add up to a vivid picture and an unavoidable fear of bullying. Nathan speculated: “... ummm maybe like bullying, like older people bully and urrm like, like you know when you play football or like at lunch time I’m scared kids might pick on me.”

Reassuringly, however, the reality of secondary school life was different and soon after arriving at City Comprehensive School many of the social concerns (including bullying) had been dispelled. After his initial fears, Nathan described the advice he would offer to pupils in the year below him at Urban Primary School: “I would tell them not to listen to anyone, I got told all the young kids get bullied but it doesn’t happen, people just try and scare you.” Nathan’s insight into bullying is important for two reasons. First, his attitude towards bullying had changed dramatically. From being concerned and anxious in primary school, he had become confident that bullying wasn’t part of secondary school life. Second, his description of the fear of bullying was almost as a ‘rite of passage’ for primary school pupils – a ritual that pupils have to endure during the primary-secondary transition often prompted by hearsay from older friends or relatives. To illustrate, while still at Urban Primary School Alex commented on the counsel he had received from a sibling: “Yeah my brother said that like kids get bullied in [secondary] school and that I need to be careful.”

In contrast, friendship did play a role for post-transition pupils at City Comprehensive. A prominent view had been the anticipated importance of maintaining existing friendships after the move to secondary school. However, the transition brought a new set of circumstances, especially being in different classes from some primary school friends that created opportunities in which new friendships could be developed. Jemma explained enthusiastically: “Yeah I’ve met loads of new friends in my class and in other classes; everyone in my class is really nice.” Rachel confirmed: “Umm yeah I get on really well with everyone in my class, they are really nice and everyone gets on great.” Interestingly though, Paula added: “I still see a lot of my friends from primary school, which is nice too.” This was a common response, maintaining friendships were still a priority, but not as prominent as had been expected when still at primary school.

Growing up

Starting secondary school is a time of new subjects, several new teachers, increased responsibility and the freshness of a new beginning (Sellman, 2000). Urban Primary School is a small, cosy and familial environment. As already explained, by the time the transition to secondary school education was looming, some pupils felt that they had already outgrown what they saw as the ‘childish’ nature of the primary school environment and were ready for the hurly-burly unpredictability of secondary school. While still at Urban Primary School James anticipated the new spatial arrangements at City Comprehensive School: “It’s going to be cool not staying in one classroom and moving around the school more”; and Alex was keen to explore the prospect of increased autonomy and independence: “In high school you get treated with more freedom and not little children, and if you get treated older then you are

going to turn out like one aren't you." The message is one of uncomplicated self-fulfilling expectation: if pupils get treated like grown ups, the likelihood is they will become more grown up. Moreover, Rebecca associated life at City Comprehensive School with productive academic work and scholarly performance: "In secondary school we will get treated like grown ups so we will get more done." A previous empirical study by Galton *et al.* (2003) sheds light. In it, pupils wanted and expected to be treated more like adults and to be granted more autonomy and trust; though they also warned that disappointment can lead to disengagement. What the pupils at Urban Primary School were looking forward to was the opportunity to be more independent and to take on new responsibilities – for example, to travel on buses to get to and from school (see also Ashton, 2008).

Having perceived secondary school as an opportunity to grow up and take the next step, it quickly became clear that the pupils seemed to thrive and flourish in their new environment at City Comprehensive School. Eric responded positively: "It's like more grown up like you carry all your stuff around, you have loads of classes and you have to do your homework or you'll get into trouble." Importantly too, when asked if they missed Urban Primary School the most pupils agreed with Harry, "Not really, I miss some of the teachers and stuff but I like secondary school and in primary school all the kids are really small. Secondary [school] is more grown up like you have to carry your books and stuff around."

Mixed feelings during transition

In addition to the particular themes associated with the transition from primary school to secondary school (i.e., academic, social, growing up), there were also some general impressions that informed the lived experiences of changed schooling. During the first series of interviews at Urban Primary School pupils were invited to summarise their feelings towards the move to secondary school in three words. The responses were a mixture of excitement, happiness and 'readiness' as well as anxiety, nervousness and sadness. That is to say, their feelings were mixed (Ashton, 2008; Measor and Fleetham, 2005), and a consequence of some of the more specific expectations already described.

It is not unusual for anxieties like these to ease or even evaporate altogether very quickly when new arrivals settle in at secondary school (Graham and Hill, 2003), sometimes being replaced by others about, for example, peer relations and the school system (Zeedyk *et al.*, 2003). Having spent only a few weeks at City Comprehensive School, the pupils in the present study were generally content. Like Rebecca, many reported feeling "happy, anxious and excited" about being in secondary school and the remainder of the year ahead. This was the general consensus among the pupils, inevitably, towards the end of primary school pupils became nervous, anxious and in some cases scared, however once in secondary school these feelings developed into happiness and excitement with a hint of nervousness about the upcoming challenges of secondary school.

Conclusion

Prior to moving to secondary school, the pupils at Urban Primary School tended to have a negative perception of secondary school. They viewed secondary school as academically more difficult, socially challenging, and had been persuaded by some of the myths that surround the transition to secondary school. In short, these anxieties and concerns were fuelled by the unknown. Academically, the pupils' perception of secondary school matched the reality of it, identifying an increase in workload, homework and range of subjects, which the pupils found difficult to manage. Socially, the pupils' fears of bullying diminished as did the importance of maintaining friendships – the latter being replaced by a desire amongst many to make new friendships. For many pupils there was an 'appetite' for the next stage of their lives and the concerns linked to uncertainty eased considerably very quickly. Indeed it may be that previous priorities of personal and social 'issues' are now catered for effectively (see OFSTED, 2008) – at least at these two schools.

There are two future research directions and limitations of the study. The first is to explore pupils' perceptions of the transition later on in the transition process (i.e. in year 8). This will enable comparisons to be made between pupils' experiences immediately after transition and a year into secondary school. The second surrounds the number of schools involved in the study and how accurate these schools represent the transitional process. A future research direction might be to include Welsh-medium or faith schools to incorporate perceptions of pupils from various backgrounds.

The key underlying message to emerge from the present study is therefore one of managing more effectively the expectations of pupils prior to leaving primary school. It is significant that academic issues during transition were more prominent in the thinking of these youngsters than had been found in other studies (Ashton, 2008; Measor and Fleetham, 2005). If Urban Primary School and City Comprehensive School are typical of many schools in metropolitan areas throughout the UK (and there is no reason to think that they are not), then it seems timely to renew emphasis on the academic transition with social/pastoral arrangements seemingly working well.

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