
**THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL TRANSITIONS AND
TRANSFERS ON PUPIL PROGRESS AND ATTAINMENT**

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ISBN 1 84185 050 0
September 1999

Introduction

In January 1999 the DfEE commissioned a review of the effects on pupils' progress and attitudes to learning of two related experiences: the move from one school to another (*transfer*) and the move from one year group to the next within a school (*transition*).

In addition to reviewing existing research (mostly from the U K and the United States) the team approached schools and LEAs; national agencies such as OFSTED and QCA also provided valuable information.

Key findings

The material reviewed leads to the conclusion that during the past two decades a great deal has been achieved. Transfer is better organised from the point of view of teachers, pupils and parents. The induction process has become more user-friendly with the result that fewer pupils experience sustained anxiety about the move to the new school. Much, however, remains to be done. Our evidence suggests the need for:

- giving attention to transitions as well as to transfers;
- evaluating the impact of present transfer/transition strategies;
- giving attention to pupils' accounts of why they disengage or underperform at these critical moments;
- recognising when and how different groups of pupils become 'at risk'; and
- achieving a better balance between academic and social concerns at various points of transfer and transition.

Is there a hiatus in pupil progress at points of transfer and transition? Some evidence

There is a strong body of professional opinion among teachers that pupils' experiences of transfers and transitions can make a difference to their commitment to learning and to their progress. However, there is little evidence of a systematic kind that throws light on questions about the size of the effects, whether they are cumulative or merely temporary 'blips' in pupils' progress, and whether some groups of pupils - and some subjects - are more at risk than others.

Data from a study of pupils transferring into year 5 and year 7 by Hargreaves and Galton (in press)

suggest that there is a hiatus in progress for a substantial number of pupils. Typically, 45% of year 5 pupils failed to achieve a better result on tests of mathematics, language use and reading at the end of the transfer year when compared to the scores obtained one year previously in the feeder school. For year 7 pupils the corresponding average figure was 38%. We estimate that up to two out of every five pupils fail to make expected progress during the year immediately following the change of school.

This hiatus in progress is also accompanied by a decline in motivation towards some subjects. In year 7 there was also a less positive attitude towards school in general and this included a group of boys who, although doing well academically, said they were no longer enjoying school. One common indicator of motivation is the pupils' level of engagement on the task. In Hargreaves and Galton's study pupils were said to be 'fully engaged' if they were 'on task' for more than 75% of the observed lesson. In the feeder schools levels of engagement were high; between 70% and 60% of all pupils were 'fully engaged' for most lessons. However, after transfer the numbers of pupils 'fully engaged' fell by 5% in English, 12% in mathematics and by 26% in science.

Evidence from OFSTED inspections appears to provide some support for the professional view that transitions and transfers make a difference to rates of pupils' progress. Their most recent evidence (1999) suggests a 'dip' at around year 3/4 in primary schools. Across the national sample, inspectors rated pupil progress as 'good' or 'very good' in 47% of reception classes and 45% of year 6 lessons but only 35% of lessons in year 3 classes were rated in this way. A similar dip was noted in secondary schools at around years 8/9.

Transitions and transfers have different effects on different pupils. An NFER study for the QCA (see Minnis *et al*, 1998) suggested that certain groups of pupils made less progress in the primary school 'optional tests' than others - these were pupils whose difficulties have been highlighted in other policy initiatives: boys, for example, in relation to progress in reading and spelling and girls in relation to written and mental maths; pupils on free school meals, pupils with special educational needs, pupils who were less fluent in English and pupils from some ethnic minority groups (which ones depended on the particular subject being tested).

Why do pupils lose ground at points of transfer and transition? Some explanations

Information from recent accounts by teachers and pupils and from the research literature suggests a number of possible reasons for a falling off in engagement and progress, for some pupils, at critical points of transfer and transition.

For transfer, problems included difficulties in adjusting to routine aspects of the new environment such as travelling by bus to school, managing school meals, losing old and making new friends, coping with a variety of teachers and different expectations about work, managing to concentrate and learn across a wider range of subjects during the school day and week. Most of the anxieties associated with settling in appear, however, to be relatively short-lived.

Of greater concern are some other features of pupils' experience of learning at transfer: the impact of the long summer break on previous knowledge and skills; repetition of work from the previous year when pupils expect subject content and teaching and learning strategies to be 'new' and 'challenging' (and to sustain the excitement of the 'taster' sessions of the induction events); pupils feeling that the new work underestimates what they are capable of doing and achieving; organisational structures that give pupils a negative sense of themselves as learners.

In relation to sustaining progress across the year-to-year transitions at the secondary stage there were some slightly different concerns: pupils not seeing each year as offering new excitements in learning; pupils who are falling behind not having strategies to enable them to catch up so that they start the next year with confidence; pupils thinking that some years matter (i.e. the years with tests or exams) and that other years don't matter so much; pupils feeling disappointed with school because they are not given more responsibility as they get older; pupils not recognising the importance of continuities in content and in ways of working - and even thinking that year 10 is when you start on 'the work that matters' (see Rudduck *et al*, 1996, 1997).

At the primary stage the possible 'dip' in engagement and progress has had little research attention and the explanations are as yet more tentative.

What are schools doing about transfer and transition?

The survey of current practice carried out for the review revealed that there are five main categories of activity:

1. *Administrative approaches* which highlight exchanges of information, usually at the level of

the individual teacher, or organisational approaches which bring pyramid schools together in a working relationship.

2. ***Pupil-centred approaches*** which concentrate on preparing pupils for the social upheaval of transfer and help them cope with the organisational and social novelties of the new school.
3. ***Curriculum continuity approaches*** which involve exchanges of material and teachers or which may involve pupils in projects that start in year 6 and are completed in year 7 in the new school.
4. ***Pedagogic approaches*** which seek to engage pupils by involving them in new ways of teaching and learning.
5. ***Approaches which give priority to exploring and explaining the purpose and structure of learning in the new setting*** (including, perhaps, ways of assessing and improving learning) and which recognise pupils' needs - and capacity - to develop a language for thinking about learning and about themselves as learners.

The new technologies are being used to promote more efficient work in categories 1 and 3 - for instance, improvements in the transfer of records. In some settings ICT is also used to enhance learning (for example, when specialist subject teachers from the secondary school provide lessons for primary pupils by means of video-conferencing).

Amongst the schools which have adopted more innovative approaches to transfer, most are concentrating on extended induction programmes in which pupils are prepared for learning in their new school or new year group. Some of these programmes involve parents, some include counselling sessions for pupils deemed to be at risk, and some involve 'tracking' procedures to check whether the more able pupils are being sufficiently stretched.

In a small number of transfer schools, pupils are being inducted into the job of being a 'professional' learner (categories 4 and 5) and are being helped to understand and apply criteria for identifying work of quality so that they feel more in charge of their own progress, more able to talk about the strengths and weaknesses of their work, and more able to manage their learning effectively. However, it is rare for these innovations to be rigorously evaluated. To what extent they bring about improvements in pupils' attitudes and academic performance remains to be determined.

Schools are also giving attention to the dip in engagement and progress at year 8 and strategies include: making year 8 special by giving it a stronger identity in relation to learning; providing opportunities for dialogue about schoolwork with teachers or with older pupils; developing recognition and reward systems that acknowledge effort and different kinds of achievement; making more opportunities in lessons for pupils' own ideas to be explored and respected. Although schools are now more aware of a possible dip in progress at around years 3/4, as yet we have little information about what schools who recognise it are doing about it.

Recommendations

The review was conducted on the common understanding that we need young people who can sustain, through primary and secondary schooling:

- * an enthusiasm for learning
- * confidence in themselves as learners
- * a sense of achievement and purpose.

It follows that it is important to look at and understand more about the impact on performance and on attitudes to learning of the routine breaks in learning that occur as pupils move from one year to another and from one school to another.

Recommendations to do with transfer

- Transfer-related activities such as improving the communication of key stage test results, holding summer schools for pupils at risk or setting up joint primary-secondary projects in the term before transfer are important but they will not in themselves overcome the problems of transfer. More radical approaches are needed which give attention to discontinuities in teaching approaches, which look at the gap between pupils' expectations of the next phase of schooling and the reality, and which help teachers develop strategies for helping pupils manage their own learning.
- There is a need for research that would plug gaps in the existing knowledge base. The National Numeracy and Literacy strategies have a part to play in reducing problems of transfer, as do various other initiatives such as summer vacation 'catch up' programmes, homework and breakfast clubs. It will be important for policy makers to have some understanding of the relative impact of these different initiatives in conjunction with those which schools themselves put in place. The evaluation could usefully focus on the impact of the strategies on the progress of pupils identified

- There is a need for better base line information against which the impact of the various initiatives currently being put in place by LEAs and schools could be evaluated. The 'optional tests' developed by the NFER for the QCA are increasingly being used by primary schools as part of their target setting and would provide appropriate information for tracking pupils' progress over time. However, there is currently no equivalent at the secondary stages.

Recommendations to do with transition

- Schools need to find out how pupils see each of the transition years and present a picture of 'the next year' that makes pupils look forward to it with excitement - in terms of opportunities both to extend their learning and to be 'more adult' and responsible.

Recommendations to do with transfer and transition

- In relation to both the start of a new phase of schooling and the start of a new year, schools need to develop structures which allow pupils to ask about things they don't understand, particularly their concerns about classroom learning and the expectations of their new teachers.
- Schools need to consider the possibility of providing flexible teaching which takes account of differences in pupils' preferred learning styles (paying particular attention to gender differences); in this way fewer pupils may become disengaged.
- Teachers are likely to need support in developing skills in evaluation so that they can judge the impact of their interactions on pupils' progress.
- As more schools seek ways of raising standards by reducing the negative impact of transfers and transitions on pupil progress, it will be important to provide a record of 'successful practices' which schools can use and build upon. This record would not only describe a practice which the school would recommend but also the degree to which it has been effective in a particular context.

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