

Outreach Approaches for 'At Risk' Incoming Secondary Students

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Abstract

This briefing outlines how a holistic service targeting potentially “at risk” young people during a period of transition could help them fulfil their potential.

Keywords

Children and young people, Education, Inclusivity, Transition, Wellbeing

Key Points

- The transition from primary to secondary school is a crucial time in a young person's education. Some charities do focus on periods of transition but there is limited discussion about the move to secondary school, and the years S1 to S2.
- Finding out what matters to young people and helping them design new programmes allows them to have a say in their future which research suggests makes more effective services. The participants can affirm how they will proceed and eventually, how they have benefited.
- Scotland needs more services focused on positive transitions during school. The introduction of a new project could not only verify current knowledge surrounding the subject, but also contribute to the research.

Background

This research briefing will consider the ways by which we can better support young people in making a positive transition from primary to secondary school, including the years S1 to S2. Moreover, drawing from recent studies and intervention schemes, the briefing will discuss the benefits of developing a project that aims to redefine the issue of transition, and which frames young people as the solution, not the problem.

The transition from primary to secondary school can be a taxing time during which children are thrown into adolescence. The initial few weeks are vital in making new friends and becoming accustomed to a new curriculum. Although most children learn to cope in these first weeks,

those with learning difficulties or living difficulties such as poverty may take significantly longer.¹

Various charities have researched and implemented programmes examining transitions during childhood. For instance, Barnardo's highlights the importance of resilience factors during transition. For example, their work suggests young people are best equipped to overcome adversities during transition when they have a mentor outside the family or have the opportunity to ‘make a difference’.² The research affiliated with Barnardo's advises that transition services should aim to recognise children's strengths; should not concentrate excessively on protecting children from risk; and should

offer opportunities for volunteering, part-time work and other prospects that allow them to exercise agency.³

Childhood in Transition is a report from Save the Children that looks into the experiences of children living in Northern Irish communities most affected by poverty and the Conflict. Speaking to 196 children and young people, they found that children did not like when adults presumed they did not understand things because they were young or when people described them using negative language like 'spoilt' or 'a nuisance'.⁴

Young people (aged 13-18) believed adults think of them as anti-social and felt they were not involved in decisions or listened to; they sensed they were considered too young to take part in their communities; they also did not feel respected by most adults and subsequently, they lost respect for those adults who judged them.⁵

International research has largely found that children from more deprived socioeconomic backgrounds experience more problems during the primary to secondary school transition.⁶ Low income is a significant predictor for low educational attainment.⁷ Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that children growing up in poverty are more likely to feel a lack of control over their education and can develop resentment about mistreatment.⁸ The research found that efforts to support disadvantaged young people are most successful when they feel more involved in planning their own futures.⁹

A negative transition from primary to secondary school could bring about the onset of anti-social behaviour, alcohol consumption, smoking and unprotected

sex, which are all associated with low levels of educational attainment.¹⁰ Periods of negative transition can also influence the likelihood that a child will become a young offender.¹¹ The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions resolved that the worst behaved children are the ones that need the most nurturing.¹² Any development of transition studies should adopt this belief.

Findings

The research examined in this briefing supports the concept of early intervention for young people during the transition from primary school to secondary school, including the first two years of secondary school. The transition to secondary school is stressful for pupils and increasing self-esteem through an inclusive service will help with social adjustment and academic achievement.¹³

Charities' findings have emphasised how young people should be given a chance to 'make a difference' in their communities, be listened to and be involved in decision-making processes. Accordingly, young people should be invited to assist in designing new primary to secondary school transition services for themselves and their peers. Ensuring they work alongside the programme developers will allow them to gain experience communicating with people, perhaps including a mentor outside of their school and home who encourages a positive transition.

Much of the discourse addresses how it is challenging to demonstrate the impact that early intervention and transition programmes will have on the futures of children.¹⁴ The possibility of engaging young people in future consultations

and asking what matters to them when moving to secondary school, is perhaps motivation enough to initiate such a project. Conceivably, we may need to discount the possibility of depending on quantifiable results and accept that young people know what they want, and what is best for their own future.¹⁵

A potential project should aim to target young people in deprived areas, as supported by the correlations between poverty and transitional difficulties.¹⁶ It should discourage anti-social behaviour by encouraging young people into diversionary activities such as voluntary work and thus reduce the likelihood that the participating young people will become part of the criminal justice system.¹⁷ Analysis of the research suggests that the criminal justice system cements individuals' place in the cycle of poverty and aggravates criminal activity.¹⁸ Therefore, early intervention is vital in poorer neighbourhoods to help potentially "at risk" young people improve their welfare and educational prospects.¹⁹

If possible, the programme could work directly with schools and target young people who they believe may benefit from the initiative. This could overcome issues highlighted in the research, namely locating "at risk" children.²⁰ The first six months of secondary school and the decisions pupils make at that time are crucial in shaping the rest of their school career and potential involvement in risk behaviours.²¹ A new programme that is aimed at "at risk" children transitioning from primary to secondary school and is designed by young people would be a promising step. Such a project would encourage further research and development of services that ensure all children experience a successful

transition whatever their socio-economic status.

Aspects of our culture such as violence or alcohol misuse can have a negative effect on young people's behaviour and their relationships with adults.²² We need a project that is aware of the ways in which adults can imprint their behaviours onto children and that is designed by young people, for young people. Whilst it may seem difficult to discuss topics such as anti-social behaviour in an optimistic light, those planning interventions should firmly believe that young people are the solution to these problems. It is important that the project does not focus solely on preventing offending but additionally on encouraging the ambitions of young people to give them a positive transition and ultimately, a positive future. We should move away from adverse language like 'anti-social behaviour' and emphasise the importance of education, relationships and wellbeing.

Limitations

Scotland-specific research into youth transitions is limited and at present there are very few UK-based researchers who are looking into primary to secondary school transition. This briefing often had to adapt general transition studies concerning coping with change or topics such as puberty to better understand the concept of primary to secondary school transition.

Limitations

Ultimately, introducing an inclusive service with input from participants during a period of transition in their lives could benefit Scotland's young people. In

particular, there is a need for a decisive primary to secondary school programme which as of yet has not been executed extensively. Ensuring participants are at the heart of the service will bridge gaps in community involvement.

As mentioned, research has proven that targeting areas of deprivation could help break cycles of poverty. We need a project that will give “at risk” young people the opportunity to guide their own prospects with a well-structured and holistic programme committed to social change and to the futures of children.

Recommendations

It would be beneficial to gather insights from participants in a primary to secondary school transition project before, during and after its delivery. This would help us to examine the benefits of a positive transition approach after the service is up and running. It would also contribute to the lack of relevant studies specific to Scotland.

Young people should also be given an active role in designing services and programmes aimed at easing this transition and improving children’s wellbeing, educational attainment and future prospects.

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⁵ Haydon, McAlister & Scraton, 2010, pp.3-4.

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⁷ West, Sweeting & Young, 2010, p.22.

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¹² Ibid., p.200.

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¹⁵ S. Deacon, Joining the Dots; A Better Start for Scotland’s Children, (2011), <<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/343337/0114216.pdf>>.

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¹⁸ The Scottish Government, Preventing Offending; Getting It Right for Children and Young People, 2015, <<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00479251.pdf>>.

¹⁹ McAra & McVie, 2010.

²⁰ Ibid., p3.

²¹ NHS Forth Valley, 2016, p.11.

²² Deacon, 2011, p.11.

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