Young People's Primary to Secondary School Transitions:
Influences and Effects

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Abstract

This briefing will examine how periods of transition are interwoven with a young person's wellbeing, education and exposure to social deprivation.

Keywords

Children and young people, education, inclusion, inequality, transition, wellbeing

Key Points

- The transition from primary to secondary school can be a stressful time for young people.

- Getting It Right for Every Child is the Scottish Government approach aiming to improve and maintain the wellbeing of children and young people. Its eight indicators of wellbeing should be acknowledged when helping children through periods of transition.

- Poverty, education and anti-social behaviour are inextricably linked. 'At risk' children living in areas of social deprivation should be targeted for early intervention.

- Further research into the transition from primary to secondary school, including the years S1 to S2, is required.

Background

This briefing analyses how an adverse transition in childhood can bring about anti-social behaviour, as well as affecting educational attainment, risk behaviours and the cycle of poverty. It determines whether the transition from primary to secondary school – including the years S1 to S2 – requires the development of projects targeting young people during this adjustment.

Despite societal concerns about anti-social behaviour in Scotland and how it results in detachment from education, there is not enough research around students' transition from primary to secondary school. There is a need for further longitudinal life studies which examine the longterm effects that a negative transition can have on a young person's future prospects. A negative transition from primary to secondary school has been found to bring about the onset of anti-social behaviour, alcohol consumption, smoking and unprotected sex, which are all associated with low levels of educational attainment.[1]

Worries faced by pupils making the transition from primary to secondary school include coping with changes determined by others and not

themselves; meeting new teachers and pupils who may not understand the difficulties they are experiencing; and making friends and decisions that can affect their adolescence as well as adulthood.[2] Evidence concerning the importance of a positive transition is inconsistent and incomplete; in particular, there is very little UK research into the primary to secondary school period. There is a common assumption that a smooth transition to secondary school is required for maintaining educational attainment, but there have been few direct analyses of the effect of poor transitions on children's education, wellbeing and participation in anti-social behaviour.[3]

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) is Scotland's national approach to improving the wellbeing and outcomes of young people. It emphasises giving children the right help at the right time and from the right people.[4]

In order to achieve this a definition of wellbeing was agreed upon. SHANARRI is an acronym for the eight indicators of wellbeing that are necessary for a young person to reach their potential:[5]

1. Safety – Protect children from abuse and neglect at home, at school and in the community

2. Health – Help young people attain better standards of physical and mental health by providing access to healthcare and support in making healthy choices.

3. Achievement – Support young people sufficiently in their learning and development at home, at school and in the community.

4. Nurture – Ensure children have a nurturing place to live in a family setting, with additional help if needed.

5. Activity – Make certain young people have opportunities for recreation, play and sport.

6. Respect – Guarantee youths have the chance to be involved in decisions which affect them.

7. Responsibility – Give children opportunities to have an active role in their schools and communities with appropriate guidance if required.

8. Inclusion – Provide help to overcome social, education, physical and economic inequalities, and to encourage acceptance in their communities.

Implementing these objectives will ensure young people become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to their communities.[6]

In 2011, the Scottish Government adopted the Whole System Approach (WSA), which works in conjunction with GIRFEC and embodies the concepts that all agencies should work together to locate the children who are most in need of help, and put the young person and their family at the core of any support provided.[7] It also focuses on the idea of early intervention, ensuring this support is provided at an essential stage. Therefore, we should focus on the potential for social improvement as opposed to the risk of criminal activity.

In 2015 an evaluation of the WSA was published. It concluded that although practitioners supported the idea that

agencies should work together and that it is possible to measure the statistical reduction of youth crime, it is difficult to discern whether GIRFEC and the WSA ultimately give young people a better future.[8] This is because if the approach is successful, the young person is removed from the system and their progress can no longer be tracked into adulthood. The evaluation determined that although the WSA is working and youth crime statistics have fallen since its implementation, it is hard to monitor long-term results.[9] Offending by young people has halved since 2008-09.[10]

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions found that young people's participation in risk behaviours can be correlated with further involvement in criminal or deviant acts. The likelihood of this happening can be dependent on critical moments of a young person's life and in particular, periods of transition.[11] There is merit in transitional support and pre-offence intervention and there is a need for inclusive, proportionate and community-based services.

The study also found that offending can be linked to social disenfranchisement and early persecution.[12] Young offenders are more likely to feel cut off from their communities and their social exclusion is intensified when they are not kept away from the Criminal Justice System.[13] Thus, encouraging young people's involvement in their communities is favourable over punitive measures. The study recommends a holistic approach to youth offending but cautions identifying potentially "at risk" young people may not be a straightforward process.[14]

Generally, criminological research agrees that crime and victimisation in Scotland are concentrated in deprived areas.[15] The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (2012) found that victims of crime tend to be situated in neighbourhoods typified by unemployment, poor health and low educational attainment.[16] That we have access to indicators of deprivation means there is a possibility for early and effective intervention directed towards children living in such areas.[17]

According to one UK Government-funded study a successful transition from primary to secondary school for a young person would involve: making new friends and improving selfesteem and confidence; settling well into school life; benefiting from a relatively positive relationship with carers and parents; showing a growing interest in school work; adapting to new routines with ease; and experiencing curriculum continuity.[18] It is essential that we research how to help young people achieve a positive transition to secondary school and in turn, reduce risk behaviours, improve educational attainment and promote the wellbeing of Scotland's young people.

Findings

There are significant interconnections between education, crime and poverty that allow us to determine what a child may need during the transition from primary to secondary school. For example, some young people may benefit from chances to engage with community organisations in an effort to diminish their feelings of social disenfranchisement.[19]

Participation in communities may help divert 'at risk' young people away from poor decisions and damaging behaviour. Hirschi's social bond theory contends that people with a long-lasting attachment to

their community are less likely to offend than those who have a more fragile bond.[20] Studies should focus on how to tackle social disenfranchisement through an inclusive community-based approach. However, this is simply one of many issues that should be accounted for when examining the complex connections between primary to secondary school transition and social factors.

Further analysis of primary to secondary school transition that takes into account concepts from recent Scottish Government policies would be constructive. The Government's initiative GIRFEC and its eight indicators of wellbeing constitute a comprehensive approach which can be personalised and should be followed when investigating this topic or helping children make the transition to secondary school.

Putting young people at the heart of the thought process is essential. This will avoid 'managerialism', moving away from target-based punitive measures. Previous research and methods of intervention were too focussed on measurable data such as the statistical reduction of youth crime, which obstructed the formation of inclusive policies.[21] Moving forward, research and policies to target youth transition should instead communicate with young people and give them an opportunity to be involved in the decisions that will affect them.

International research into transition has largely found that lower socioeconomic status children experience more problems such as anxiety and low self-esteem during transition periods.[22] Thus, targeting young people whilst they are in a period of educational transition is a strategy that could prevent them from entering or remaining in cycles of poverty,

improve social cohesion and encourage educational attainment. Breaking the cycle of poverty, and ensuring it remains broken, could be crucial to giving affected young people a positive future. A lack of qualifications and obstacles to education contribute to a low pay/no pay cycle, whereby the impoverished are unemployed or stuck in low-paying jobs.[23] As mentioned, social deprivation is an important factor influencing antisocial behaviour and youth offending.

School-based environmental factors leading to risk behaviours such as alcohol consumption may have common effects amongst an institution's pupils. Therefore, research and initiatives for early intervention at the transitional phase from primary to secondary school could impact more than one of these negative behaviours and more than one child.[24] It is important to consider environmental and social factors both within the home and at school when identifying 'at risk' young people for whom a turbulent move to secondary school could severely affect their prospects.

Limitations

Although there are numerous studies looking into youth offending and school transitions, Scotland-specific research is sparse, particularly studies looking at transition from primary to secondary school. Most of the Scottish-based studies examined in this briefing are limited to the same few research entities or to Government analyses. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, it is difficult at present to monitor the long-term results of transition projects on the future wellbeing of young people.

Conclusion

Social and environmental indicators of risk behaviours including criminal offending, poverty and poor educational attainment are all interrelated and potentially exacerbated by a negative transition. The move from primary to secondary school is instrumental in a young person's education and social wellbeing. Primary to secondary school transition is a meaningful concept that further research, policies and services should account for.

Recommendations

It would be beneficial to now look at whether there are successful services currently focussing on the transition from primary to secondary school or whether this is yet to be implemented. Further data collection and analysis could be used to design the best possible programmes to benefit young people's wellbeing and their futures.

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