A review of Scottish Government plans for primary to secondary school transitions

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Abstract

This briefing reviews the Scottish Government's plans to ease the primary to secondary school transition and highlights key factors to be considered for the transition to be as successful as possible. As People Know How are running projects as part of the Positive Transitions Service to support young people ahead of and throughout the transitional period, this briefing provides further evidence for the value of this service. It is found that multiple factors impact the transition experience, including socio-economic status, emotional wellbeing, relationships with peers and teachers and the amount of preparation for increased independence. Existing research commonly infers that pupil's academic attainments suffer after transitioning to secondary school and that many feel unprepared for entering secondary school. The Scottish Government plan to improve transitioning through increasing funding to councils, with more funding awarded in light of COVID-19. The pandemic has further entrenched existing issues in transitioning and served to decrease digital exclusion as more families have had to rely on home technology to home-school their children. Efforts to improve the readiness for the transition will greatly impact upon the lives of young children in Scotland.

Keywords

Secondary school transition, Scottish Government, Positive Transitions Service, young people, COVID-19

Key points

- Generally, a challenging transitioning experience results from un-preparedness for curricular changes, new peers and friendship groups, and generally higher expectations not associated with primary school.

- The Scottish Government plan to improve child transitions by funding local councils and schools through the Attainment Scotland Fund.

- People Know How's Positive Transitions Service highlights the key areas children need support on when transitioning, such as resilience-building and guidance on developing independence.

- Third-sector organisations and experts largely agree that more ought to be done to improve transitions. A focus on emotional resilience training and improving relationships between teachers and pupils, are the two most significant recommendations.

- To manage transitional challenges, education needs to be invested in by local councils and committed to by the Scottish Government

Introduction

Research indicates that children's educational attainment generally declines after they start secondary school (Scottish Government, 2019b). There are numerous aspects of the primary-secondary school transition that can be challenging for many pupils. Reportedly, a poor transition generally involves a lack of curricular continuity between schools and lack of preparation, ahead of the transition, for a more independent approach to education. Therefore, the Scottish Government recognise the need to implement policy on improving transitions from primary to secondary school. To do so research has been conducted on how the transition is experienced and how children are adversely affected (Scottish Government, 2019b). Such research at a governmental level is crucial as this will determine policy choices which, in turn, affect children's social, emotional and educational outcomes. This research briefing evaluates plans made by the Scottish Government to enforce successful transitions for Scottish pupils moving from primary to secondary school. The briefing starts by examining the factors affecting children in the transition; particularly those that have been highlighted by the work of People Know How's Positive Transitions Service. Secondly, the policy plans for the primary-secondary school transition put forward by the Scottish Government will be explored; assessing its weaknesses and strengths, particularly in relation to children's educational attainment and emotional wellbeing. Lastly, some gaps in current policy will be identified and recommendations for future policy changes will be presented.

Transitional challenges

The transition from primary to secondary school is one of the most challenging experiences young people face growing up and various factors have been shown to relate to a challenging transition and a decline in educational attainment. Some of these factors include evidence of lower grades, low attendance and poor relationships with peers and teachers (White, 2020). Indeed, the jump between primary to secondary school is generally regarded to be challenging for many – both in Scotland and internationally. However, there are accounts of positive transitional experiences. Successful transitions have been noted to be marked by good attendance, improved grades, extracurricular activity, good relationships with peers and teachers (White, 2020). This offers hope that the challenges many pupils face in the transition can be addressed ahead of their entry into secondary school. Transition challenges largely fall under social, academic and physical environmental categories. Social challenges include becoming the youngest age group in a larger school and engaging with new peers and teachers. Academic challenges include new timetables and studying a wider variety of subjects, a higher homework load and higher academic expectations overall. Lastly, physical environmental challenges include changes in class sizes, as well as navigating between different classrooms on your own in a new environment. These challenges run alongside the more general personal changes children face when becoming young adults (White, 2020). Thereby, the combination between external and internal changes occurring simultaneously have proven

overwhelming for many. Hence, it is important to ensure that pupils are well-prepared for the change well in advance of them entering secondary school so ease the transition and potential worries.

Facilitating positive transitions

In order to deflate the jump that currently exists between primary and secondary school, it is therefore crucial to introduce support measures to familiarise pupils with secondary level education practices and expectations. It has been noted that teaching social and emotional skills is particularly important in this regard. Furthermore, if this style of learning is introduced early on primary school, this can ease the transition for pupils in secondary school by allowing them to get used to the idea and develop strategies to adapt to a more independent lifestyle. Generally, children find seeking support from primary school teachers easier than seeking help from secondary school teachers, primarily as primary school teachers are perceived to be more "open, approachable and available" (Bagnall et al., p. 219). Secondary school teachers have reportedly found that personal preparation and pupils' mindsets greatly contributes to the ability of children to adapt to the transition. This is something they encourage primary school teachers to foster throughout their time in primary school. One secondary school teacher reported that 'children that can reason social problems, but seek help from staff when they haven't been successful in rectifying a situation, rather than bottling up issues (...) are excellent skills to possess' (Bagnall et al., p. 218). It is therefore advised that primary school teachers ought to do more to provide children

with emotional and social support and skills, in preparation for the social expectations in secondary school.

This is backed up by the Scottish Government (2019b) who emphasise the importance of emotional wellbeing of pupils in the transition. Poor emotional wellbeing and emotional detachment from school have further been found to lead to pupils decline in motivation and engagement in school – leading to poorer grades and declined educational attainment (Scottish Government, 2019). Therefore, it is important to ensure that adequate support and preparation is available to transitioning pupils, for them to settle into their new environment with ease. The Scottish Government notes that this can be helped by introducing transitioning policies focusing on developing a sense of school belonging. They highlight that relationships with peers, teachers and parents, class sizes, ethnic diversity all contribute significantly to this sense of belonging (Scottish Government, 2019b). This sense of belonging will diminish the repression and loneliness that many younger children have found to negatively impact on their experience of the transition. Such can be achieved through introducing specific transition-preparation workshops whereby children can visit secondary school before leaving primary, meet their future classmates and teachers and adjust to the larger school environment. Furthermore, support available outside of the direct school environment can similarly be beneficial. For instance, People Know How's Positive Transitions Service supports children ahead of, and throughout, the transition through various projects, such as Befriending. This project connects a befriender with a young person, providing them with a

safe environment and someone to talk to about any worries or fears they have going into secondary school (People Know How, 2020c). This is evidence of a successful measure for improving social isolation and children's skills in making friends; a significant aspect of the transition to secondary school.

Support mechanisms

Furthermore, Bagnall et al. (2019) have examined 'repression behaviours' in children, referring to the repressing of emotions from themselves and from others through concealing pent-up anxieties. This repression can cause children to feel alone and unsupported. National assessment targets and a lack of transition provision in primary schools has been suggested as potential triggers to such repressive behaviours (Bagnall et al., 2019). This is a key challenge that ought to be addressed amid our recognition of improving children's emotional wellbeing at primary school. Some children found that it was less about opening up (addressing repressive behaviours) and more about emotional self-management through building confidence required to cope with transitional changes (Bagnall, et al.,2019). In relation to this, People Know How's Pupils Know How group sessions have provided S1 pupils with support around the importance of building resilience and adjusting to the changes coming in high school (People Know How, 2020a). Using occupational therapy approaches, these sessions were shown to be effective in providing critical support relating to emotional wellbeing (People Know How, 2020a).

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic is adversely impacting upon younger people's mental health (CPAG, 2020). A YoungScot survey found that 80% of respondents felt their mental health had worsened during the pandemic (Young Minds, 2020). As such, larger efforts from education and health experts will be needed to accommodate the influx in challenges facing young people over the coming years. Some of these efforts should include improving the existing relationships between pupils and teachers whilst unable to meet face-to-face in schools, in order to ease the transition when pupils go back to school (CPAG, 2020). People Know How's Positive Transition Service has implemented new support mechanisms in response to COVID-19, with projects adapted to an online environment. For instance, the Transitions Club has brought children from secondary school together through social activities to enhance relationships and stave off loneliness whilst schools are closed (People Know How, 2020a). This was an innovative and productive quick response to the pandemic and is sure to improve the transitioning for those pupils. The Scottish Government would do well to learn from and provide resource for similar workshops.

The deprivation gap

From statistics based on the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), children from more affluent backgrounds have been shown to perform better than those from less affluent backgrounds (Scottish Government, 2019a). The statistics reflect the percentage of pupils in Primary 1, Primary 4, Primary 7 and Secondary 3 who achieved the expected CfE level for their stage in in reading, writing,

listening, talking and numeracy (Scottish Government, 2019a). The deprivation gap can be observed in these statistics, as a higher proportion of those from the least deprived areas achieved their expected level, compared to those from more deprived areas. In fact, a 13.5% gap between pupils from the 20% most deprived areas and the 20% least deprived areas who studied numeracy at Secondary 3 level has been measured (Scottish Government, 2019a). This reflects how significant socio-economic background is when measuring children's capability to perform well at school overall. The Scottish Government have outlined plans to increase funding through the Attainment Scotland Fund to help address the poverty-related attainment gap, with £50 million being directed towards the most deprived areas in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2020). This policy was established in June 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the funding is to be distributed across the nine 'challenge authorities' – local authorities with the highest levels of deprivation – to be redirected as each council sees fit. These are: Glasgow, Dundee, Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire, North Ayrshire, Clackmannanshire, North Lanarkshire, East Ayrshire and Renfrewshire (Scottish Government, 2020). This is a promising plan to address the deprivation gap in education. Moreover, a gradual improvement in the figures on the connection between socio-economic background and educational attainment has already been identified. Comparing to 2017-18, the percentage of children achieving the expected CfE level has increased slightly across most stages (P1, P4, P7, S3) and areas (reading, writing, listening and talking,

numeracy) (Scottish Government, 2019a). This indicates that there are some inconsistencies in the pattern of analysis generally relating to the deprivation gap. However, such analytic inconsistencies do not refute the existence of the poverty-related attainment gap and the need to address this, as closing the gap remains the "defining mission of this Government" (Scottish Government, 2020).

Moreover, with the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, children across Scotland have been pulled out of school and home-schooled, with parents who are either working or suffering the setbacks of furlough or unemployment. Home-schooling has demanded access to technology, which many low-income families don't possess. Pupils who were unable to finish primary school in the usual way, now face unusual physical guidelines whilst at school to minimise the spread of the virus when they start secondary school. These challenges have added to the existing obstacle course that exists in the transition. People Know How's Computer Delivery project has assisted in distributing computers and laptops to families who lack such technology since the beginning of the pandemic (People Know How, 2020d). This is a valuable societal contribution and have allowed numerous individuals to access online services and teaching during this time. Furthermore, the Scottish Government has, in addition to the £50 million funding to councils, promised £9 million to provide 25,000 laptops for pupils learning at home (The Scottish Government, 2020). These are positive progressions, however, to manage these challenges, education needs to be invested in by local councils and committed to by the Scottish Government. Researchers and lobbyists

agree that additional funding is required to ensure schools are properly funded and able to ensure every child is equipped for learning and to remove existing barriers (Child Poverty Action Group [CPAG], 2020). In fact, it has been suggested that schools implement 'poverty aware' approaches (CPAG, 2020). CPAG (2020) emphasises the need for schools to maintain regular contact with pupils and families during lockdown to improve communication during this period and make the transition for those returning to school as smooth as possible; particularly for those starting secondary school. CPAG (2020) further recommends increasing child tax benefit by £10 per child per week, increasing from the current £20.70 a week for the eldest child, and £13.70 for every other child (The Scottish Government, 2019b). It has been noted that this increase will help low-income families that have been struggling as a result of the pandemic and that such an increase would see child poverty reduce by five percentage points (Bradshaw and Keung, 2020; CPAG, 2020). Children from low-income backgrounds are more likely to experience poverty and are disproportionately affected by their transition to secondary school which is reflected in their academic attainment. As such, a move to eliminate child poverty and bring about greater equality across socio-economic backgrounds is necessary.

Pupils' voices

A recurring problem with existing research in the area of primary-secondary school transitions is that it tends to focus solely on negative transitions. Much of the research is similarly based of retrospective accounts given by children who have already lived through the experience, with little balance between these and preliminary experiences. As such, this encourages a negative discourse and focuses on problems rather than benefits of the transition (The Scottish Government, 2019b). To form a better understanding of the transitional experience, it is important to take the voices of pupils into account. People Know How's work is particularly valuable in this regard as they take into account the experiences of children and parents, from their practical engagements through the Positive Transitions Service. The Whit Dae Ye Hink project saw collaboration with parents to share knowledge and thinking points about the best ways to support children (People Know How, 2020b). This kind of engagement encourages and backs more pre-emptive research, which is useful for enforcing more positive changes to transitions.

Conclusion

There are many factors involved in the decline in educational attainment after the primary-secondary school transition, largely caused by the jump between schools leaving young people feeling unprepared with pressures academically, socially and emotionally. The introduction of new teachers and the tendency for these relationships to be relatively distant in comparison to primary school teacher relationships, add to the challenges young people face in the transition. So does the expectation and requirement to act independently, with some not feeling adequately prepared for this change. Social changes affect children differently depending on their mental and physical

health, and socio-economic background. Indeed, one of the more significant transitional issues as unchallenged socio-economic disadvantages in education further the attainment gap (The Scottish Government, 2020). The Scottish Government's plans to provide more funding to certain councils and to provide laptops during the pandemic to support home-schooling, are welcome support measures to address two of the most significant issues in school transitioning currently: the attainment gap, and the affects of COVID-19. In the future, younger people would benefit from a revised curriculum that provides teaching in emotional and resilience-building in preparation for secondary school, and Government funded workshops on transition preparations, such as those offered by People Know How. In light of the literature reviewed in this research briefing, recommendations for future policy include increasing child benefit to help parents cope with COVID-19, and improving relationships between teachers and pupils, to in turn, improve pupil's sense of belonging. With Scottish Government plans to increase funding, particularly to deprived areas, it will be interesting to see if this commitment is made and whether it goes far enough in improving the transition for young people.

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