



# Facilitating a successful primary- secondary transition

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### Abstract

This research briefing reviews international evidence of the determining factors for a successful transition from primary to secondary school. Studies worldwide have identified a strong and supportive pupil-family-teacher relationship as one of the most crucial influential factors for a positive transition with regards to both social and academic challenges many pupils experience. Studies on the transition experience suggest that, when designing supportive policies for future transition, it is essential to let pupils' voices be heard and involve parents in the process. This evidence aligns with research on Scottish children's experience of the transition. People Know How and their Positive Transitions Service has already played an important role in facilitating good transition experiences for young people across Edinburgh and East Lothian – involving pupils in the design of projects to ensure they are as helpful and relevant as possible. With their strong connections with young people, their families and communities, their service is an innovative example of supplementary support during the transition period.

### Keywords

Secondary school transition, primary school, secondary school, student development, Positive Transitions Service

### Key points

- The primary to secondary transition is a significant, often challenging, stage of pupils' development both in an academic and social sense.
- Major determining factors for a successful transition are situated in pupils' related ecological system, including the pupil themselves, family, teachers, peers, and physical environment.
- A strong and supportive pupil-teacher-family relationship is a key factor for a successful transition.
- It is necessary to let parents and teachers actively engaged and work together in assisting with potential challenges in the transition.

## Introduction

The primary-secondary school transition is widely regarded as a challenging period for pupils, both in Scotland and internationally. Indeed, Rice et al. (2011) state that these challenges are based on “simultaneous changes in school environments, social interactions, and academic expectations” (Rice et al., 2011, p. 246). A stressful primary-secondary school transition experience can impact on pupils’ psychological adjustment and wellbeing (Rice et al., 2011), which can lead to an increase in school absence, truancy, and a decline in school engagement (Evangelou et al., 2008). Furthermore, there exists indirect evidence demonstrating a decline in pupils’ educational outcomes after the transition (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). Overall, the negative impact on educational outcomes and pupil wellbeing illustrate the importance of gaining a greater understanding of how positive transitions can be facilitated. As such, this research briefing explores international evidence on the primary-secondary school transition. The briefing starts by discussing pupils’ the experience of the transition period and its overall influence on their wellbeing. Secondly, factors that influence pupils’ transitional experience will be explored, particularly emphasising peer and teacher relationships, school culture and academic responsibilities. Lastly, family support and involvement in the transition process will be examined, after which a conclusion will be drawn. People Know How’s Positive Transitions Service projects will be discussed throughout the briefing and used as a socially innovative example of how positive primary-secondary school transitions can be facilitated.

## Pupil wellbeing

The concept of ‘wellbeing’ encompasses several dimensions, including emotional and psychological wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, physical wellbeing, and social wellbeing (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019, pp. 11-21). Waters et al.’s (2012) Australia-based study demonstrates that one third of their 1500 student-participants had experienced a ‘difficult’ or ‘somewhat difficult’ primary-secondary transition. These students were also found to have worse social and emotional health than students who reported they had not experienced the transition as being difficult (Waters et al., 2012). However, studies have found that a negative transitional experience can be avoided (Evangelou et al., 2008; Gillison et al., 2008). Gillison (2008) concludes that pupils can adapt quickly and successfully after the transition if sufficient support is provided to fulfil their need for autonomy and ensure a sense of belonging. Langenkamp (2009) similarly notes that establishing a sense of belonging amongst pupils facilitate a positive transition experience and that good social integration correlates with good academic performance. Moreover, Howard et al. (2005) have found that orientation camps organised in the first week of secondary school and preparing pupils for the transition whilst they are still at primary school is key for facilitating a positive transition for Australian pupils. This allows the pupils to get used to their new school environment, peers and teachers; thereby minimising the risk of the transition being associated with anxiety and fear (Howard et al., 2005). Notably, preparing pupils ahead of the transition is the key focus of People Know How’s Positive Transitions Service. For instance, their Arts Therapies project

provides opportunities for young people to explore and express their emotions through the arts. Another project, Whit Dae Ye Hink, acts as a bridge between schools and families, listening to both parties to ease the transition to secondary school. In combination with in-school and family support, such services can prepare and support young people for the transition, through allowing them to explore what is to come alongside other young people, as well as with their parents or carers.

### **The secondary school environment**

Some pupils have similarly expressed negative experiences of coping with transitional changes surrounding the discontinuity in the school curriculum and secondary school environment (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). Booth and Gerard's (2014) US-based study demonstrates that, while many pupils enjoy the new environment in the secondary school and appreciate the opportunity to take more personal responsibility in the first year after the transition, they may still experience a lack of belonging to the secondary school environment in the second year after the transition (Booth & Gerard, 2014). Furthermore, Howard's (2005) Australia-based study argues that primary school culture emphasises care and nurturance of pupils and offers a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, secondary school culture is arguably more oriented towards teaching academic subjects; emphasising differentiation of pupils according to achievement (Howard et al., 2005). As a result, this change can generate experiences of fragmentation and isolation rather than cohesion

and bonding (Howard et al., 2005). By extension, then, it can result in anxiety, confusion and a perceived lack of stability and, subsequently, alienation and disengagement amongst pupils (Howard et al., 2005). Again, this illustrates the importance providing young people with enough socio-emotional support before and during the transition to tackle such challenges (Howard et al., 2005). It has further been suggested that giving pupils the opportunity to visit secondary schools with prospective teachers and organising joint social events between primary and secondary schools may be useful in this regard (Evangelou et al., 2008). Moreover, getting teachers and families involved in these information sharing events can be beneficial for pupils ahead of the transition process and may similarly ease parents' own anxiety surrounding the transition (Evangelou et al., 2008). Indeed, People Know How's Whit Dae Ye Hink project has done exactly that, with positive results. The Positive Transition's Service overall is built on the value of conversations and building relationships with others. This is similarly evident in the Pupils Know How project where pupils support one another and where they are themselves in charge of identifying what support is most relevant and beneficial to them.

### **Building strong relationships**

Furthermore, it has been argued that factors in a pupils' ecological system play major roles in a positive transition experience. Their ecological system, in this context, refers to the pupil themselves, family, teachers, peers and physical environmental (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). Studies on the transition

process tend to focus on the interplay of four distinctive groups: local authorities, children, parents and schools (Evangelou et al., 2008). The pupil-family-school relationship is often awarded specific attention (Jindal-Snape et al. 2019). High-quality relationships with teachers and peers are regarded as essential for facilitating pupils' academic development, school engagement and motivational resilience (Furrer et al., 2014; Langenkamp, 2010). Indeed, Jindal-Snape et al. (2019) note how the "perceived and real relationships with peers and teachers" (p. 17) was the most discussed aspect in discussing the transition from the pupils' perspective. Moreover, Benner's research on pupils in the USA shows that perceived stable friendship support relates to less social disruption, consequently higher school engagement and better academic performance (Benner et al., 2017). However, a 2005 study conducted in New South Wales, Australia, shows that young people's anxieties of "fitting in" new school environments and fostering peer-pupil-teacher relationships is one of the major challenges of the transition (Howard et al., 2005). Furthermore, Booth and Gerard (2014) note that a pupil's relationship with their teachers influence their perception of the school. To help laying the foundation for health and steady relationships between pupils, their peers and their teachers, it has been suggested that familiarisation with the new school environment and people prior to the transition can be beneficial to ease pupils' anxiety (Howard et al., 2005). Older pupils at the secondary school can similarly help ease the transition of new students through mentoring schemes or informal question and answer sessions. Having the opportunity to engage with

pupils already at the secondary school, hearing about their experiences and asking questions ahead of the transition can familiarise the incoming secondary school pupils with the secondary school system and experience. It also provides them with the opportunity to get to know pupils in the years above them, as well as their future class mates (Ashton, 2008).

### **Academic responsibilities**

It has been shown that a discontinuity in assessment (Smith et al. 2008), disciplinary practices (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008), teaching styles and academic expectations (Marshall & Hargreaves, 2008) present further challenges for some in the primary-secondary school transition. As opposed to in primary school, secondary school require pupils to bear greater personal responsibility for their work (Rice et al., 2011). While some report that they find the work too challenging, others report enjoying being challenged academically and being introduced to new subjects (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). However, the number of reports of negative experiences are significantly higher than those of positive experiences (Mackenzie et al., 2012). Ashton's (2008) suggests that letting pupils speak to secondary school teachers and/or pupils already in secondary school ahead of the transition, can help them understand what the expectations of them are. This includes both the amount of everyday school work, as well as the how subjects and classes are organised and scheduled (Ashton, 2008). Again, this illustrates the importance of involving pupils in primary-secondary school transition ahead of the actual transition. Furthermore, previous

research has discussed the interplay between pupils' academic performance, peer relationships (Benner & Wang, 2017) and wellbeing (Langenkamp, 2009). These studies suggest the need of integrated approaches to boost young people's academic performance. An example of what this can look like in practice is People Know How's Science Club, which encourages pupils to build good relationships with peers, as well as stimulate interest in learning. Being offered such support ahead of the transition can thereby be highly beneficial for pupils, as has it may have a positive impact on their educational performance and encourages the development of good peer relationships.

### Family support

There exists limited literature on parental perceptions of the primary-secondary school transition. Dillion and Underwood's (2012) study, on the perceptions of UK parents whose children are yet to experience the transition, reports more negative than positive attitudes in relation to the transition. However, parents whose children has already experienced the transition perceived it in a more positive way (Dillon & Underwood, 2012). This indicates that worries from parents may subside over time. Though the number of studies on factors relating to parents and family is limited, a stable parent-teacher relationship and parent-child relationship have been regarded as influential in effectively facilitating a positive transition (Smith et al., 2008; Waters et al., 2013; Wilcock, 2013). Several studies have shown how factors, such as consistent and ongoing support from parents and a parenting style that children and young

people perceived as supportive to their autonomy, result in a more positive transition experience (Hammond, 2016; Smith et al., 2008; Waters et al., 2013). Siblings and/or cousins can also have an impact on the transition experience. While siblings and/or cousins attending the same secondary school can be a protective factor to ease the transition anxiety (Mackenzie et al., 2012), it may also trigger negative feelings when they share their negative experiences, such as experiencing school bullying, with the transitioning pupil (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). The possible negative influence coming from siblings highlights the importance of making space to let pupils' voice be heard and ensure they are being listened to with regards to their worries and concerns. In particular, it is important to give pupils the opportunity to themselves recognise what support they feel they would benefit from – as all schools and year groups are different. As previously mentioned, the Pupils Know How project is a notable example in this regard. Furthermore, it is similarly necessary to involve the families of the pupils who are transitioning, as is done in the Whit Dae Ye Hink project, and work collaboratively with them, the school and the community ahead of, and throughout, the primary-secondary school transition.

### Conclusion

International literature pertaining to the primary-secondary school transition process have demonstrated consistent views on its effect and it is similarly consistent with Scotland-specific literature on this topic (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). This evidences that the transition experience is similar for many

pupils on an international scale – and in the United States and Australia in particular. Most studies show that pupils experience more negative than positive feelings regarding their transition experience. These negative experiences include a discontinuity in teaching style, as well as an increase in pressure and personal responsibilities (Benner & Wang, 2017; Booth & Gerard, 2014). These negative experiences can be expressed through a decline in school engagement and academic outcomes (Howard et al., 2005). Few pupils in the reviewed literature report positive feelings regarding the transition. Part of the explanation for this may lie in that the transition may be especially challenging as it takes place during an overall challenging period of puberty (Carlo et al., 2012; Waters et al., 2012). Furthermore, factors in the context of the pupils' ecological system are the most important factors for a positive transition. As such, stable and good relationships with family peers and teachers are crucial. It is similarly highlighted that involving pupils at all steps in the transition process is valuable to ensure that the support offered is good and

relevant to sufficiently prepare them for what is to come (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Furrer et al., 2014; Howard et al., 2005). This can be done through the organising joint social events between primary and secondary schools or organising orientation camps before the transition. Encouraging communication between primary school pupils and the secondary school – both pupils and teachers – can help them understand what lies ahead (Ashton, 2008; Howard et al., 2005). People Know How is an outstanding example of how projects can offer comprehensive services from pupils' perspectives to facilitate a good primary-secondary school transition. Particularly noteworthy are the projects Pupils Know How, Family Support and Whit Dae Ye Hink project that, in combination, involve the voices of teachers, families and pupils in the transition process. Overall, this research briefing suggests that support provided by organisations such as People Know How may be useful and applicable across countries and that there is much to be learnt from other countries approaches in facilitating positive primary-secondary school transitions.



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