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24 May 2022

Transition Literature Review – Primary to Secondary

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School Transition Literature Review

Summary and Key Findings:

The literature on pupil transition, from primary to secondary school, is diverse and covers a number of distinct areas. However, much of the literature is descriptive in nature and fails to posit secure evidence led solutions, particularly from a Widening Participation (WP) and Outreach perspective. A number of key insights and recommendations can still be gleaned:

- The transition phase can be both enjoyable and problematic, depending on the child and in particular their environmental context
- Adverse longer term consequences are more liable to centre on children from WP backgrounds with poor support networks
- The range of potential issues that children can and do contend with is very broad
- A number of pupil centred recommendations can be made in relation to intervention development

Contents

1. Methodology

This scoping review examines the academic and grey literature relevant to pupil transition between primary and secondary schools. This age point differs internationally but is at year 6 (age 10 at point of entry to secondary school) within an English context. The research literature was examined by utilising the following sources under the search term: 'school transition, primary to secondary':

- Web of Science
- Google scholar
- Mendeley
- EEF
- TASO

The search term has been drawn wide enough to include specific interventions that act to support the transition and to afford appreciation of the broader context in which the transition takes place. The review is intended to support further Theory of Change (ToC) development.

2. Introduction and Context

A variety of issues at the transition stage was highlighted by Ofsted in 2015, these included:

> *"too many secondary schools did not work effectively with partner primary schools to understand pupils' prior learning and ensure that they built on this during Key Stage 3"* and

> *"Leaders prioritise the pastoral over the academic needs of pupils during transition from primary school. While this affects all pupils, it can have a particularly detrimental effect on the progress and engagement of the most able".* (Ofsted, 2015) (note that this was in particular reference to information transmission between schools).

In addition, there has been a great deal of relatively recent research in this area but the majority tends to concentrate on the practicalities of transition and preparing children for potentially new ways of learning (Bagnall, 2020).   Much of the research is problematic in that it has been conducted in the USA (where there is a higher transition age), is small scale, non-longitudinal or is biased in selection (Coffey, 2013; Evangelou et al., 2008).

The move between primary and secondary school encompasses a broad range of changes and challenges for the pupil to face – not least the shift from one classroom teacher to multiple subject specialists, from oldest to youngest in the respective school, from typically smaller to larger school surroundings and often commuting

using public transport for the first time (Symonds and Galton, 2014). These environmental factors are often compounded by the transition into early adolescence where control of one's own autonomy and peer relationships become more important. A range of issues present themselves, as discussed in the next section.

3. Issues and Problems

The transition between primary and secondary school can set in train positive or negative pathways that can last for several years (Symonds and Galton, 2014). We can identity a number of 'needs' and potential risk factors:

- **Need for Safety** – the risk of bullying increases in school transition compared with transition between grades within school. However, fewer children seem to report the actuality (of bullying) after transition.
- **Need for Relatedness** – due to the more specialist nature of education in secondary schools teachers have less time to bond. There is also a period of relational instability within the peer group – however the majority of research indicates that children perceive greater emotional support amongst their peers after transition.
- **Need for Autonomy** – whilst children can approach transition expecting to be treated as 'more grown up', in actuality this is often negated by a teacher's desire for control. Only in the minority of schools is greater emphasis placed upon meta-cognitive and learning skills programs (Deakin Crick et al., 2010).
- **Need for Competency** – this can be understood in three main areas; task achievement, external feedback (from teachers/parents) and social comparison. All are likely to undergo changes with the potential for a more negative self-construct to develop (i.e. when the work set is too challenging, when teachers don't have the time to give individual feedback or when a previously high attaining pupil is now only average in comparison to others).
- **Need for Enjoyment** – one issue may arise where teachers adopt a, 'start from scratch' approach where core subject knowledge is re-enforced and ability identified independently of test results (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002). Less experienced learners are therefore advantaged but the more able temporarily risk becoming disinterested.
- **Identity Development** – This area has been analysed at length within sociological and ethnographic case studies but has not received a great deal of attention via the use of psychological frameworks. However, we can note that a larger group of potential friends, and new teachers, can facilitate identity development in several ways (i.e. the encouragement of existing and new interests and the 'ranking' of 'social cliques' relevant to their own position in a social hierarchy).
- **School Emotional Engagement** – a common finding across several studies shows that enjoyment of school decreases across transition (Wigfield and

Eccles, 1994; Schneider et al., 2008). This can be for several reasons including conflict with peers and teachers along with autonomy restriction. However, whilst some students might enjoy an increased level of autonomy not all of them do – in effect, it is not always the case that early adolescence also means a desire for increased autonomy (MacIver et al., 1986).

- **Academic Self-Concept** – Numerous studies (see Symonds and Galton, 2014: 11) indicate that academic self-concept is likely to change during this period but the evidence is split as whether this is generally positive or negative (but there is a period of self-concept instability).

- **Anxiety** – Whilst some children are highly anxious before transition others view it with eager anticipation. The general picture is that most children lose their transition anxiety after they move and feel comfortable in their new school after a few weeks

- **Gender** – For a variety of reasons, including anxiousness over early signs of puberty, 'girls' self-esteem is found to be lower and decline more often across transition than does boys', whereas boys are more likely to disengage from learning after transition as, *"in the unfamiliar peer group where intellectual and social abilities are initially unknown, the most salient markers of social status are aggression and physical prowess, which deviant boys display through active rejection of learning"* (Symonds and Galton, 2014: 15).

- **Family** – A number of studies have shown that increased parental involvement reduces a number of risk factors at transition (with active involvement as shown by school selection and providing the correct uniform, see O'Brien, 2005 and in raising self-esteem, see Osborn et al., 2006).

- **Ethnicity** – In the UK and US ethnic minority children are more likely to experience lower achievement (Wampler et al., 2002) and social difficulties (Holcomb-McCoy, 2011) at transition.

In relation to what commonly happens, and the deficiencies within it, Ofsted reported in 2015, that:

"'standard activities'.. included contact with primary schools, taster and induction days and opportunities for pupils and parents to meet with form tutors. The majority said that the information they gathered from primary schools focused on pupils' pastoral rather than academic learning needs" (p.17).

4. Effective Interventions

The range of issues at transition indicates a broad range of potential interventions to support pupils. However, we can discern a number of key issues from the research:

- As most pupils' anxiety levels fall back to normal after a few weeks, practitioners can make pupils aware that, before they change schools, most will **feel quickly settled in** to their new school.

- Voicing, fielding and counteracting **transition myths** and problems can also be useful (i.e. travelling to and from school, being separated from current friends, homework, higher academic expectations, older pupils, and bullying).
- Discussion of **support mechanisms** in their new schools can also be effective, thus creating a mental safety net (for those that are bullied after transition – and especially ethnic minority children).
- The **role of teachers** is also critical; those that give emotional support tend to have a positive impact on pupils' self-esteem. The efficient transfer of **pupil information** between schools could also be reviewed (so teachers can more effectively support their pupils). See Chapman (2021) for a seven point plan that centre's on school/teacher cross syllabus and school working.
- Managing **pupil expectations** for more autonomy would also be useful – in highlighting the potential of a fast paced academic environment that potentially limits increased autonomy (and the desire for teacher control).
- From a specific outreach perspective, further developing **career identities**, as they are forming at this age, could help to re-engage pupils within a diverse syllabus (Atherton et al., 2009).

In a systematic literature review of (international) school transition interventions between the ages 11-13 van Rens (et al., 2018) found that most studies were in agreement about key aspects:

- Involvement and good communication between **all stakeholders** is crucial (pupil and parent, primary school and secondary school) see fig 1 below re different stakeholder characteristics (*ibid.* p.50)
- To focus on (interpersonal) **relationships** (Coffey, 2013) (related to safety and belonging in particular) (see also Rice (et al., 2015) for a range of practices schools have used to support friendships)
- Support from **external networks** (particularly parental) is important (Topping, 2011)

Van Rens (et al 2018: 54) also makes the point that:

> *"Schools do not focus as much on their emotional climate as they do on academic requirements. This is particularly remarkable because, although the literature shows the need to help children to develop their social and personal skills and to enhance their self-esteem (Ashton 2008; Coffey 2013; Gillison et al 2008; Zeedijk et al. 2003), there is a lack of proven effective interventions in this area"* (emphasis added).

In addition, *"one of the main features affecting a successful transition is whether children received considerable help from their secondary school"* (*ibid.* p51). These can include the simple but effective: knowing how to get to the new school, information, support and taster days. Indeed not all children experience transition in the same way and it might well be beneficial to tailor support to those who need it

most (Waters et al., 2012) (i.e. those with existing depressive symptoms or anxiety and those already at risk of dis-engagement).
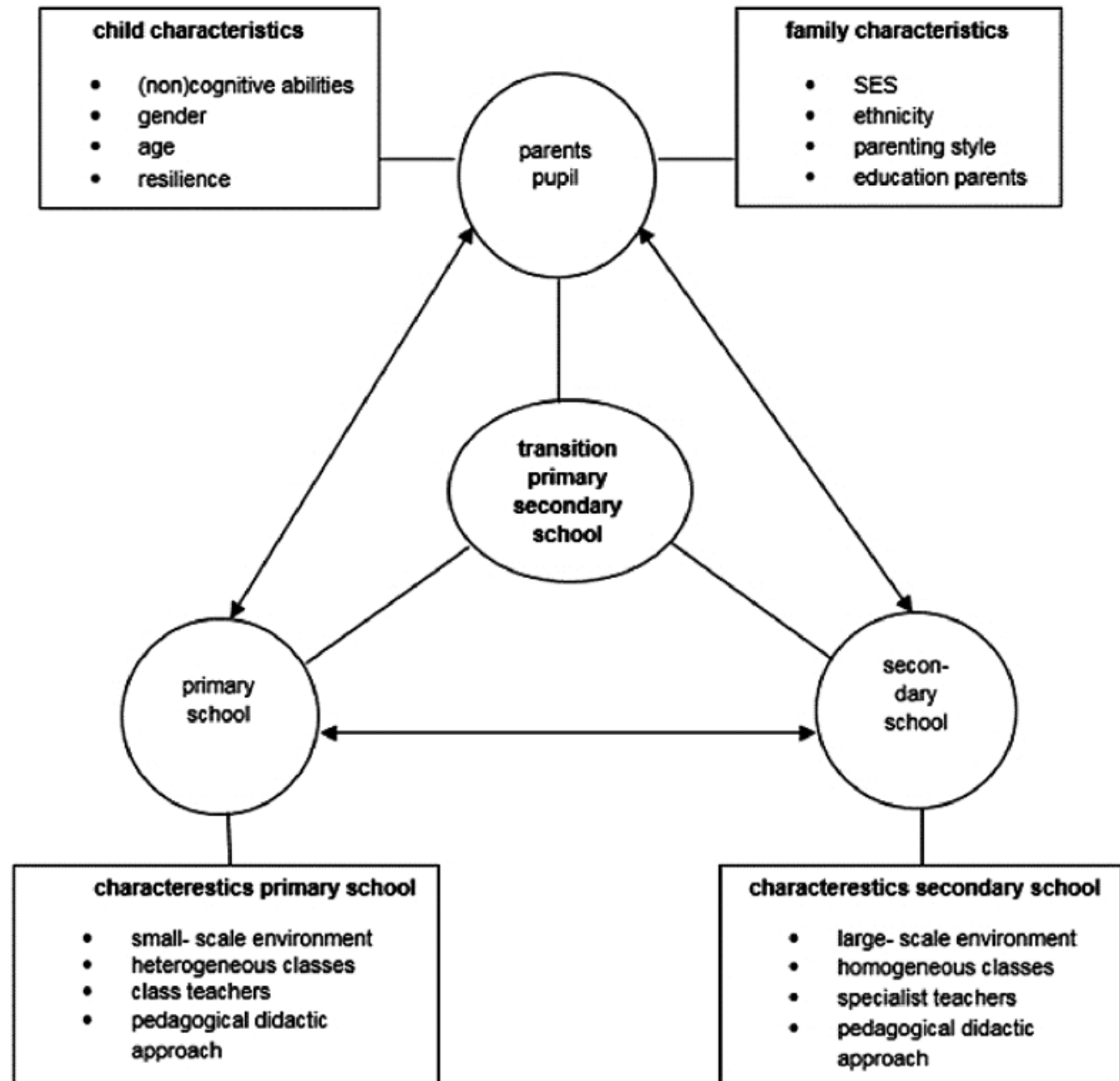
At a basic level, following the advice of Anderson (et al., 2000) might be a good start in the development of an effective transition intervention:

- developing a planning team,
- generating goals and identifying problems,
- developing a written transition plan and
- acquiring the support of all those involved in the transition process and evaluating the process

Another potentially effective means of conducting transition support involves **action research**. As noted by Van Rens (et al., 2018: 55); *"when teachers are able to explore teaching and learning through the eyes of the children, they might be able to develop strategies based on first hand evidence"*. Interventions that adopt co-created or bottom-up designs are more likely to be sustainable in the long run (Stormshak et al., 2016).

Finally, CenSCE's outreach provision is conducted via active learning and dialogical pedagogies, in stark contrast to more traditional didactic approaches (which, as a consequence, we can assume through contrast, would enhance whatever approach CenSCE adopts).

Fig. 1 Stakeholders involved in the transition primary–secondary school

child characteristics

- (non)cognitive abilities
- gender
- age
- resilience

family characteristics

- SES
- ethnicity
- parenting style
- education parents

parents
pupil

transition
primary
secondary
school

primary
school

secon-
dary
school

characterestics primary school

- small- scale environment
- heterogeneous classes
- class teachers
- pedagogical didactic approach

characterestics secondary school

- large- scale environment
- homogeneous classes
- specialist teachers
- pedagogical didactic approach

5. Measurement

Transition studies (see Symonds and Galton, 2014: 4-6 for a review) predominately encompass the pre and post transition year with the emphasis upon post transition adaptation. The majority of research conducted in the UK, starting with the Observational and Classroom Learning Evaluation (ORACLE) conducted in Leicestershire in the 1970's (Galton and Wilcocks, 1983) have used questionnaires or structured interviews to gather data.

We can also note that Evangelou et al. (2008) define a successful transition as consisting of the following five underlying dimensions:

(1) After a successful transition children have developed new friendships and improved their self-esteem and self-confidence;

(2) they are settled so well in school life that they cause no concern to their parents;

(3) interest in school and schoolwork has increased compared with primary school;

(4) they are used to their new routines and,

(5) the school organization and they experience curriculum continuity.

The above definition links all stakeholders and their interests.

However, the School Concerns Questionnaire (SCQ) (Rice et al., 2011) based on Thomasson (et al., 2006) offers a reliable means to measure psychological and emotional (pupil) concerns at transition, whilst not (obviously) covering all stakeholder concerns. The scale has the advantage of offering a standardised quantitative measure across several concerns. In summary, *"the SCQ is a simple checklist of seventeen concerns which pupils are required to rate on a Likert scale, It is simple and straightforward to complete, focuses on assessing current concerns and can be used both at primary and secondary school"* (Rice et al., 2011: 247). The aforementioned can be used in conjunction with other indicators of poor adjustment such as poor attendance, low attainment and behavioural problems.

Finally, a number of transition materials, and specific questionnaires related to parents, pupils, teachers and to predicting transition success are available through the START project at:

https://www.ucl.ac.uk/pals/research/clinical-educational-and-health-psychology/research-groups/school-transition-and-2

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