

**Making the move: the assessment of
student attitudes to Primary –
Secondary school transfer**

**S. M. Chedzoy and R. L. Burden
(University of Exeter)**

Abstract

A review is provided of past and present literature on the reactions of students to transfer from Primary to Secondary school giving rise to a number of hypotheses about the potential difficulties associated with this process.

A study is described in which the attitudes towards transfer of 207 Year 6 students attending five Primary schools in the South West of England were identified by several different means. Questionnaires were constructed based on hypotheses generated by previous research in relation to student expectations about general Secondary school ethos, academic work, relationships with teachers and peers and aspects of personal development. The same students were followed up after one term in Secondary school to assess whether their expectations had been confirmed.

The results confirm previous findings concerning the existence of rites-of-passage myths, often aided by Primary school teachers, about the difficulties likely to be met during the transition period. However, they also demonstrate the disconfirmation of those myths for most students after a relatively short period of time, especially with regard to psycho-social relationships. At the same time, there are clear indications of an ongoing need for careful consideration of the most appropriate form of learning experiences immediately after transfer.

Introduction

The education system in England and Wales is one in which most children move between different schools at least twice (and, increasingly, three times) during their educational careers. Towards the end of their seventh year (at the end of Grade 3) the move is usually made from infant to junior school (although this may well be on the same campus). At eleven years old (at the end of Grade 6) an even more significant move is made from junior (or primary) school to some form of secondary education, and at sixteen yet another move may well be made from school to a college of Further Education.

Although such moves have been traditionally viewed as relatively unproblematic, a small but growing number of researchers have questioned the cognitive, social and emotional effects of the adjustments that some children need to make to such changes in their educational careers (Berndt & Mekos, 1995; Bourcet, 1998; Kakavoulis 1998; Sobell, 2003). The move between primary and secondary education in particular has come under scrutiny for a number of reasons related to such organisational factors as 11+ selection, a perceived lack of curriculum continuity, the increasing number of specialist schools and the gap between the rhetoric and reality of parental choice of secondary school. At the same time, the ever earlier onset of puberty and the academic pressures brought about within the current English educational system by Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) set at 7 and 11 present young adolescents in particular with other developmental stressors which may well interact with such organisational factors to produce anxiety and possible disruption to the educational and personal careers of a significant number.

Fundamental questions which arise therefore in relation to the period and process of transfer from one school to the next, particularly in early adolescence, are:

- How easily do most children negotiate this process?
- What proportion find it particularly difficult and for what reasons?
- What is the perceived relative importance placed by the pupils on academic, personal, social and organisational aspects of school life as they move 'up' through the educational system?
- How well do schools take each of these factors into account in seeking to achieve their wider educational aims for their students?

- What techniques are available to enable schools to collect and use such information for the benefit of their students?

These issues are not new. Some twenty years ago in the mid 1980s several investigations established the foundations for research in this area, but until relatively recently there appears to have been relatively little follow-through, in the UK in particular, apart from the work of one or two well-known projects (Galton & Willcocks, 1983; Galton, Gray & Ruddock, 1999; Measor & Woods, 1984; Youngman, 1986).

As the relevance of many of the conclusions drawn by these early researchers can be seen to be equally applicable to students transferring schools within the twenty-first century, a brief summary of the key issues that they raised will be provided before moving on to consider more recent studies.

Summerfield (1986) summarised the position of students entering their first year at secondary school with the following graphic description:

“From being the oldest, most responsible, best known and most demonstrably able – both academically and physically – these children became the youngest, least knowing and least known members of the community in which they find themselves. What effect will the change have on the individual child? To what extent will his or her behaviour, attitudes, confidence, and above all work, be affected? Will the transfer process affect some children more than others? If so, who are the most vulnerable and who will relish the challenge?” (Summerfield, 1987, p11)

The same author went on to identify as key variables: ability, sex, date of birth, social adjustment and self image. Different cluster groupings were found across a cohort of 138 pupils by means of a number of measures, indicating that those of high academic ability with a positive self image tended to settle in very quickly at their new school, in comparison with other disenchanted and disaffected groups. Summerfield concluded that secondary schools could benefit a great deal by focussing on children’s reactions to the transfer process.

Brown and Armstrong (1986) took a somewhat different approach by obtaining essays from 89 students about their positive and negative feelings prior to secondary transfer and

after they had settled into their new schools. A wide range of worries was identified prior to transfer, including getting lost, homework, bullies, being the smallest in the school, strict teachers and detentions. Most anticipated aspects were sports, new subjects, new friends, computer and craft lessons, clubs and dinners. After transfer around 10% of the students continued to express worries about strict teachers, changing rooms, difficult work and homework. Almost half of the students, however, expressed positive feelings about the new subjects they were studying and 25% described their new schools as better than anticipated, with friends and clubs being cited as other positive aspects. Brown and Armstrong conclude that the general patterning and structure of both positive and negative expectations tend to change over time. Environmental and organisational worries are most likely to dissipate, and where concerns persist they are most likely to be about intellectual demands and inability to relate to certain teachers.

Youngman (1986) raises an important issue in relation to these and other studies on this topic. He points out that the terms 'transfer' and 'transition', both of which are widely used, sometimes interchangeably, refer by definition to the temporal nature of the process of moving from one school to another. However, development goes beyond purely temporal considerations, implying an understanding of the psychological process taking place within the individual. At the same time, it is equally important to recognise the influence that environmental considerations are likely to have on that process; when both of these principles are considered, the formative role of school transfer in the lives of individual students becomes critical.

A paper by Murdoch (1986) expands further upon this point by highlighting the dilemma faced by teachers and parents as to whether to *'emphasise the distinctiveness of different institutional levels, highlight the process of transition, mark it with a degree of ceremony so as to help the child manage a status passage, or, whether it should soften the divide, blur the boundaries and ease the transition so as to reduce the strain of adjustment'* (p52). As a result of her in-depth study of 42 children before and after transfer, Murdoch drew upon the anthropological notion of 'rite-de-passage' in concluding that schools should take the former course of action and the distinctiveness of institutional levels by marking the process of transfer with ceremony rather than playing down the process in a low-key manner.

In taking such action, acknowledgement is made of distinct emotional changes in the individual and social changes in the peer group culture, as well as different expectations within the new organisation. Here the process of transition is conceived in terms of a series of stages – *separation* from the safety of the known world of the primary school with associated anxieties, *transition*, where everything is up in the air, personal and role changes are required, and there is a fear of ritual and confrontation of mythological acts of initiation and induction; leading finally to *adjustment* (rebirth) with confirmation of new status with personal, social, physical and educational implications.

A special edition of the International Journal of Educational Research, published in 2000, returned to many of these themes and sought to explore them further with reference to subsequent research.

As a result of their meta-analysis of mainly American research on student reactions to transition between different levels of schooling, Anderson et al (2000) draw a number of general conclusions. Drawing from Rice (1997) the helpful concept of ‘institutional discontinuities’, these authors suggest that student reactions can be conveniently accounted for as responses to organisational and social changes. Thus, anxieties or concerns of an organisational nature relate to such issues as increased school size, the departmentalisation of subject knowledge, the introduction of tracking (streaming, banding, setting), a greater emphasis on ‘rules of behaviour’, and higher academic standards and expectations. Social concerns include reactions to changes in the diversity of the student population (eg the need to establish new friendships), less personal relationships with teachers and losing/regaining a sense of belonging.

Arising out of these discontinuities and associated student concerns, Anderson et al conclude that there is evidence to suggest that many students experience some decline in their average grades (Petersen & Crockett, 1985; Roderick, 1993), less positive attitudes towards school subjects, and more negative reactions to teachers (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Finally, it is suggested that students’ self-efficacy and self-esteem decrease (Blyth et al, 1983; Eccles et al, 1987), particularly amongst girls moving from elementary to middle schools (Crockett et al, 1989). It would appear, however, that for most students these decreases are small and short-lived.

There are some students who appear to find systemic transitions particularly difficult and who react with unusually large decreases and declines in one or more of the above areas which persist into late high school and beyond. In the USA these students are far more likely than their same-age peers to leave school before graduation (Blyth et al, 1983; Crockett et al, 1989; Roderick, 1993). Significant interactive risk factors in this respect have been found to be gender, prior problem behaviour, low academic achievement, socio-economic status and race (Anderson et al, 2000).

As a result of her small-scale study of the reactions of 30 high-school girls to moving from Primary to Secondary school, Tobbell (2003) identifies what she believes to be key areas for consideration with regard to the transition process and makes several salient points relating to those areas. However, as she herself points out, the fact that she employed qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews with focus groups) with a small selective sample means that no justifiable claim can be made for the generalisability of her findings. At best they can only be considered hypothesis generating.

Basing her interpretations upon Vygotskian and ecological perspectives in contrast to an approach drawn more from adolescent development theory, Sobell suggests that five themes emerged as being of central importance to the establishment of a satisfactory educational experience for her sample, which she terms:

- school as community
- adult or child?
- what makes a good teacher?
- the learning experience
- feeling lost.

The key points to emerge from this investigation, which can be expressed in the form of hypotheses were that:

1. Social relationships with both peers and teachers contribute significantly to a school's sense of community, specially in the form of friendship groups and in a sense of being 'known' by teachers and being able to feel a sense of relationship with them as people.

2. The Secondary school ~~disxxxxxx~~ focuses on the requirements to act as adults at a time when the children themselves want to 'hold on' to their childhood. such a mismatch of expectations is likely to lead to problems in establishing meaningful relationships between teachers and pupils in the early secondary school years and potential barriers to learning.
3. The general conception of what makes a 'good' or 'bad' teacher is largely based upon students' perceptions of the nature of their personal relationships with individual teachers and vice versa. This in turn will have a profound effect upon student learning.
4. The organisational nature of secondary schools with regard to the lesson timetable, coping with multiple teachers, and approaches to classroom management which were more individual than group-focussed, all provided barriers to effective learning.
5. The transfer from often quite small primary schools to large secondary schools can lead to a significant number of Yr 7 students feeling 'lost' and unprepared for the culture shock with which they are faced. This in turn may contribute significantly to the identified downturn in achievement.

Sobell concludes that the majority of her sample had not found the transition process to be a very positive process. However, for her claims to carry any validity beyond the boundaries of that particular sample and school, a wider investigation is called for.

The present study

One of the main purposes of this study was to explore ways in which valid and reliable information could be obtained from students prior to and following transfer from Primary to Secondary school. The construction of a questionnaire with items relating to many of the issues arising from the previous literature was felt to be a worthwhile first step. It was considered important also to tap into such issues as the formation of new identities and the existence of organisational myths, raised by Measor and Woods (1984) and others, but to try to do so in ways which were ethically robust and minimally obtrusive. Careful scrutiny was therefore given to the content and wording of questionnaire items.

The questionnaire items were subsumed under six main headings:

- general anticipations of the students regarding the impending transfer and their subsequent reactions to it;
- expectations about the level of difficulty of academic work at secondary school and the reality with which the students were subsequently faced;
- the nature of the relationships with teachers;
- the general ambience and ethos of the secondary school;
- the establishment and maintenance of friendships and social relationships with peers;
- perceptions of personal development.

In order to provide cross validation by means of triangulation data three complementary forms of questioning were devised. In the first instance the primary school students were invited to indicate up to three things that they anticipated would happen at their new school, their worries or concerns about the transfer, the lessons they were most looking forward to, and what they would miss most about their present schools. This was followed by a 30 item structured questionnaire built around the issues of anticipated changes in academic work, relationships with teachers, the ambience of the new school, friendships and social relationships, and taking on a new identity. Slightly amended versions of these questionnaires were re-administered towards the end of the students' first term at secondary school. Finally, small focus groups of volunteers were interviewed in two secondary schools at the beginning of their third term in the secondary school.

Five primary schools and the five main secondary schools to which their students transferred elected to take part in the study. The primary schools administered the questionnaires during their students' final term in Year 6 following the administration of SATs. The secondary schools administered the follow-up questionnaires six months later towards the end of the first term in Year 7. The schools themselves varied somewhat in size and location, with the average size of the primaries standing at 300-350 pupils, and the secondaries at 800-900 pupils. All were situated in or on the outskirts of medium to large size towns in the southwest of England.

The final number of students who participated in both aspects of the questionnaire study was 207 (103 girls and 104 boys). All pupils were also given the opportunity of electing not to take part in the survey or completing all the forms anonymously.

Examples of the original questionnaires are provided in Appendices A and B. Adjustments were made at follow-up to enable the students to reflect upon the actuality of their experiences and how they felt they had reacted to and coped with these.

Results

After one term in at Secondary school the students were asked to indicate what they had enjoyed about their transfer from primary to secondary school, their favourite lessons at the new school, what on going worries, if any, that they had, and whether there was anything about their primary school that they continued to miss. 207 students participated of which 104 were boys and 103 were girls.

The large bulk of responses regarding most enjoyed aspects of the new school were:

- new (different) lessons/subjects (25% of reponses)
- making new friends (24%)
- new (different, nice) teachers/tutors (12%)

A clear gender difference emerged here, as elsewhere. The majority of the girls' responses related to making new friends (28% as compared to 21% of the boys). There was very little difference between the boys and the girls in their identification of new (nice) teachers often naming specific teachers or form tutors. The boys, revealed a somewhat greater interest than the girls in their new subjects (28% compared to 23%). The remaining 34% of the responses were distributed fairly widely and evenly between a range of topics including new opportunities, a new and bigger environment, becoming more independent, after school activities, school dinners and the bus journey to school.

Fifteen subject areas were chosen at least once by both boys and girls as their favourite lesson. 66% of the responses were distributed between 5 subjects. Design and Technology (21%), Physical Education (13%), Information Technology (10%), Drama (12%) and Art (10%).

Here again gender differences were revealed. Design and Technology was popular with both boys and girls. Boys' responses totalled 19% and girls' responses 22%. The boys revealed a stronger liking for Physical Education (17% compared with 10%) and Information Technology (12% compared with 9%). The girls, on the other hand showed a preference for Drama (15% compared with 9%) and Art (13% compared with 8%).

When asked to comment on aspects of their primary school that they continued to miss 35% of the boys' responses and 26% of the girls' responses indicated that there was nothing missed about their primary school. However several aspects continued to be missed by both boys and girls: younger friends and siblings (22% of responses), previous teachers (21%), easier work (2%) and aspects of the school itself including size and organisation (12% of responses), less homework, being the eldest.

The Year 7 students continued to have concerns about bullying (21% of boys' responses and 19% of girls' responses) and older students' behaviour (3% of boys' responses and 8% of girls' responses). Homework caused some concern, 7% of the responses made reference to having too much homework or worries about forgetting to hand it in.

Aspects of the school building, falling on the stairs, being squashed in the corridor, concerned some children. A small proportion of pupils were concerned about drugs, smoking and swearing (2% of boys' responses and 4% of girls' responses). However, 28% of the responses indicated no continuing worries at all.

Table One presents comparative data on student responses to the structured questionnaire completed prior to and following transfer to secondary school. The following points are highlighted as worthy of further consideration, although it is acknowledged that this list is not exhaustive.

1. General anticipation vs overall reactions

Just over 90% of the Year 6 students indicated that they were definitely (59%) or quite (33%) looking forward to moving to Secondary school. By the end of their first term in Year 7, a similar proportion confirmed that they had enjoyed the move, but up to 10% had not enjoyed the move compared with only 3% who had not been looking forward to it.

2. Academic work

Nearly 70% of the Year 6 students were certain that the (academic) work at Secondary school would not be easy, but this appears to have been confirmed for only 41% after their first term in Year 7. Moreover, whereas only 1% of Year 6 were sure that the new work would be easy, this had risen to 12% indicating that they were definitely finding work in Year 7 easy. This was confirmed by a further question which revealed that whilst 65% felt that they would have to work harder at Secondary school, only 40% considered that they were having to do so. Moreover, 46% indicated that the work they were doing in Year 7 was somewhat (31%) or very much (15%) as at Primary school.

One of the aspects of Secondary school that the vast majority (81%) of Year 6 students did not anticipate with pleasure was homework. This feeling had not dissipated much by Year 7 when 72% indicated that they did not enjoy homework.

As far as the curriculum subjects were concerned, just over 70% of the Year 7 students considered that the subjects they were particularly looking forward to studying were as good as they hoped they would be.

3. Relationships with teachers

Just under 80% of the Year 6 students anticipated that the teachers in Secondary school would definitely (49%) or probably (30%) be stricter than at Primary school. In fact, only just over 50% found this to be the case. At the same time, the anticipation that most of the Year 6 students showed for expecting to enjoy having lots of different teachers was borne out at Secondary school. On the other hand, a higher proportion of Year 7 students (26%) felt that their new teachers did not know who they were than did know who they were (24%).

4. The general ambience of Secondary school

Nearly two thirds of the Year 7 students considered that their new school was definitely (24%) or quite (40%) a friendly place, but 15% indicated that it was definitely not. A significant proportion also felt that it was quite (36%) or definitely (25%) an exciting place to be, but 25% disagreed. Whereas three quarters of the Year 6 students (76%) anticipated that there would be lots of interesting things to do at their new school, only 48% had found this to be borne out. Similarly, whereas 65% had been looking forward to lots of 'out of school' activities, only 48% found this to be the case.

5. Friendships and social relationships

Just over half (55%) of the Year 6 students anticipated that they would make lots of new friends at Secondary school. In the event, this had risen to 69% who felt that this had definitely occurred after a term in Year 7. A very small proportion (3%) who did not have such expectations remained the same after transfer.

Just over 50% in Year 6 believed that they would be picked on by older pupils at Secondary school, whilst only 35% considered that this was unlikely. In reality, only about 20% indicated that this had actually occurred, whilst 70% were very clear that it had not.

6. Perceptions of personal development

Just over 80% of the Year 6 students felt that moving to Secondary school would give them the opportunity to make a fresh start, whilst only 3% did not feel this to be true. Although up to 70% of the Year 7 students continued to feel this, almost 20% now displayed their doubts. At the same time, whereas only 30% felt that they would be a different person at Secondary school, by the end of one term in Year 7 up to 40% considered that they had in fact changed. Nevertheless, whereas just under 50% considered that they would definitely be better learners at Secondary school, the number of students who believed in Year 7 that they actually were learning better had fallen to below 40%.

Discussion

This study has served several purposes. The first was to provide up-to-date information on students' anticipations of and reactions to transfer from primary to secondary school, albeit in one specific geographical region of the country. The need for such information is important both to see whether attitudes and myths continue to exist in a similar form across generations and even across widely varying geographical areas. To a large extent our findings appear to substantiate both of these points. The primary school students in our study demonstrated many similar hopes and fears about life at secondary school and similar reactions to transfer as have most previous UK studies at different times and in different geographical areas (Brown and Armstrong, 1986; Galton and Wilcocks, 1983; Measor and Woods, 1984)

The vast majority of students look forward to the move and most of them claim to have enjoyed it, but even by the end of the first term in secondary school one in ten students are

beginning to show signs of disaffection (vis Brown & Armstrong, 1980). The reasons for this would appear to be highly complex, as will be discussed further below.

In their seminal study, Measor and Woods (1984) identified a number of major issues with which all new secondary school students are faced. These are the 'formal' issues of the size and complex organisation of the new school, new forms of discipline and authority, and new demands of work, together with the 'informal' issues of the prospect of being bullied and of losing one's friends. Often such issues are considered likely to be accompanied by significant myths relating to the difficulty of the work, the strictness of the teachers and the terrifying nature of the bullying rituals.

In considering the reactions to transfer of the students in the present study, it became clear that the issues identified by Measor and Woods continued to predominate. Measor and Woods continued to predominate during the period immediately prior to secondary transfer. However, during the first term at their new school most students appear perfectly able to resolve these issues satisfactorily. In this respect our findings were somewhat at odds with the hypotheses generated by Tobell's study and Anderson's (2000) meta-analysis of previous research. Although the size of the new school was an area of concern for some primary school pupils, very few continued to show anxiety about this by the end of the term one in Year 7 and most indicated their satisfaction at the more complex organisational structure of having lots of different teachers for different curriculum subjects. This was undoubtedly due in large part to arrangements made by each of the secondary schools in our study to prepare the pupils for transfer by means of induction processes in which they were introduced to the new school and how it was run both prior to and following transfer. It may also have been influenced in part by the strong, positive tradition of neighbourhood schools in this region.

The issue of different forms of discipline and authority is more complex than might first appear. It is clear that the large majority of primary school pupils in our study expected discipline to be stricter at secondary school than at their present school. This was an expectation that for almost 50% of the students was not borne out. In discussions with the students themselves it emerged that in some part this expectation had been set by their Year 6 teachers as a kind of 'sword of Damocles' as a means of curbing any indications of 'demob fever', ie warnings of the nature of 'You won't be able to get away with acting so childish at secondary school'. In this respect it seems likely that some transfer myths are

perpetuated by teachers as a means of maintaining control in the period leading up to transfer, but probably in a more positive light as an attempt to prepare the pupils for transition from primary school *children* to secondary school *students*.

The vast majority of the students in our sample were not only prepared for secondary transfer but also indicated that they had enjoyed the process. Further worth while research could profitably be carried out into the reasons for dissatisfaction with the move indicated by the small but significant number of dissenters. Whilst the majority of students commented favourably on the friendly atmosphere within their new schools, the potential roots for disillusionment can be seen in the growing loss of interest in both 'inschool' and 'out of school' activities. Academic work was not found to be as difficult as had been anticipated; rather the opposite in fact, with a lot of perceived repletion of work carried out at Primary school.

Although the Secondary school teachers were found on the whole to be friendly and less strict than expected, it was notable that a significant number of students did not feel that many of their teachers knew them properly. It is here that Tobell's findings do appear to be borne out. It may be, however, that this is a lot to expect of teachers in a large school by the end of the students' first term in Year 7. By contrast, there were comparatively few indications of bullying having occurred (although it could be argued that 1 in 5 reported instances is still unacceptably high), compared with very strong indications of the establishment of new friendships.

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that the transfer from Primary to Secondary school need not be by any means traumatic or stressful. The perpetuation of rites-of-passage myths is probably an inevitable aspect of the transition process, despite considerable contradictory evidence. One of the most satisfying aspects for the students themselves is the establishment of new friendships, together with the excitement of new and different subjects and the positive atmosphere engendered by friendly teachers. However, it is perhaps to the curriculum area that more attention now needs to be given, particularly with reference to matching the level of academic work in Year 7 to the needs and abilities of the incoming students and to convincing these same students that homework is a relevant and worthwhile activity as an aid to their learning progress.

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