



# The difficulties for children in the transition from primary school to secondary school in Scotland

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### Abstract

The transition from primary to secondary school has been identified as an equally important and challenging time for young people. It is therefore imperative to understand the challenges that must be addressed to facilitate a positive transition. This research briefing explores existing literature on this transition for pupils in Scotland. A change in teaching style, an increased workload and a new physical school environment are identified as the key challenges many pupils experience. It is noted that pupils' relationships with teachers and peers is particularly important for a positive transition. People Know How's Positive Transitions Service is highlighted as a positive example of additional support to facilitate a positive primary to secondary school transition experience for children and young people.

### Keywords

Primary school, secondary school, school transitions, Positive Transitions Service, wellbeing, student support

### Key points

- Pupils' relationships with teachers are deemed essential for a positive transition from primary to secondary school.
- Healthy and positive relationships with peers are a necessity in promoting positive academic and mental wellbeing.
- It is important to identify additional support needs ahead of the transition.
- Communication between teachers, pupils, parents and carers is vital in preparing young people for the transition.
- Initiatives such as People Know How's Positive Transitions Service allows for young people to voice and share their opinions, concerns and worries with one another.

### Introduction

In Scotland, much like the rest of the United Kingdom, young people move from primary to secondary school around the age 11-12. The transition process refers

to the move from last year of primary school (P7) into first year of secondary school (S1) and has been shown to be a critical stage in a young person's life

(White, 2020). Furthermore, how it is experienced can have far reaching consequences throughout their time at secondary school and beyond into adult life (West et al., 2010). A negative transition experience has been shown to negatively impact the attainment of new knowledge and skills – particularly in literacy and numeracy (Snape et al., 2019). In turn, this can result in a lowering of self-esteem (Snape et al., 2019). Low self-esteem in combination with other challenges such as poor peer relations, depression and anxiety can lead to further struggles both academically and socially (West et al., 2010). Therefore, in 2020, the Scottish Government's Learning Directorate commissioned NHS Health Scotland to review how Scottish children's mental health and wellbeing can be best supported in the transition (White, 2020). Two additional noteworthy studies have been conducted that explore the transition in Scotland specifically (West et al., 2010; Snape et al., 2019), both on which will be drawn on throughout this research briefing. The briefing starts by summarising how a change in academic workload and teaching style can prove challenging for pupils. The importance of relationships with peers and teachers for pupils' emotional and mental wellbeing will then be discussed. What support measures can be implemented with then be explored, highlighting the role of parents and the importance of ensuring that additional support needs are considered. Recommendations that can aid in achieving a positive transition from primary to secondary school will be provided throughout the briefing. Here, People Know How's Positive Transitions Service is similarly highlighted as an example of a beneficial support system for young people during this notoriously

difficult period as well as in the years leading up to the transition.

### **Support as a preventative measure**

People Know How began their work with children and young people in 2014. After consulting with young people in Edinburgh, it was discovered that the transition to high school was perceived as particularly challenging. As such, the Positive Transitions Service was established in 2016. This service now involves a variety of one-to-one projects such as befriending and family support, and group projects where the young people engage with one another through educational and confidence-building activities. People Know How has a socially innovative approach in all their work and projects, which is clearly visible in the Positive Transitions Service. For example, the Pupils Know How groups are an example of how pupils themselves can be involved in designing workshops that are relevant to them. Overall, the support provides is based on the notion that preparing pupils for the secondary-school transitions at an early age can be regarded as a preventative measure (People Know How, 2020). Despite much of the literature reviewed in this briefing discuss preparation for secondary school as being predominately relevant in the year leading up to the transition, there is value in familiarising pupils with changes to come over a longer period of time. In fact, a primary school headteacher, interviewed by Ross and Brown (2013) identified the need to start responsive planning, and discussing learning strategies with pupils from as early as nursery school. Furthermore, People Know How emphasise that all primary school

approaches to the transition are different and that pupils will find certain kinds of projects or topic to be particularly relevant and valuable. As such, flexibility and consultation of pupils is paramount to facilitate positive transitions and support ahead of time.

### Academic challenges

Primary 7 pupils have reported feeling uneasy about the adjustment to studying several, some new and unfamiliar, specialist subjects at once. Furthermore, some S1 pupils express that they struggle with juggling an increased amount of homework from several classes with different expectations of multiple teachers. As primary school classes in Scotland typically have one teacher handing out homework, many are concerned about the lack of continuity between the curriculum in P7 and S1 (Snape et al., 2019). Without clear communication between the secondary school teachers in making sure deadlines do not overlap, this increased workload may prove overwhelming for pupils in the first few months in their first year of secondary school. Moreover, in 2013, Ross and Brown conducted interviews with 53 teachers spread across 17 schools in Scotland. They conclude that there are benefits to preparing pupils in P7 for the increased workload through activities that encourage the development of time management skills, such as creating homework timetables (Ross et al., 2013). Another study recommends taster lessons and visits from specialist teachers; introducing and preparing prospective pupils for subjects previously unfamiliar to them (Chedzoy et al., 2005). Some of P7 pupils' worries can therefore be eased by identifying new elements they

will be faced with in secondary school and devise appropriate strategies to normalise and prepare students for those changes. Increased communication between primary and secondary school teachers can be beneficial in those regard, as can the involvement of parents (West et al., 2010). Importantly, People Know How also involve families and teachers in the transition process to identify the most relevant and suitable support for young people; most notably in their Family Support project (People Know How, 2020).

### Relationship with teachers

Concerns about secondary school teachers being too strict and a sense of loss regarding their primary school teacher are factors that can increase a pupil's anxiety in the transition period (Snape et al., 2019). In Scottish primary schools, children tend to have one or two teachers in total. As a result, the pupils often have a close relationship with their teachers and a good understanding of their teaching style and expectations for assignments. However, with the increase in specialised subjects in secondary school, pupils may find it difficult to bond with several new teachers. Furthermore, each teacher will have different expectations and rules, both spoken and unspoken – which may cause feelings of inconsistency (Snape et al., 2019). To ease such difficulties, Hennessey (2016) and Chedzoy et al. (2005) suggest that increasing the number of visits to the secondary school and engaging with the secondary school teachers before the transition is crucial. Furthermore, this similarly allows secondary school staff to gauge what the pupils' strengths are and identify areas for potential additional

support ahead of the transition, both through interacting with the child, but similarly with their parents (Hennessey, 2016). Moreover, familiarisation with new peers and teachers through organised visits to the new school should be enacted as early as possible. Indeed, Snape et al. (2019) recommend starting this process in P5 or P6. This is based on the idea that starting the process before P7 will make the transition even smoother, since it gives pupils more time to prepare and get to know their future teachers better.

### Peer relationships

Moreover, Snape et al. (2019) suggest primary school pupils having residential experiences with cluster school pupils, as well as those anticipated to move from outside the cluster in the years leading up to the transition. This would allow the pupils to get familiar and comfortable with their future classmates over an extended period of time, thus easing the worries relating to peer-relationships in secondary school. It has been shown that the strength of peer relationships is imperative to how well a young person will cope in S1 (Longaretti, 2020). In the transition, many pupils may feel anxious about friendships from primary school disappearing or dissolving (West et al., 2010; Longaretti, 2020). Other worries relate to being the youngest group in a school with older pupils. This has been found to encompass worries such as being bullied by older pupils, being squashed in corridors and being peer pressured into taking drugs, swearing, and smoking (Chedzoy et al., 2005; West et al., 2010). As the worries surrounding peer relationships are numerous and varied, it is important

to listen to people's voices surrounding all aspects of the transition process. Furthermore, if particularly vulnerable children could be identified pre-transfer, additional support could be put in place to ease their transition. This can include children who have experiences of being bullied and younger children, as they have been identified as more likely to be negatively affected by the transition (West et al. 2010). West et al. (2010) conclude that a positive relationship between a pupil, their peers and teachers foster good social integration and resilience after the transition. After-school activities such as book, athletic, drama, music and/or art clubs can be beneficial in fostering such positive relationships. So can teachers having designated time slots for pupils to discuss any anxieties and concerns and weekly check-ins with a guidance counsellor or guidance teacher. People Know How's Positive Transitions Service similarly offers numerous projects for pupils ahead of, and during, the transition that bring young people together in a stimulating and rewarding way – encouraging them to engage with one another and the surrounding environment (2020).

### Change in physical environment

Pupils must also learn to navigate a new physical environment and switch classrooms several times a day – something most primary school pupils are not used to. Depending on the layout and size of the secondary school, this may be experienced as intimidating, particularly in terms of worries about getting lost or knocked down in the busy corridors (Snape et al., 2019). The stress of being late for their classes may similarly add further pressure onto the new

pupils. To ease these worries, Chedzoy et al. (2005) note how new pupils being shown around by older pupils is helpful. Anxieties surrounding the move between classrooms throughout the day can similarly be addressed whilst the pupils are still in primary school. Indeed, towards the end of Primary 7, pupils may benefit from switching rooms over the course of the day to get into the habit of taking more personal responsibility for being in the right place at the right time (Snape et al. 2019). Furthermore, Snape et al. (2019) suggest that activities, such as using the swimming pool in the secondary school or opening other facilities if no pool is available may be beneficial for pupils. This is particularly the case if visits are made before Primary 7, to make the pupils familiar with the secondary school environment before the time immediate to their transition and the transition itself.

### **Facilitating positive transitions**

Education Scotland (2019) outlines a project undertaken by Peebles High School, with the aim of helping P7 pupils 'make the leap' into secondary school. The project was a collaboration between all nine primary schools in the Tweeddale area. Meetings were set up where the pupils got the opportunity to share their worries and concerns about the forthcoming transition. The pupils then came together to act these worries out in a sketch in front of their parents, teachers and peers. Some of the pupils expressed how the project helped them gain confidence in talking to new people and how the experience had increased their confidence overall. Others shared how they enjoyed working with pupils from other schools (Education Scotland,

2019). Judging by the positive feedback, similar projects could be undertaken by more primary and secondary schools across Scotland.

Bannockburn High School in Stirling has also enacted measures that helped bring teachers, parents, and pupils together, in the form of informal evening meetings (Education Scotland, no date a). Although this initiative took place at a high school, it could similarly be applied in a secondary school context. During these meetings, parents were provided with information about the transition programme and had the opportunity to put forward their own ideas and suggestions. These suggestions would be taken onboard and the parents would be kept informed of the school's activities and potential changes to the programme. Parents were similarly invited to attend the visits that headteachers and senior pupils made to the High School. The initiative also resulted in the parents launching an information booklet where they penned their own FAQs, providing a useful resource in future transition processes (Education Scotland, no date a). This interaction promoted a healthy relationship between parents and the school. In turn, it was beneficial for the pupils, as active family participation can be of critical importance in this stage of their academic journey. Knowing these measures were in place, parents reported an increase of trust in the school and that their confidence was boosted with regards to their children going to the High School (Education Scotland, no date a).

Relatedly, Parents in Partnership (PIP) is a parental engagement project first developed in Renfrewshire, Scotland

in 2015/16 (Education Scotland, 2020). PIP offered families the opportunity to 'go back to school' and experience an S1 curriculum first-hand, whilst building positive relationships with key staff members and accessing support with any key questions around the transition (Education Scotland, 2020). The aim was to acquaint parents with current teaching practices and language explored in the classroom, granting them a better insight of what their child experiences in school. The PIP programme has effectively been applied in ten secondary schools across Scotland. Important to note is that every schools' programme had a slightly different format to suit the size and layout of the school, as well as the needs of the families (Education Scotland, 2020). This particular approach makes it similar to People Know How's view that the projects do, and should, differ depending on where they are run and what is deemed to be of most help and interest. Indeed, People Know How's overall emphasis on their clubs and therapies being led by children themselves ensures that they are relevant for the children and young people they are there to support and that their voices are being heard, taken into account and understood in the process.

### **Additional support needs**

The Scottish Government Education website, Parentzone, emphasises that local authorities are required to plan for transitions early if a child has additional learning needs (Education Scotland, no date b). This advice pertains to all children who have additional support needs arising from a disability, as defined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

In providing appropriate additional support, communication between the pupil, their parents and their teachers is necessary. Focusing on support for dyslexia specifically, Dyslexia Scotland (no date a) states that secondary schools must ensure that staff have access to professional learning on dyslexia and inclusive practice. Furthermore, Dyslexia Scotland (no date b) outline the experience of one student, noting that she was concerned about falling behind and being picked on because of her dyslexia. She then details that her worries have been alleviated by certain additional needs measures being taken, thus evidencing that appropriate steps and clear communication could pave the way forward for pupils making a positive transition from primary to secondary school.

### **Limitations**

Demographics in future studies should include rural and urban schools, different economic socio areas, and different sizes of primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, data may would benefit from being collected throughout the first and second year of secondary school year, as well as into adulthood. More longitudinal and up-to-date studies are similarly needed. Studies pertaining to ethnic minority groups are also limited. This is especially pertinent considering Graham and Hills' (2003) finding that Pakistani and Muslim children appear to have more transfer concerns and adjustment problems than their white Scottish counterparts. This is an integral topic for future research.

## Conclusion & recommendations

This research briefing provides further evidence for the necessity to support children and young people in their transition from primary to secondary school – support that is currently being provided by People Know How’s Positive Transitions Service. A positive transition promotes academic wellbeing and emotional stability. A negative transition may put the pupil in danger of feeling overwhelmed, depressed or anxious, which can affect them into adulthood. Therefore, communication between teachers, parents and pupils is necessary, especially in the first two years of secondary school, to ensure that pupils feel well prepared and supported. Engaging directly with pupils, for instance through People Know How’s Positive Transitions Service, is similarly beneficial to inform parents, teachers and the Scottish Government of anxieties and concerns of pupils that then, subsequently, can be addressed before the transition. The value in perceiving preparation ahead of the transition as a preventative measure, engaging pupils in conversations about what changes lies ahead before they reach P7, is similarly evident. Doing so can further ease the transition into S1 itself, as well as the worries pupils may have ahead of the transition. Thereby, it can function as a preventative measure in pupils being

confronted with such challenges in the first place.

Based on the exploration of this literature, the briefing offers the following recommendations:

- Further direct engagement with young people and their parents or carers is necessary to grasp the extent and variety of worries pupils experience before the transition.
- Co-ordination between secondary school teachers is needed to ensure workload is not overwhelming the pupils.
- Introduce P7 students to secondary school practices and subjects before they make the transition to ease academic worries. This includes changing classrooms and “taster lessons” of new subjects.
- Introduce P7 pupils to the secondary school teachers and pupils from other primary schools who will be attending the same secondary school to create a sense of belonging before the transition.
- Organise multiple visits to the secondary school throughout Primary 7 and in earlier years. This will help pupils prepare to adapt to their new physical surroundings and layout of the new school.

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