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Transition from Primary to Post-Primary School: Issues for Students with Special Educational Needs

In this, the first of two articles on transition, the author looks at some of the literature on transition from primary to post-primary school and identifies a range of issues that emerge for students with special educational needs (SEN). He argues that pupils with SEN are particularly susceptible to the discontinuities in organisation, curriculum, pedagogy and personal and social interaction that come into sharp relief during and immediately after transfer. The challenges created by these discontinuities are discussed and some possible consequences are noted in order to understand and respond to the increasingly diverse and complex needs of those transferring.

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INTRODUCTION

Greater numbers of students with SEN are transferring to mainstream schools than ever before. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2006) estimates that around 18% of school going pupils have SEN, equating to about 10,800 students in each age cohort. An increasing majority of these students are transferring to mainstream post-primary schools. A raft of documentation evidences the considerable interest taken in the area by the educational partners, especially those seeking to influence, inform or develop policy (Ireland, 2004; NCSE, 2006; DES, 2007; INTO, 2008).

Research relating to the transfer of the generality of students has focused on factors that make students more vulnerable to unsuccessful transfer. The findings have had implications for students with SEN. For example, it has been postulated that students with problem behaviours and those with low academic achievement seem particularly 'vulnerable' at this time (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittgerber, 2000). Students with lower ability are thought to experience more transitional stress and anxiety and have low self-esteem linked to low preparedness for transfer (West, Sweeting and Young, 2008). However, a range of issues other than ability or SEN have also been identified as making students vulnerable at this time. This makes isolating factors associated with SEN very difficult. For example, it has been suggested that vulnerable pupils tend to be younger, more withdrawn and come from particular family backgrounds such as disadvantaged or ethnic minorities (O'Brien, 2001; West et al.). Some writers also suggest that transfer anxieties affect girls disproportionately (Anderson et al., 2000), particularly where they leave single sex schools and move outside their locality (O'Brien). While many of these factors can be discussed outside the context of SEN, it is clear that where students have SEN but also belong to one of the above groups, they are more likely to experience difficulties (West et al.).

Given the complexity of issues it may be necessary to look at the wider context before focusing specifically on the experiences of students with SEN. For example, many small

scale studies are divided on whether having SEN alters or increases the stress of transition. In a survey of the perceptions of students with SEN and their parents/carers before and during transfer, Maras and Aveling (2006) found that several of the young people canvassed seemed to adapt easily along side their peers without SEN, while others required more structured support. They concluded that different types of SEN may mean that 'particular stressors have greater impact during transition' (p. 196). It is also clear, however, that certain systemic factors affect the experiences of students with SEN in unique ways. For example, specific legislative and policy imperatives relating to assessment, identification, resource allocation and effective service provision come into play for these students in a way that is not the case for others.

The author intends to present two articles in successive issues of this journal. The author will first examine what is known about the general experience of transfer and relate findings to issues commonly experienced by students in certain categories of SEN. The follow up article will attempt to explore factors that relate specifically to students with SEN and will report on a small scale survey of post-primary learning support and resource teachers regarding their perceptions of transfer to Irish second level schools.

THE NATURE OF TRANSFER

Research in Ireland (O'Brien, 2001; Naughton, 2003; O'Brien, 2004; Smyth, Mc Coy and Darmody, 2004; Smyth, Dunne, McCoy and Darmody, 2006) and elsewhere (Galton, Gray and Rudduck 2003; West, Sweeting and Young, 2008; Warin and Muldoon, 2009) suggest that successful transfer to post-primary education is a complex and multi-layered experience. For the majority, moving from primary to post-primary school marks a significant milestone in their lives that is characterised by both positive and negative feelings. For some, it is an exciting and liberating time, a sort of 'coming of age' (Galton, Gray and Rudduck, 1999; Hargreaves and Galton 2002; Naughton). For others it is an unsettling and difficult time that brings to the fore a range of issues, both real and imagined, that cause considerable anxiety (Zeedyk, Gallagher, Henderson, Hope, Husband and Lindsay, 2003).

Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittgerber (2000) contend that transfer from primary to post-primary education is ostensibly a systemic one and refer to 'institutional discontinuities' that affect the academic, personal and social dispositions of students. Research also acknowledges that systemic changes coincide with developmental transitions such as the onset of puberty and suggests that transfer from primary to post-primary school can only be understood with reference to students' attempts to negotiate 'multiple personal transitions' (Naughton). Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) write of a triple transition, from one institutional context to another, from childhood to adolescence and from long established social groups to new social relations.

It has been argued that students with SEN experience particular difficulties at this time and anecdotal reports seem to support this (DES, 2001a; DES, 2001b; DES, 2006). Moreover, most general resources relating to the needs and learning propensities associated with various categories of SEN allude to a range of difficulties that are

disproportionately experienced by these students. They include deficits in cognitive processing, speed and memory, attention, application, motivation, persistence, self-esteem, social insight and competence, language skill and dexterity, anxiety, physical co-ordination strength and stamina and behaviour. Any intuitive comparison between such difficulties and the demands placed on students by the transfer process would suggest that students with SEN have an elevated risk of more pronounced or more numerous negative experiences

ADMISSION

Admission to one's chosen post-primary school remains a major concern. There has been considerable unease regarding students with SEN that they might be disadvantaged by admission practices in schools (Wilkin, Archer, Ridley, Fletcher-Campbell and Kinder, 2005). In discussing the statistics on appeals taken by parents under Section 29 of the Education Act (Ireland, 1998), the DES (2007) acknowledged that 'there is evidence that some post-primary schools continue to have restrictive enrolment policies that lead to the effectual exclusion of children with special educational needs' (p. 44).

Other than anecdotal evidence, there is little evidence of system-wide discrimination against students with SEN. Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004) noted that the vast majority of schools (85%) claimed that they accepted all students who applied, with schools that were oversubscribed reporting the use of factors other than ability to determine eligibility (e.g. local feeder schools, other siblings already attending). Similarly, Wilkin et al. found no evidence of systematic discrimination of students with SEN in the UK. There are worrying indications however, that some schools do not accept such students in proportion to the numbers occurring in the communities they purport to serve. Drudy and Lynch (1993) noted that students showing lower academic performance and those from lower social class groupings were over-represented in the vocational sector. It may be that school selection practices hide the extent to which exclusions occur at transfer (Drudy and Lynch; Lynch and Lodge, 2002). It is clear that this dichotomy between anecdotal reports and research findings warrants further investigation.

ORGANISTAIONAL ISSUES

For any student transfer from one educational setting (single sex, mixed, urban, rural, disadvantaged) to another (single sex, mixed, private, voluntary secondary, community, comprehensive or vocational) can be daunting. For students with SEN there can be another layer of transition involved as they also move from one model of support provision (in-class withdrawal, special unit or special school) to another. In fact the disparity between the primary and secondary school environments is a recurring theme within transfer literature, with some commentators suggesting that the greater the cultural difference between these the greater is the need for support for those transferring (Ward, 2000).

Whatever type of feeder school is involved, there seems to be an expectation on the part of the receiving school that every student will be able to deal with a wide variety of

practical demands. These include travelling to and from school, familiarising themselves with a new and often more complex physical environment, understanding and using timetables, acclimatising to a longer school day, moving around the school in an efficient and timely manner, coping with a larger number of teachers and subjects, assimilating and conforming to different disciplinary codes, adjusting to new ways of student grouping, often resulting in different configurations in different classes and being able to plan ahead and organise their day/week, through visiting lockers and selecting appropriate books and equipment (O'Brien, 2001; Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; Naughton, 2003; Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004; West, Sweeting and Young, 2008). Such practical issues are particularly prominent in the minds of students with a variety of SEN (Maras and Aveling 2006; Maunsell, Barrett and Candon, 2007). The concerns expressed by this group are hardly surprising since the demands listed occur in areas where students with specific learning disabilities (DES, 2001a), general learning disabilities (Ireland, 1993), emotional and behavioural (EBD) (Visser, Cole and Daniels, 2002) and other SEN such as autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) (Barnard, Prior and Potter, 2000; DES, 2001b) and physical disability (Shevlin and Rose, 2002) experience particular difficulty.

The most contentious organisational factor affecting the transition experiences of students with SEN relates to the streaming on the basis of ability – a practice still evident in a variety of Irish second level schools (Smyth et al., 2004; Smyth, et al., 2006). While Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) argue that these practices lead to polarisation of students and are related to a narrow view of academic achievement occurring disproportionately in secondary schools, Smyth et al. (2004) discovered that streaming and/or banding is most likely to occur in larger schools and where there is a greater proportion of students with literacy difficulties. Where this model is used, students with SEN are placed more often in lower streamed classes and are more likely to stay there (Hannan and Boyle, 1987). Moreover, streaming affects friendships patterns, especially where students with SEN were previously placed in mixed primary classes, which in turn can lead to disaffection, disengagement and even to engagement with the anti-work and anti-school cultures that develop around this time (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittgerber, 2000). O'Brien argues that such practices cause students to internalise constructions of their inferiority and identify themselves as unable. For students with SEN, who often already struggle with such issues in a wider societal context, it is particularly damaging.

As has been noted, students with SEN must adjust to different models of support as well as accommodate broader systemic changes. In a study of the effects of moving to a new model of support within the primary school sector, Nugent (2007) found that over a fifth of parents believed their children took a long time to settle. If this is the case within a sector, it is reasonable to assume that the discontinuity of moving between models of support across sectors will be even more difficult. Maras and Aveling (2006) found that the more knowledge families had about special needs provision, including personal contact with staff, the fewer were the transition anxieties they experienced. They also noted that a key factor in successful transition was continuity of support throughout the

transfer process, with effective communication between all parties leading to support programmes tailored to individual needs.

In a minority of cases, students have transferred from special schools or units to mainstream post-primary provision. More research is needed into the positive and negative aspects of this experience. Some schools for students with mild learning disability enrol students at transfer age. It is possible that parents may be making choices in relation to the model of support they prefer. This movement of students from mainstream to special schools at transition age warrants further investigation.

CURRICULAR CONTENT AND CONTINUITY

Research on the impact of transition on educational performance and attainment (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan and MacIver, 1993; Galton, Gray and Rudduck, 1999; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittgerber, 2000) suggests that as many as forty percent of students experience a hiatus in progress during the first months after school transfer. It is proposed that this hiatus is largely attributable to the lack of curricular continuity between primary and post-primary schools (Galton and Willcocks, 1983; Galton, Morrison and Pell, 2000). Naughton (2003) suggests that Ireland has a particular problem in this regard due to a range of systemic factors such as differences in pre-service training, curricula, pedagogy and assessment. Differences relating to the organisation of the curriculum include the introduction of new subjects, higher expected levels of basic literacy and numeracy with less direct instruction in these areas (Hargreaves and Galton 2002; Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004), an increased focus on examinations (Naughton), an increase in the pace at which material is covered and different expectations about students' ability to engage in self-directed study (Smyth et al.). In particular, Smyth et al. found that the preeminent concern of post-primary teachers was the unsuitability of the curriculum for lower ability students and the difficulty of covering it in the time available. Similarly, they found that students were more likely to experience transition problems if they felt unprepared for their post primary subjects or if they did not enjoy their subjects, especially their new subjects, in first year. Maunsell, Barrett and Candon (2007) surveyed sixth class students with a variety of SEN and found that 'greater amounts' of 'harder work' and 'doing tests' were amongst their greatest concerns..

There is insufficient space in this article do deal comprehensively with the wide range of issues relating to the compatibility of the mainstream post-primary curriculum with the increasing diverse range of needs exhibited within the population of students who are expected to engage with it (Tilstone and Rose, 2003). However, it is clear that it places considerable demands on these students, in terms of its breadth, the abstract nature of many of the concepts that underpin it, the complexity of its language and the literacy and numeracy skills required to engage meaningfully with it. Despite the highly committed nature of the support teams that have developed in many schools, these are unlikely to be able to deliver sufficiently intensive or differentiated responses to all who will need them.

Some guidance is available in relation to the delivery of a relevant curriculum to students with mild, moderate, severe and profound general learning disability (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2007; DES, 2007). Similarly, in promoting the use of individual education plans (IEPs), mechanisms have been suggested by which schools can meet student needs across the post-primary curriculum (DES; National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), 2007). The decision to mandate transfer statements about transition within the IEPs of students transferring was particularly astute (Ireland, 2004). Unfortunately, the failure to commence any legal imperative that ensures such plans are put in place has seriously limited their use in mainstream post-primary schools, even by way of good practice. The absence of any serious commitment of resources to IEP planning, including transfer planning, runs counter to the intentions of those who drafted the legislation.

PEDAGOGY

Naughton (2003) argues that students' failure to accommodate variations in teaching approaches contribute more to the measured dip in academic performance than organisational issues. For example, in relation to mathematics, Hargreaves and Galton (2002) highlighted significant differences in the way in which teachers in post-primary schools preferred to 'start from scratch', with less able students becoming confused at having to master the same topic using a different method from that taught in the primary school. In the area of literacy post-primary teachers 'put response to literature as their main concern' with 'writing and talk' occurring only insofar as they arise 'from reading' (Marshall and Brindley, 1998). Primary teachers on the other hand 'focused on literacy skills'. Hargreaves and Galton commented that in such cases poor readers found it very difficult to cope with the post-primary approach and began to lose interest.

Other significant differences included more time spent listening and watching, with more adult-dominated teacher-pupil exchanges that are generally targeted at the whole class rather than individuals, indicating more didactic teaching (Hargreaves and Galton; Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004). Overall, post-primary classrooms are described as focusing more on instruction than participation, being more subject centred, teacher-directed and examination oriented (Naughton, 2003).

Such approaches do not suit students with SEN, especially those with learning disabilities. These students often learn by more active or multi-sensory means rather than teacher talk. Moreover, they often need work to be set out in a highly structured way. Tilstone and Rose (2003) suggest that teachers can implement more inclusive practice simply by planning more practice, more opportunities to transfer skills, more explicit teaching of learning strategies, more time for assimilation and more careful checking of students' preparedness to move to the next stage of learning. Yet in terms of what has already been outlined, teachers have great difficulty finding time to assess individual progress so as to set appropriate tasks (Galton and Wilcocks, 1983). It seems that the pressures to deliver to the main phalanx of students a set curriculum to a standard

demanded by state examinations may limit teachers' ability to affect even these rudimentary changes.

Another issue is the ability and willingness of teachers to meet the needs of students with learning support or SEN. Many post-primary teachers do not consider the teaching of basic skills (e.g. in literacy, numeracy, social skills and task engagement) to be an integral part of their teaching remit. Hence, support in these areas is limited. This disposition, when coupled with the time pressures alluded to above and the increase in minimum standards expected in basic skills, leads to greater potential for teachers to pitch lessons beyond the capacity of students to engage with them. Moreover, research suggests that there is less group and more individual work, with 'on task' behaviour being highly unlikely to attract teacher attention while 'off task' behaviour becomes more obvious. For students with SEN this 'off task' behaviour can often relate to the mismatch between their abilities and the content of lessons, methods and/or resources selected. In such instances the qualitative differences in the social interactions pertaining to post-primary classrooms may mean that they have less opportunity to access peer support when they experience these pressures.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

We know that adolescence is often marked by changes in personality and behaviour associated with increases in autonomy, decision-making, self-consciousness and self-identification and issues pertaining to sexuality, relationships, peer-orientation, abstract thinking and other areas. These changes similarly affect students with SEN. The mismatch between early-adolescent traits and the typical features pertaining to school environments at transfer is thought to contribute to the general decline in positive attitudes and achievement observed at this time. West, Sweeting and Young (2008), reporting on a relatively unique longitudinal study, found that students who expressed the greatest concern prior to transfer were of lower ability, were judged to be more anxious or to have been victimised in their pre-transfer schools and/or who had lower self-esteem linked to feeling less prepared for the demands of secondary school. Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittgerber (2000) and O'Brien (2001) found that students with problem behaviours in pre-transfer schools or with low academic achievement fare less well in making social adjustments during transfer.

However, as we have noted earlier the typical teacher-pupil relationship at post-primary increases in professional and physical distance at this time. Many students with SEN find such distance difficult at a time when they are negotiating so many other emotional and affective changes. In fact it is postulated that this changed dynamic may pose a threat to the quality of teaching and learning that occurs (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002). It is probably in response to this situation that many learning support settings are characterised by less formal and emotionally 'safer' elements since in the absence of these supports students are less likely to experience success. Humphrey, Charlton and Newton (2004) drew out the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, perceptions of social support, externalising behaviours and truancy. Anderson et al. comment on the role transfer plays in sewing these seeds of general disengagement and

exclusion, conceptualising ‘dropping out’ as a rejection of membership of a community from which students gain little reward and which continually marginalises them. Interestingly, Humphrey et al. also note that they are more likely to use success in non-academic areas to guard against poor self-image, since academically low-achieving students experience less academic success and have lower academic self-esteem,. This would suggest that one cannot overestimate the importance of providing positive experiences to vulnerable groups in non-academic and social areas during the transfer process.

Studies at primary school level (Martlew and Hodson, 1991; Thompson, Whitney and Smith, 2007) found that students without SEN preferred to make friends with other students who did not have these needs rather than those who did. They also noted that students with SEN form fewer friendships than other students, are teased more often and are more vulnerable to physical bullying. Maunsell, Barrett and Candon (2007) found that bullying was the greatest pre-transfer concern of the students with SEN whom they surveyed. Generally there is concern that weak academic ability, poor self-esteem and problem behaviour may combine to make successful systemic transitions difficult (Anderson et al.).

It is worth noting that students with problem behaviour or who fall within specific categories of SEN, such as EBD, ASD and mild or moderate learning disability seem to experience particular problems at transition. For those with EBD, the stresses inherent in adapting to new school conditions, combined with the temptation to become involved in anti-social sub-cultures that develop at this time can make transfer particularly difficult to negotiate successfully. For students with learning disability, difficulties negotiating changes in school and peer aspects of transition can cause considerable anxiety. For students with Asperger’s Syndrome/High Functioning Autism (AS/HFA) the social aspects of transition seem to present particular difficulties. The Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001b) acknowledged that the majority of students with AS/HFA were in mainstream classes and possessed the potential to excel academically there. However, they expressed grave concern about the levels of peer rejection and social isolation experienced by these students, which seemed to increase throughout childhood and cause so much distress that by early adolescence, many became de-motivated and dropped out.

A pertinent, if dramatic, indication of the consequence of failing to address personal and social issues may be gleaned from an investigation of the degree to which students with SEN are disproportionately represented within the groups that do not transfer to post-primary schools (NCCA, 1999); that do not engage fully with post-primary education or who disengage soon after transfer (Anderson et al.; Humphrey et al.); that are refused entry, perhaps as a result of a Section 29 appeal (Lynch and Lodge, 2002); that truant; are expelled (Reid, 2005); leave school without qualifications of any kind (Eivers, Ryan and Brinkley, 2000); have literacy and other functional skills below functional levels (Shiels and Ní Dhálaigh, 2001; NCSE, 2006) or who because of engagement with delinquent sub-cultures come to the attention of social, probationary or prison services (Murphy, Harrold, Carey and Mulrooney, 2000; Morgan and Kett, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that pupils with SEN are particularly susceptible to a range of factors inherent in the process of transfer from primary to post-primary school. Inconsistencies between the primary and post-primary education systems create particular challenges for these students in relation to organization, curriculum, pedagogy and in the personal and social areas. While responses to their difficulties are likely to vary between schools, where sufficient cognisance is not taken of the complexities of the transfer process, programmes designed to support students at this time are unlikely to be effective and the seeds of disengagement from school and the wider social culture may be sewn. If schools and the educational partners are serious about promoting a form of inclusive provision that responds to the needs of all students, considerable policy and practice will need to be developed in this area. Moreover, considerable resources will need to be invested in 'comprehensive efforts' (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittgerber, 2000) to support students with SEN, since those experiencing difficulties typically require support, several at a number of levels simultaneously.

Anderson et al. note that only when positive outcomes are achieved in relation to a range of key indicators can it be said that transition issues are being adequately addressed. These indicators include buoyant academic progress during and after transition, positive post-transfer classroom behaviour, positive social relations with peers and good general academic orientation.

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