

# Transition from Primary to Post-Primary School: What the Post-Primary Teachers Saw!

This is the second of two articles by the author in successive issues of REACH journal dealing with issues surrounding the transition of students with learning support (LS) and/or special educational needs (SEN) from primary to post-primary schools in Ireland. This article presents the findings of a survey of thirty-nine post-primary teachers regarding their views of the effectiveness of transition programmes in operation in their schools. Specifically, it focuses on their awareness of issues pertinent to transfer generally and on their perceptions of the experience of students with LS/SEN during the transition process. It also focuses on whether and how these transition programmes might need to be improved to cater more appropriately for the needs of students with LS/SEN during the transition process.

---

**EAMONN McCauley** is a lecturer in education at the Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin.

---

## BACKGROUND

The previous article looked at some of the literature on transition, outlining some of what is known about the general experience of transfer in Ireland and discussed this in the context of a range of difficulties commonly experienced by students deemed to fall within various categories of LS and SEN. The author contended 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 current research was conducted in February 2009 through the use of a fifteen item questionnaire given to a group of thirty-nine (of a possible forty) teachers who, at the time of the study, were engaged in a post-graduate diploma course in LS and SEN in a college of education in Dublin. It is important to note that no specific input had been delivered on transition *per se* up to the time of the survey.

However, the group had completed an assignment that required them to look critically at their school from the perspective of including students with LS/SEN. One of the areas they had been encouraged to investigate was the transfer of these students into and out of the school.

Thirty-eight of the group worked exclusively in mainstream post-primary schools. One respondent worked simultaneously in a Youthreach setting and a secondary school and agreed to base her responses on her mainstream secondary school experience only. Two of this group worked in the same school and agreed to collaborate on a single questionnaire. This resulted in thirty-eight completed questionnaires (n=38).

All those who took part worked in the area of LS for at least twelve hours per week at the time of the study. Twelve of the schools in which respondents taught were set in rural settings or small towns and twenty-eight worked in urban schools. The sample included four male and thirty-four female teachers. The majority of respondents (85%) were at least in their third year working in the school on which they based their responses, with 54% (n = 21) in their fifth year or more.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Teachers' Understanding of the Effects of Transfer on the Generality of Students**

The author sought to investigate post-primary teachers' understanding of issues relating to the transfer of students from primary to post-primary schools both generally and in relation to students with LS/SEN.

Findings suggest that in relation to the experience of the general population transferring, teachers' views varied widely. Over half of the teachers surveyed (58%) thought that transfer had a direct effect on academic performance. Of those teachers who reported that transition had a direct effect on this area, 73% referred to a link between academic performance and stress or anxiety caused by adjustment to a range of factors relating to the design and delivery of the curriculum. Overall, these respondents showed good awareness of key research findings in the area of transition relating to academic performance.

Teachers' responses regarding the social and emotional impact of transfer on the generality of students transferring to post-primary schools were relatively emphatic. The majority (76%) of useable responses (n=37) referred to transfer as

having a direct impact on students in these areas, with only 16% saying it did not and two respondents indicating that they did not know. Moreover, there seemed to be good general awareness of pertinent issues in this connection. For example, many teachers perceived students as having difficulties around feelings of isolation and wariness and exhibiting difficulties in making friends. This is consistent with many studies (McCauley, 2009). The link between anxiety, coping with change and academic issues also re-emerged.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of the Effects of Transfer on Students with LS/SEN**

When asked if there were differences in the ways students with LS/SEN experienced transition from an academic perspective 95% thought that they experienced greater difficulty in the academic arena and located these difficulties around an inability to cope with the post-primary curriculum. Many respondents (63%) referred specifically to the difficulties exhibited by these students. These difficulties included coping with the number of subjects being taught, the amount of information being imparted and the increased demands of interacting with this information (including the complexity and abstract nature of many of the concepts underpinning it), the methodologies chosen, the lack of information to teachers regarding students needs and the failure of teachers to adjust instruction on foot of receiving this information. In addition, 34% of teachers identified a mismatch between the organisational skills required by students to interact effectively with the curriculum and their organisational abilities in this regard. They referred in particular to difficulties in adjusting to a larger number of subjects and daily preparation for these, to a larger range of teachers and teaching approaches and to movement within a larger built environment, often between classes, lockers and break areas. Though not specifically asked about this, a number of teachers (26%) noted that the model of support in operation at the school was pivotal in helping students with LS/SEN cope with these challenges.

In relation to the effects of transfer on students' social and emotional adjustment, there is a striking correlation between the views of teachers in relation to the experience of students with LS/SEN and those described for the generality of students. The only real divergence was in relation to the degree to which various issues were experienced.

All teachers responded to this item and the interplay between student anxiety and academic and related organisational demands emerged as a prominent theme (47%), along with fears about social isolation and difficulties in establishing friendships (32%). Interestingly, as with the academic area, the role of transfer programmes in facilitating the effective transfer of information on social and

emotional issues and offering support on the basis of this information was seen as highly significant by a substantial number of respondents (34%).

### **Transfer Programmes**

Of the thirty-eight schools represented, twenty-four operated a mixed ability system of grouping students at junior cycle, which in some cases included banding for English, Irish and mathematics. Eight teachers reported that their schools operated streamed models of provision or a mixture of streamed and mixed ability.

#### *Students Presenting within the LS/SEN Category*

Respondents were asked about the numbers of students transferring who fell within LS or high-incidence categories and those who fell within low-incidence categories or their estimates of these. The author then calculated these figures as a percentage of the total numbers transferring to each school. It must be noted that six of those surveyed reported that they could not stipulate these figures with any degree of surety. Data supplied by these six respondents is not presented here. Moreover, the responses of a further four participants was presented in an unclear manner and required a degree of interpretation on the part of the author. These responses are included. Given that these issues relate to a sizable proportion of the sample (26%) a degree of caution must be exercised in interpreting the figures outlined in this section.

Teachers reported that an average 21.6% of school intake in September 2008 fell within LS and high-incidence categories of SEN. They reported that an average of 5.4% fell within low-incidence categories. Fourteen schools indicated that 20% or more of their intake fell in high-incidence categories, with roughly 78% of the sample reporting rates in excess of 10%. No school on which statistics are presented reported less than 5% of student intake falling within the LS or high-incidence categories (Table 1).

**Table 1: Students with high-incidence needs**

**Numbers of Schools and Percentage of Students with Learning Support/ High-Incidence Needs in First Year Intake: Aug/Sept 2008 (n=32)**

<b>0-5 %</b>	<b>5-9 %</b>	<b>10-19 %</b>	<b>20-30 %</b>	<b>=/&gt;30 %</b>
0	7	11	7	7

Given the nature of low-incidence categories and how they occur the lack of uniformity here was understandable. Particularly high rates were reported where

students with high-incidence needs comprised 2-5% of student intake and where they exceeded 5%. Overall 21 teachers (65%) reported more than 2% of student intake as falling within low-incidence categories (Table 2).

**Table 2: Students with low-incidence needs**

**Numbers of Schools and Percentage of Students with Low-Incidence Needs in First Year Intake: Aug/Sept 2008 (n=32)**

0-1 %	1-2 %	2-5 %	5 – 10 %	=/>10%
7	4	11	4	6

**Time Span of the Various Transfer Programmes**

Most respondents (80%) indicated that the transfer process began between August and March of the year preceding September 2008. Interestingly, two respondents noted that it started in fifth class in primary school. Teachers most commonly reported that the transfer process began with an open day/evening (34%) or an entrance assessment day (24%). Otherwise, the most common opening activity recorded was a visit by a representative of the post-primary school to prospective feeder schools (usually a member of the senior or middle management team). No respondent reported that they began the process later than March of the year preceding transfer.

The most common dates given for the end of formal transfer programmes were between May (immediately preceding transfer) and September (immediately after it), with 55% of respondents identifying cessation dates during this period. Worryingly, ten respondents indicated that the programme in their school finished before these dates. Much greater diversity was reported by teachers in the activities signalling the end of the transfer process than those initiating it. The most common activity was an induction day devoted exclusively to first year students (45%). Parent-teacher or parents’ information meetings were also significantly quoted in this connection (16%). Only six respondents indicated that transfer programmes continued after September of the reception year, with two indicating that monitoring aspects of this programme continued into second year. The vast majority of teachers reported that their schools offered no further transfer support after the end of September.

**Personnel Involved in Transfer**

As part of the study respondents were asked to identify from a list provided the personnel *directly* involved in the transition process at their school. Table 3 summarises this data.

**Table 3: Personnel involved in transition programmes**

<b>Personnel</b>	<b>No. of Schools</b>
Principal	30
Deputy Principal	22
First Year Class Tutors	14
Year Head Responsible for First Year Students	25
Chaplain	13
Guidance Counsellor	29
Home School Community Liaison Teacher	10
Special Needs Co-ordinator	25
Learning Support Teacher	12
Resource Teacher	5
Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)	6
Psychologist / Psychological Support Service	7
Programme Co-ordinator/s	5
Other (please specify)	6

From the perspective of this article, perhaps the most significant finding in this area was the high number of teachers (66%) who reported that special needs co-ordinators were involved in their schools transfer programmes. Where no particular person was nominated to co-ordinate the area, a learning support or resource teacher was usually involved. Only a tiny minority of schools indicated no role for these teachers in the process. Participants were also asked whether the person nominated as special needs co-ordinator was trained or not. It is encouraging to note that nineteen of the twenty-five who were involved were reported to hold qualifications in this connection. At a systemic level this is a very significant finding and indicates the keenness of schools, supported by the Teacher Education Section of the Department of Education and Science, to see the influence of trained personnel in this area. The importance of this should not be taken for granted since it does not occur in other jurisdictions. On the other hand, the increasing trend in Irish schools to appoint trained learning support or resource teachers to this role indicates a demand for specific training in the exercising of this role.

Another significant finding was the involvement of principals (79%) and deputy principals (58%) in the transfer process. This seems to indicate the high priority placed on this area by senior management and their willingness to back this up by direct involvement. Moreover, their involvement occurred in the majority of

settings irrespective of school size. Outside the involvement of the principal/deputy principal, the professional most often involved in transfer was the guidance counsellors (76%). Two thirds of respondents (66%) indicated that year heads had a direct involvement in the transfer process. A final group of staff significantly represented in the reports of teachers (13%) consisted of school completion programmes co-ordinators. This was a significant number given the diversity of the sample group. This would indicate that school completion programmes (correctly) view the transfer process as highly significant, both in terms of retaining students at this juncture and in terms of engaging and orientating them in order to prevent the seeds of later disengagement being sown.

An interesting finding referred to the involvement of special educational needs organisers (SENOs). Only fourteen respondents indicated an element of SENO involvement in the transfer programme operating at their school. Only six indicated a 'direct involvement' for this group. The comment most attached to responses related to how 'unsure' teachers were in relation to the role that SENOs played in this process. Either they were viewed as having a very remote role or no role at all.

### **Elements of Transfer Programmes, Including Elements Specifically Targeted at Students with LS/SEN.**

The ten elements reported most in the transfer programmes of respondents' schools are listed in order of frequency in Table 4 below, along with the number of participants who reported them.

As emerged elsewhere the most common features cited in transfer programmes were pre-transfer visits by key personnel, pre-transfer entrance assessments and pre-/post-transfer tours of post-primary schools. Parents/care giver meetings and induction days also loomed large as did the completion of application forms and various post-transfer settling in routines, though the latter were by no means universal.

The frequency with which teachers reported that their schools engage in meetings between learning support and special education teachers is highly significant. Information gathered seems to indicate that these meetings most commonly involve the post-primary SEN co-ordinator and are primarily devoted to discussing test results and the strengths and needs of students with LS/SEN. They do not generally include discussion of the approaches and strategies that most effectively play to these strengths and mediate these needs. Another interesting finding was the relatively large number of teachers who reported on-going

tracking of students with LS/SEN after transfer. Of course the extent to which this tracking is effective is closely linked to the quality of teacher knowledge of LS/SEN and of transfer – a factor which may determine where teachers look for indicators of success around transfer. It seems that teacher knowledge of these matters varies widely, with perhaps greater unanimity arising around social and emotional issues than academic and curricular ones.

**Table 4: Elements of transfer programmes**

<b>Rank Order No.</b>	<b>Elements of Transfer Programmes</b>	<b>No. of Teachers Identifying This Element</b>
1.	Pre-transfer visit/s by a key members of staff	33
2.	Pre-transfer entrance assessment tests	32
3.	Pre-transfer tour of the post-primary school for primary students	30
4.	Pre-transfer general meeting/s for parents/carers	29
4.	Induction day/s for new first year students	29
4.	Post-transfer tour of the school for students	29
7.	Application forms in which parents/carers inform the school of students' LS or SEN	24
7.	Post-transfer tracking of students with LS/SEN	24
9.	Pre-transfer information meetings between primary and post-primary LS/SEN teachers	21
10.	Pre-transfer visit by principal or deputy principal	20
10.	Specific post-transfer 'settling-in' routines e.g. buddy systems	20

Another interesting point to emerge relates to the use of individual education plans (IEPs). It is significant that only three respondents reported the presence of any IEP element in the transition programmes they described, even in loose terms or by way of systems that underpin good practice. The fact that this element of provision is the focus of some attention in the context of an industrial relations dispute is relevant here as is the failure to commence legal provisions that provide for IEPs.

Given the difficulties in relation to curricular alignment between primary and post-primary systems noted in the first of these articles (McCauley, 2009) and the implications such matters have for students with LS/SEN, it is also significant that



only two respondents reported any process by which this issue was addressed as part of any consideration of transfer.

Finally, it was significant that only three teachers reported a post-transfer survey of student experiences was part of the transfer programme operating in their school. How are the voices of students to be heard or gain currency if we do not elicit their legitimate and valuable insights and use these to inform future provision?

### **Teacher Ratings of Effectiveness Regarding Students with LS/SEN**

Each respondent was asked to rate their school according to their perceptions of its effectiveness in responding to students with LS/SEN around certain aspects of the transfer process. These were:

- **The transfer of information on the strengths and needs of students with LS/SEN during transfer**
- **The transfer of information regarding the teaching and learning approaches that best suit these students**
- **Supporting students with LS/SEN in dealing with demands related to organisational differences during transfer**
- **Supporting students with LS/SEN in dealing with academic and curricular demands during transfer**
- **Supporting students with LS/SEN in dealing with the social and emotional demands of transfer.**

The first trend to emerge from this data was the clustering of responses around the middle of the scale used (highly effective, effective, adequate, inadequate and grossly inadequate). Though not all participants provided a response for each area 92% of responses fell around the middle of the scale (effective, adequate, inadequate), with 73.5% falling specifically within the ‘adequate’ or ‘inadequate’ ranges. Only eight of 185 ratings fell within the ‘highly effective’ category and these were dispersed across four of the five areas. Only eleven of the 185 ratings indicated that school provision was ‘grossly inadequate’ in some area. This rating was used more in connection with the transfer of information on teaching and learning approaches best suited to students with LS/SEN than any other area.

The area in which most teachers (63%) felt their schools provided adequate, effective or highly effective provision was in relation to the transfer of information relating to the strengths and needs of individuals with LS/SEN. In fact, this area had the highest number of ‘highly effective’ ratings, followed closely by school

support for the social and emotional needs of this group (60%). Over half of teachers (53%) also felt that their schools deal at least adequately with the academic and curricular demands placed on students during transfer, though this of course necessarily meant that the remainder of the sample did not.

The area in which most teachers felt school provision was least effective was in soliciting information on the teaching and learning approaches best suited to the various students with LS/SEN. This area was followed by a majority view (55%) that provision in their schools was inadequate in relation to supporting students with LS/SEN around negotiating organisational differences between primary and post-primary schools.

### **Suggested Improvements for Transition Programmes**

The final survey question asked teachers to outline three changes they would prioritise in the coming year in relation to the transfer process in operation in their school. It is interesting to note that all but a tiny fraction of these referred to issues related to the transfer of students with LS/SEN.

Of the suggestions noted above, fifty-one referred to the need to support students with LS/SEN within academic and curricular areas, thirty-eight referred to improvements that might be made to supporting this group in the social and emotional domains and fourteen referred to supporting them around organisational issues. The remaining eleven suggestions referred mainly to (often very school-specific) aspects of procedure in other areas.

Taking all of the suggestions together, the theme to emerge most clearly related to better transfer of information between primary and post-primary schools and the quality of this information (63%). One third of responses (33%) suggest more structured transfer of key information on performance and ability and 30% suggested better transfer of information on the teaching and learning approaches best suited to these students. Specifically, post-primary teachers were keen to receive information on learning style, motivation and learning disposition, individual accommodations, exemptions and specific approaches, materials and programmes used in the past so that better choices could be made regarding continuing or discontinuing the use of these after transfer. It seemed clear to the writer that many respondents were thinking in terms of their emergent roles as learning support or resource teacher and hence were focused on having to hand the information most useful to the school for the development of effective student profiles and programmes. It was equally clear from their responses that they saw a role for themselves in disseminating this information to other colleagues. The

most common group mentioned in this connection were subject teachers. The most common purpose quoted was the facilitation of differentiated teaching and learning in mainstream classes.

Suggestions made in relation to the social and emotional areas were very diffuse and difficult to draw together. The most numerous suggestions centred on the need to improve on-going monitoring of students social adjustment (again predominantly relating to students with LS/SEN) which was instanced in 13% of cases. Two suggestions related to prevention of bullying in particular while a further recommended 'buddy systems' to support students in terms of negotiating their new social contexts and two others related to a greater role for parents in supporting students through the social and emotional aspects of transfer. It is highly significant that 13% of suggestions focused on greater use of post-transfer feedback from students in planning for transition in the future.

Suggestions for improvements in the area of supporting students in coping with organisational issues associated with transfer were pragmatic. In the main these focused on areas such as understanding the geography of the school, timetables, school books, journals and the use of lockers. This compares closely with teacher knowledge issues relating to transfer and more specifically to their views of the difficulties experienced by students with LS/SEN.

## **LIMITATIONS OF STUDY**

This study focused on a questionnaire given to thirty nine teachers. There are many limitations to the approach taken. One relates to the use of a questionnaire as a method of inquiry (Creswell, 2002). Another to the fact that the study focused exclusively on post-primary teachers' perspectives: more specifically the perspectives of post-primary learning support and resource teachers in training. It became clear during this research that those surveyed were not the only people in their schools involved in the transfer programmes they described. In fact, in some cases these teachers described only marginal involvement for themselves in this aspect of school provision. Given this fact, there may well have been elements or initiatives relating to transfer programmes operating in their schools of which they were unaware and hence were not described. Similarly, the views of teachers in feeder primary schools, students and parents would have greatly enhanced understandings of these programmes.

These limitations notwithstanding and if the sample used is representative, the survey made clear the fact that many post-primary teachers take a very active

interest in the area of transfer and they have much to say about it. While there is considerable divergence in their opinions much can be learned from them. Moreover, post-primary schools seem to consider it a very important issue, often devoting considerable thought, effort and resources to making transfer programmes effective in meeting individual and institutional needs.

## **DISCUSSION**

The variety of transition programmes described should be of little surprise given the diversity of opinion noted above. This variety occurred not only in terms of the duration of these programmes but also in terms of their scope, design and the number and type of school personnel involved. Nevertheless, most post-primary schools seemed to hold open days, visited feeder schools and arrange induction for first year students at a minimum. In relation to the effectiveness of the programmes described in supporting students with LS/SEN, teacher opinion was also shown to be divided. Despite this, their suggestions for where improvements to current provision might occur should be taken under careful advisement. These suggestions centred mainly on academic issues, with the transfer of useful information relating to the teaching and learning approaches best suited to students with LS/SEN being paramount. The need to offer more support around social and emotional issues was also emphasised.

Another point emerging from this work is that many schools have developed a range of experience and expertise in relation to the transfer of students with LS/SEN over a substantial period of time. The practitioners in these schools must be facilitated in sharing their thoughts and experiences throughout the Irish educational system. Various levels of involvement should be represented in any such initiative, i.e. teachers, guidance counsellors, co-ordinators and senior management.

This might happen in tandem with the implementation of a system wide awareness programme or the setting up of a forum charged with contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this area. Certainly, such an initiative is warranted given what is at stake; the smooth and effective transition of an entire age cohort of children each year. They will however, require co-ordination at a systemic level if consensus is to emerge regarding the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders. The eventual roll out of a system of IEP provision and the imperatives demanded by that system, in terms of transition planning, could provide a useful focal point for such developments. On the other hand if we depend on this roll out to provide the necessary impetus we may well be left waiting!

The involvement of guidance counsellors was generally connected with the administration of entrance assessments, however, research suggests that students with SEN are often willing to talk to guidance teachers on a variety of matters (Edwards, 2001 cited in O'Brien, 2008). Given the frequency of this groups' involvement in transfer programmes it is imperative that they receive sufficient input to appraise them of pertinent issues, especially those relating to students with LS/SEN. A similar rationale could be applied to other groups such as year heads.

The perception of the lack of a role for the SENO within transition programmes should be of some concern to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). At the very least it seemed that the work of most SENOs occurs without direct contact with many of those most intrinsically involved in the process of supporting students with LS/SEN during transfer, namely learning support, resource and other teachers. Continued disjunction between these two groups of professionals would seem to militate against the interest of students with LS/SEN, especially in terms of making resource allocations that take into account their transfer needs. Unless such discussions become an intrinsic part of the transfer process it is unlikely that such needs will ever be adequately anticipated and provided for. This issue is not new, being alluded to as far back as the SERC Report (Ireland, 1993) and is specifically provided for in a part of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Ireland, 2004) not yet commenced. It is high time to act on these provisions.

This is not to say that SENOs are not aware of the issues involved. For example, in anecdotal discussions between the author and a number of SENOs it was clear that they were aware of the benefits of effective transfer of information and resources to students with SEN. Interestingly, many of their comments focused on the boon to the parents in this connection. However, it does seem that their role as currently constituted does not include sufficient liaison with teachers. Clearly, there is much for the NCSE to consider in this connection. This may account for their interest in this area in recent times (NCSE, 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

This author has always held the belief that the *quality* of educational experience offered to students should be kept at the centre of any debate focussing on inclusion. Given that the process of transition seems to impact significantly on the quality of subsequent educational experiences, and that this might be particularly true in the case of students with LS/SEN, it is imperative that this process is adequately understood and resourced as part of any systemic response to

inclusion. This requires building the capacity of schools to respond adequately to the needs of all students as they arrive in and adjust to their new educational surroundings. It also means developing capability of these schools to continue to support students, including those with LS/SEN, as they progress throughout their school careers, since it is only in the longer term that success in relation to transfer can be gauged. Given that this current generation may, either through its naivety or impropriety, have consigned the next one to the very real possibility of difficult economic circumstances and the fact that those with LS/SEN seem particularly susceptible to the vicissitudes of social marginalisation at times of financial rectitude, it is difficult to see how it will be forgiven for also failing to provide the next generation with the quality of educational experience that will equip it to cope with demands placed on it by this legacy.

#### *Acknowledgement*

*The author remains indebted to the generosity of the particular group of teachers surveyed and to their commitment to developing a greater understanding of transfer.*

#### **REFERENCES**

Creswell, J. (2002) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2nd ed), New York: Sage.

Ireland (1993) *Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC)*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Ireland (2004) *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN)*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.

McCauley, E. (2009) Transition from Primary to Post-Primary School: Issues for Students with Special Educational Needs, *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, Vol. 23 (1), pp. 32-46.

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2008) *Invitation to Tender for a Research Study on the Transfer Experiences of Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Moving from Primary to Secondary School*, [http://www.ncse.ie/research\\_info.html](http://www.ncse.ie/research_info.html) (accessed 25th March 2009).

O'Brien, M. (2008) *Well-Being and Post-Primary Schooling: A Review of the Literature and Research*, NCCA Research Report No. 6, Dublin: NCCA.

Copyright of Reach is the property of Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.