Aiding in the Transition from Primary to Secondary School

Angela C. Dalton

Project Advisor: Maureen Parker, School of Secondary & Further Education Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, PL4 8AA

The transition from primary to secondary school is said to be a major cause of anxiety amongst children. This was the focus of an earlier assignment from which my research showed that transition can cause anxiety among children in Year 6. Since discovering the main causes of this anxiety, I subsequently looked at ways to help children through this transition period, this being the focus of my assignment. Through the analysis of responses to questionnaires administered to 62 children in Year 6 during my previous assignment, I was able to conclude that although most children look forward to some extent to their move to a new school, 83% would like to know more about the school. Over one third of children in Year 6 are experiencing anxiety and would like the opportunity to talk about those worries. This period of anxiety can affect not only children’s academic performance, but their general sense of wellbeing. From my earlier research I concluded that a support system, providing information and informal discussion was called for to enable as smooth a path for children through transition as is feasible. This was set up in the form of ‘The Moving On Club’ for Year 6 children.

Keywords: Transition, Primary, Secondary, Anxiety

Introduction

As individuals, any significant change to our daily routine can be cause for a certain amount of anxiety. For many children, one of the most difficult changes in their lives is that between primary and secondary school. As Marshall (1988) states,

“[Transition from primary to secondary school] is seen as the biggest step for moving from one stage to another of the educational process.” p.11

As a Teaching Assistant working within Year 6 of a primary school, I am able to see at first hand the unease that this significant change can bring about. It was for this reason that I focussed my preceding assignment on finding out what, exactly, was the cause of this unease. Responses gained from questionnaires, administered to 62 Year 6 children, showed that of those children experiencing anxiety, a majority stated bullying, getting lost and losing contact with friends as major concerns. The concern about possible bullying was by far the most prevalent and this would correspond with the findings of Zeedyk et al (2003) who measured the responses of primary and secondary school children and their parents to questions concerning transition from primary to secondary school:
“For all groups, the issue mentioned most often was bullying. There was a striking degree of consistency in this outcome, arguably the most robust pattern to emerge in the entire data set.” p.72

Those children also stated that they would like the opportunity to talk about their concerns and find out more about their new schools. It is from this information that I decided to set up what was to become ‘The Moving On Club’ to provide those children with the opportunity to do just that.

“The Elton Report suggests that we should develop ‘peer support groups’ to combat isolation, to increase effectiveness and to reduce stress.” (1989 cited by Best (1995) p. 84)

Throughout this assignment I plan to discuss strategies used by the school and myself to aid children through the transition process. Any names used have been altered for confidentiality.

**Transition as a Cause of Anxiety**

While many children are looking forward to moving on to a new school, many others have concerns which cause anxiety. Adjustments must be made to the new situation and new demands will be made. The research carried out for my previous assignment showed the following areas of major concern for children: the foremost being a fear of being bullied, getting lost and an increased workload; other concerns were losing contact with friends and over-strict teachers. These findings correspond with Marshall (1988, p.41) who found the 5 main anxieties/issues during transition to be:

- Size and complex organisation
- New forms of discipline
- New work demands
- Prospect of being bullied
- Losing friends

Zeedyk et al (2003) also found that;

“Results showed that bullying was a major concern for all groups, followed by fears of getting lost, increased workload and peer relationships, among others.” p.67

One interesting fact is that the majority of the unease among Year 6 children does not concern academic issues, but more social and environmental matters. However, it is the very nature of the anxiety these concerns create, that can affect children’s academic performance. Zeedyk et al (2003) note:

“While concerns of [academic] nature did emerge, worries about coping with the new workload, environment and peer group were much more common. This is an important realization for schools to keep in mind when developing transition support programmes; children’s most pressing concerns appear not to be academic ones.” p. 73
There are certainly many negative aspects of transition. Firstly, Year 6 children will be moving from a small school where they are the oldest pupils to a much larger school where they are the youngest. They will be changing from having 1 teacher and 1 classroom to many teachers and new subjects being taught in numerous different classrooms. They will be moving from a school where they will know a majority of the children in their year to one with many new faces, both pupils and staff who they do not know. Marshall (1988) saw these differences as ‘the great divide’. She asks:

“If there is to be continuity, how best can this ‘great divide’ be bridged and what problems are we likely to have to overcome?” p.39

While many children will enjoy the change, seeing it as a challenge and having a sense of ‘moving up’, meeting new friends and learning new subjects, others will have major concerns. This can have an adverse affect on the children’s ability to learn. As Zeedyk et al (2003) state:

“The move from primary to secondary school results in a range of consequences for young people... it seems there is almost always a considerable period of stress and worry. This can lead to decreases or even reversals in academic performance...” p.68

**Introducing the ‘Moving On Club’**

It was to deal with these concerns that I set up meetings for Year 6 children. The responses I received from previously administered questionnaires, clearly showed that there was a need for more information. I hoped that ‘fear of the unknown’ would diminish once concerns were discussed and accurate information passed on. I discussed my ideas with the class teacher and she agreed that the club would be a great benefit to certain pupils and that I could use the classroom as a meeting place.

I set up links with all four secondary schools in the area. By telephoning and explaining my objective, I was able to create contacts at each school in case there were any questions the children had which I could not answer. These contacts were also useful for giving me dates and information for the newsletter which I will discuss later.

The first meeting was held soon after the children were told, in March 2007, which secondary school they would be attending. A message was passed to each Year 6 class notifying the children of the time and place the club would be held and its objectives. I made it clear that everyone was welcome and that we would chat informally about any concerns and answer any questions raised.

I was aware that certain pupils might have concerns but be unwilling to attend a ‘club’ to discuss them. Zeedyk et al (2003) noted that:

“...a large proportion of primary pupils stated that they were not concerned about anything. This may represent a show of bravado, given that a much lower proportion of secondary students endorsed that view. Secondary students may have been more willing to voice their past fears, having already completed the transition.” p.72
In order to accommodate this group, I provided a ‘Questions Box’ next to my desk. I provided question slips on which any questions could be written. Names need not be included as there was an option to remain anonymous. Anonymous questions would be answered in a newsletter, named questions would be answered directly and in confidence.

12 children attended the first meeting, 10 girls and 2 boys. I provided squash and biscuits to promote an informal atmosphere and we sat in a circle around a table. I also gave each child a ‘smiley’ badge to recognize their membership of the club. During this meeting we discussed who was going to which school. This in itself helped certain children as they hadn’t known anyone else going to their school until the meeting. I asked each child to tell us one thing they knew about their secondary school. This started a good discussion and raised some important questions. If I or the children could not answer certain questions, I would make a note to find the answer for the next meeting. For example, a few children wanted to know what kind of meals were provided at lunch time and how much they would need to pay. This is a good example of the simple concerns children have which can cause anxiety. We agreed to meet again in 2 weeks.

At the second meeting 8 children attended, 7 girls and 1 boy. The drop in numbers was apparently due to the fact that there was a rehearsal for a school play which many Year 6 children were involved in, something I had overlooked. At this meeting I firstly answered the questions raised at the first meeting and then asked the children for suggestions on ideas to include in a ‘Moving On Club’ newsletter. Suggestions made were: bullying and what to do if you are bullied; getting lost and how to avoid it and friends – a list of who is going to which school. I also asked for contributions of good jokes to liven the letter up.

Since the first meeting I had received a number of questions in the ‘Questions Box’. Without reading any names, I read out the questions and as a group we discussed the concerns and offered solutions. I held the list of names for each question and made a note of whether they were present to hear the answer, if not I would talk to them individually later. I was very impressed with the quality of suggestions offered by the children and by the end of the meeting any concerns had been tackled and the children seemed satisfied with the results. As Marshall (1988) states:

“...there can be no substitute for personal involvement and experience to put things into their real perspective.” p.73

Again we agreed to meet again in 2 weeks.

Whilst thinking of how the children were, in effect, helping themselves by talking together about their own concerns, I decided to invite an ex-pupil to our next meeting to discuss their own experience of transition to secondary school. I knew that one of the secondary schools in the area had a staff training day at the end of the month while our school would be in attendance. I decided to ask one of the girls who had left Year 6 two years earlier. She was a sensible girl and I knew she wouldn’t have any difficulty talking to a small group. Her younger brother still attended our school and so I sent a letter home via him. Susan kindly agreed to come to our next meeting.

I sent a message to the Year 6 classes notifying them of Susan’s visit and the time and place of the meeting. This meeting was well attended with 18 children present, 15 girls and 3 boys. Each child was given the opportunity to ask Susan a question and we went round the table in
Susan was an excellent speaker, answering questions fully and giving anecdotes which the children loved. She allayed fears of bullying and admitted that she had been afraid of being bullied when she first went to secondary school but that she had had no difficulties. However, Susan also explained the procedures if you do get bullied at her school and who to see. Some of the other topics discussed were: homework; school trips; getting lost; uniforms; teachers; lunches and vending machines.

After Susan’s visit I wrote the first ‘Moving On Club’ newsletter. I was aiming, basically, at those children who had concerns but did not attend the club. I therefore covered the main concerns and gave some useful tips and information, including web sites. I hoped this information would give the children more confidence and knowledge. Sirsch (2003 p.2) states that “believing one has control over outcomes reduces stress.” I believed the more information the children had, the better they would be able to deal with the situation. I included the donated jokes and a wordsearch to make it a little more interesting and hopefully encourage the children to read it. I had planned to print a list of who was going to which school on the back of the newsletter, but there were still appeals taking place and I considered this to be better left until the appeals were finalised.

We held two further meetings before the end of term which were still well attended with 16 and 12 children respectively. During the penultimate meeting we played a game of ‘Go Fish’ with a set of cards I had made especially for the club. This went down well and the children had an informal chat whilst we played. Most concerns seemed to have been cleared up by now and no-one had any particular worries. The discussion was mainly about the excitement and anticipation they were feeling about their new schools. We discussed reasons for looking forward to their new schools and each child gave one reason.

The last meeting was held in June and this time I provided special cakes. I had received a few more questions in my box although mostly concerned with leaving the school and friends. We discussed why we feel sad when leaving familiar friends and surroundings. Best, (1995 p.84) believes that children need to be sad and say goodbye before they can move on. He suggests we “…give [children] information so they can release fear and get back to joy.”

The meeting ended with each child giving a happy memory of their time at the school.

**Other Strategies used to Aid the Transition Process**

For many children the transition from primary to secondary school can be daunting. During my study of the subject, I have found little research on the anxiety caused by transition and relatively few accounts of transition research have been published in U.K. academic literature. In a study by Sirsch (2003) it is noted that

“...little scientific attention has been given to investigating its importance for the individual.” p.1.

Sirsch looked at the positive as well as negative attitudes and feelings towards the impending transition and found that personal factors affect the child’s perception. Sirsch explains that a child with high perceptions of their own competence will see transition as more of a challenge than a threat, whereas those who perceive themselves as anxious view transition more as a threat. I agree with this theory when considering the children who attended ‘Moving On Club’. The children who attended the club could be described as having less confidence than
others. Although this was not the case with every child, the class teacher described those who she knew were attending as the ‘more needy’ children.

When considering strategies we can use within school to aid the transition process, giving children the confidence to tackle transition anxiety cannot be overlooked. A study by Zeedyk et al (2003) found that children tend to undervalue confidence as a skill needed to aid in transition. While adults in the study mention confidence as a key skill for assisting with transition, Zeedyk et al (2003) stated:

“Neither of the two pupil groups mentioned this skill with any noticeable frequency.” p.76

Zeedyk et al (2003) found that the skills teachers and children identify as those needed to aid transition are rather dissimilar and goes on to say:

“If this gap could be bridged, children could be supported to contribute much more effectively to managing their own transition, giving them the sense of confidence that teachers seek and children appear to underrate. p.76

I felt it was therefore necessary to give those children as much confidence as possible and I believed this could only come in the form of knowledge. The more information I could give them, the less they would view the transition as a threat and the more they would see it in a positive light and as a challenge. In this way, I hoped the ‘Moving On Club’ would give the less confident children an opportunity not only to receive help but also to give help to their peers, in the form of discussion. As Griffiths (1994 p.42) states, “Self esteem comes from making a contribution rather than being a recipient.”

In order for the Year 6 children to receive this information, links between primary and secondary schools need to be strong in order to benefit the children moving between the two.

Griffiths (1994) discusses this shift of responsibility from primary to secondary schooling and the need for children to become more responsible. As teachers, our aim should be to train children in the skills they will require to become more independent individuals. They need to move from a more dependent environment, to one where they are less reliant on adult involvement.

“Others are totally responsible for making all provisions. The child is, however, learning to take more responsibility for itself...the child is increasingly judged by, and held accountable for its own actions.”

(Griffiths, 1994 p.3)

A strategy to aid in transition which is already in place is that all children and parents are provided with a prospectus from each school and given dates for ‘open evenings’ when they can visit each school and be shown around. This gives an opportunity for parents to discover the school’s values and ethos. There needs to be a thorough understanding between teacher, pupil and parent. It is important for parents to be involved as they play an important part in supporting continuity.
After the child and parents have visited each school, it is then necessary for the parent to complete an application form which must be returned by the closing date; usually towards the end of October. Parents are invited to indicate first, second and third place preferences. Parents are notified of the outcome of their application by letter; usually at the beginning of March. Appeals can be made if first preference is not given and the outcome of these appeals should be known by the end of May.

This procedure alone can cause untold anxiety among the children. Not knowing if they will be attending the school of their first choice with their friends can cause great apprehension.

During June and July the Heads of Year 7 visit our school to talk to the Year 6 children who will be attending their school. This gives the children an opportunity to ask any questions and the teachers can reassure the children on the various routines of the new school.

In July children from all schools transfer for the day to their new schools, meet their form tutors and experience a number of lessons with their new teachers. This is a most important day for children as it allows them to familiarize themselves with the building, organisational characteristics and to meet the staff and other pupils.

In addition to this set ‘transfer day’, two of the secondary schools in our area also hold other activities throughout the year which allow our pupils to visit the secondary schools. They hold music workshops, maths challenges and sporting activities which keep the links strong.

At our primary school, meetings between Year 6 and Year 7 teachers take place in the final weeks of the summer term. This gives Year 7 teachers an opportunity to discuss individual needs of the pupils coming to them the following school year. Finding a mutually acceptable time can be extremely difficult but is a great opportunity. Children’s records are sent on to the respective secondary schools but the meetings ensure that the written information is properly understood, especially where abnormal grades and results need some explanation. This is particularly the case with Special Educational Needs (SEN) children and some ethnic minorities who may have language issues.

Records sent from primary to secondary school should be easy to read and understand. They should give only the required information and this should be effective by giving it quickly, accurately and in a useable format. Our school uses a printed IEP form for SEN children; it is one sheet, in simple format and only has essential information. All children have a ‘white sheet’ which gives SATs results and reading and spelling ages for their primary years.

For the SEN children, certain schools ask Year 6 staff to fill out an information form indicating the child’s strengths and weaknesses, family situation, hobbies and any particular difficulties and strategies used. I believe this form will be of great value to secondary school staff wishing to get to know the child and allowing them to be more able to set appropriate activities without delay.

All the strategies mentioned in this section go some way in aiding the transition process, however, as I will discuss in the next section, some improvements could be made.

**Evaluation**

This assignment has produced a number of useful ideas. Overall there seems to be the need for an increase in attention to the anxieties faced by children looking toward transition to
secondary school. In general, schools from this study are proficient at facilitating and easing that transition, however these children are moving into a more independent role and need to be better equipped. Children need a repertoire of skills and abilities on which they can draw to ease the transition.

Schools put into place several measures to aid transition, as mentioned in the previous section: visits to secondary school; former pupils and secondary teachers speaking to Year 6 children; involving parents at ‘open evenings’; transferring records between schools and ‘fun’ activities organized by the secondary school all contribute to easing this transition.

There are however a number of improvements which may aid children even further. For example, perhaps it would be more beneficial to begin the process of liaison earlier in the year. A steady ‘trickle’ of information and activities may be more constructive than a rush of activity in the final term. Although the provision and timing of letters and brochures from secondary schools is out of my control, there are certain strategies that I can implement myself. For instance, next year I would like to begin the ‘Moving On Club’ earlier in the year or at least make the children aware that it will be available to them.

It is important for the children’s information to be passed on to secondary school in a manner that will facilitate it being used to its best advantage. The SEN information forms provided by some secondary schools could be used for all children. Information concerning family situations and hobbies could be of great benefit, it need not only be confined to Special Needs children. This information would need to be simple in format as, at times, little notice is taken of records passed on. I would like to discuss with next year’s Head of Year 6 the possibility of providing secondary schools with concise, simple information about every child, which Year 7 teachers would be able to access more readily.

Parents and carers are an extremely important part of any young person’s life and so should be more involved in the transition process. Zeedyk et al (2003) show that parents and children share many of the same concerns about the move to secondary school.

“It seems reasonable to assume that a causal relation may exist between the two; if a parent becomes aware of a child’s concerns, they may well come to share them and vice versa.” p.73

Conceivably, a programme needs to be introduced which addresses not only the concerns of the child but also of the parent. More attention should perhaps be given to the parent, who would then in turn be more equipped to support their child. Next year, I plan to offer ‘Moving On Club’ meetings for parents as well as children as I believe it is important to keep parents involved. These meetings could provide parents with information early and address their individual concerns. I would also act as a point of contact for them at the school in case any other concerns were raised.

During the 1960s, the Plowden Report (cited by Marshall, 1988) suggested the introduction of ‘middle’ schools. They were seen as an effective bridge between primary and secondary stages of education. Marshall (1988) suggested that we need to consider the experiences a child has had and those they will have in the next stage;
“...teaching philosophies and methods in the early years of middle school are often closer to those of primary than secondary schools.”
Marshall p.44

A study by Jennings and Hargreaves (1977, cited by Marshall, 1988 p.42), clearly showed that transition from primary to secondary schooling had detrimental short-term effects upon the attitudes of children compared to those who moved to middle schools as an intermediary step. These effects could have a long-term educational consequence. It would be impractical of me to suggest that all authorities need to implement middle schools; however, it is important to provide as smooth a path through the educational system as is feasible.

Another option might be to continue the best of our primary school practices in the first two years of secondary school by effectively treating these years as an ‘internal’ middle school although, in order to achieve this, there needs to be more discussion between schools. The National Curriculum bridges the gap to some extent; however, there can be a wide range of discontinuities depending on each child’s individual experiences.

While schools focus on organisational and environmental issues, we must also make sure that individual concerns are discovered and addressed. This was the objective of the ‘Moving On Club’. Although, overall, the club was relatively successful, there are certain aspects that could be improved. For example, I would like to concentrate more on the positive aspects of transition to secondary school such as new friends, a greater variety of subjects and sporting opportunities and becoming a more mature and independent person. Although at the penultimate meeting the children discussed what they were looking forward to at secondary school, I do not believe we concentrated on this positive aspect enough.

I will also need to plan meeting times better, so as not to conflict with other clubs within the school. Fortunately, this year, I was able to meet with the teacher in charge of the school play to arrange subsequent meetings for the ‘Moving On Club’ at times when she did not need to hold rehearsals for the play.

I also believe it may be beneficial to encourage Year 6 children to hold their own ‘Moving On Club’ without the presence of an adult. As Griffiths (1994) states:

“...many young people find it difficult to enter an adolescent subgroup...Schools should offer all young people the opportunity for working and being together in groups without adult intervention.”

p.25

Unfortunately, the opportunity to allow children to work together and be together for long periods, without the presence of an adult, rarely occurs at primary level. Though the growing use of children’s networking sites may provide one way to address this concern.

The idea of having a ‘Questions Box’ was successful in that the children were able to ask questions they might have felt unable to ask me directly or to raise at the meetings. It also gave me a chance to research the answer to each question before I fed back to the child individually or to the group, making sure that I was providing accurate information. The ‘box’ was also unexpectedly used after Year 6 girls were given a PSHE lesson concerning menstruation. After the lesson I found two questions had been left in the box. I was able to talk to the girls privately and answer their queries. I plan to use the box next year as a general
‘question box’ for the children I work with in Year 6. Later in the year it will revert to a ‘Moving On Club’ question box.

The meeting with Susan was very successful and next year I plan to ask one child from each of the four secondary schools in the area to return to our school to give similar talks. I believe it would be more relevant for the children to talk with a pupil who attends the actual secondary school they will be attending as specific questions can then be answered. Overall, I believe the ‘Moving On Club’ was a success although some improvements, which I have mentioned, could be made. The research I have carried out for this and my previous assignment has made me aware of the issues faced by Year 6 children and therefore I will be better equipped next year to deal with any potential problems.

Conclusion
The aim of my study was to discover how best to aid transition for children from primary to secondary school. Previous research I had carried out showed that this transition does in fact cause anxiety in Year 6 children. The main areas causing anxiety were bullying, getting lost, losing contact with friends and an increased workload. My research also showed that children wanted to talk about their concerns and to be able to ask questions. For this reason, I started the ‘Moving On Club’ to give Year 6 children the opportunity to meet and discuss their concerns.

Children are not as concerned about academic issues as perhaps teaching staff are, and the club allowed Year 6 pupils to discuss informally an array of more personal and individual issues. The children helped themselves and each other by providing a supportive environment and offering each other strategies to cope with any difficulties. Susan’s visit, (an ex-pupil from our school) proved to be invaluable and this will be an approach I plan to expand on next year.

By the end of the school year, all the children’s apparent concerns had been tackled and their anxiety had turned to excitement and anticipation. I believe that the extra knowledge the children had gained from the meetings, talk and newsletter helped them to become more confident and to see the impending transition as more of a challenge than a threat.

Our schools already offer many resources to aid in the transition from Primary to Secondary school. Open evenings, school visits, prospectuses, teacher visits, school activities and transfer days all contribute to facilitating and easing the move, however, as I have discussed, some improvements would always be welcome. A curriculum to include competence, confidence and co-operation may teach children the skills they need to cope better with their transition.

The objective of this research was to help prepare the children in Year 6 for a more independent role and to give them the confidence to be better equipped for change. In giving this help, schools are limited by financial and staff resources, however, as Marshall (1988) states:

“...it is probably the individual teachers and heads who can have the biggest effect on improving transition and continuity...” p.12

It is not only the primary school’s responsibility to prepare children for transition. Secondary schools must ensure that pupils settle easily into their new environment once they have made
the transfer. The continuity from one phase of education to the next must be made as smooth as is feasible.

This study has been motivating and I hope, beneficial to the children concerned. I believe the results will provide me with a good foundation for further strategies to be used in coming years.

References


Further Information


www.tes.co.uk/section/story I would like to be a...Primary Liaison Co-ordinator. Accessed 23.8.07