

Rhiannon Packer ^{a*}, Amanda Thomas, Cath Jones and Philippa Watkins ^b

^a *Cardiff School of Education and Social Policy, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, Wales;* ^b *Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, University of South Wales, Newport, Wales.*

*rajpacker@cardiffmet.ac.uk Dr Rhiannon Packer, CSESP, Cyncoed Campus, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cyncoed Road. Cardiff CF23 6XD.

Rhiannon Packer is currently a senior lecturer in Additional Learning Needs and teaches on both undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Cardiff Metropolitan University. She worked for nine years as a secondary school teacher and was a Head of Year for five years before moving into Higher Education. Her research interests include transition for learners with Special Educational Needs, the learner journey for quiet, shy and anxious children, supporting learners with Specific Learning Difficulties and bilingualism.

Contact details: rajpacker@cardiffmet.ac.uk

Amanda Thomas is currently a senior lecturer in Early Years Education at the University of South Wales delivering on a range of education modules. In 1997, she began teaching in a Primary school and successfully led the Early Years provision for over 10 years. Amanda also taught in FE for four years training childcare practitioners. Amanda was awarded her PhD in researching schemas in the Foundation Phase in 2019.

Contact details: amanda.thomas@southwales.ac.uk

Catherine Jones is currently the Head of Research Development and Pedagogic Practice in the School of Education, Early Years and Education and Education Cognate Research group lead at the University of South Wales. Her research interests include developing professional practice; the learner journey, collaboration and collaborative learning and blended learning.

Contact details: Catherine.jones@southwales.ac.uk

Philippa Watkins is a senior lecturer on the BA Early Years Education and Practice in the School of Education, Early Years and Social Work at the University of South Wales. As well as an interest in transition, her research areas include the importance of storytelling as a tool for cognitive and social development; how to encourage sustainable thinking, creativity and global citizenship in the Early Years and the role of digital literacy in the 21st century.

Contact details: Philippa.watkins@southwales.ac.uk

Voices of Transition: sharing experiences from the primary school

Transition has long been acknowledged to have an impact upon the academic, social and emotional development of learners, which can be long lasting in effect. Using an interpretive methodology, the voices of the three key stakeholders involved in primary education transition – learners, practitioners and parents/caregivers - were sought and recorded to inform good practice. Data was collected using online and paper questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Findings concluded that to enable successful transition there is a need for all involved to: prepare and plan, engage in effective communication, foster positive relationships, and be responsive to individual needs.

Keywords: transition; primary education; collaborative inquiry

Introduction

If transition is regarded only as a surface phenomenon, a matter of transference from one place to another, then more fundamental and complex meanings and issues are missed (Downes, Nairs-Wirth and Anderson, 2018). This paper explores the complexity of transition by listening to the voices of three key stakeholders in the process - teachers, parents/caregivers and children - with the aim of improving our understanding of the experience. The context for the study is primary settings in South Wales which is significant because, since devolution in 1999, the Welsh Government has developed a distinctly Welsh approach to education. For example, the introduction of the Foundation Phase between 2004 and 2011 brought a new approach to learning between the ages of 3-7 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004). Currently underway is another significant process of change in how compulsory education in Wales is to be delivered and designed (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2020), with attention

given to transitions. The current curriculum has different phases and stages, each with a tendency towards distinctive approaches and philosophies (Donaldson, 2015). This creates additional transition points alongside physical movement between settings. The new curriculum seeks to remove these by focusing on a continuity of learning from ages 3-16, with individual progression through the proposed Areas of Learning and Experience.

Using an interpretive methodology framed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory allows for analysis of the key roles and experiences of those involved in the transition process and explores the impact upon the learner. The perspectives of the voices captured by our research provides a contribution to an improved understanding of transitions in primary education and reflects on good practice.

Literature Review

Transition in education is a much explored area of research, particularly in terms of the impact the experience of change can have upon learners (Davis, Ravenscroft and Bizas 2015; Eccelstone, 2007; Galton and McLellan, 2018; Perry and Dockett, 2011; Sutherland et al, 2010; Symonds, 2015; Topping, 2011). Galton and McLellan's (2018) review of transition from primary to secondary schools across five decades identifies the process metaphorically as a bridge, guiding learners as they transfer from A to B. This transfer is supported by concepts: administrative; social and emotional aspects; curriculum; pedagogy; pupil self-management. The bridge analogy is evident also in early child development theory, especially from Piaget's theoretical perspective of ages and stages (Carey, Zaitchik and Bascandziev, 2015). However, this concept can be criticised as being too linear; that transition should rather be viewed as "an ongoing process rather than a discrete event" (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Anderson, 2018, p.

443). However, the bridge analogy is still a useful concept when visualising the transition process, but the impact of human experiences and social and cultural contexts should not be overlooked: a view recommended in the Donaldson Report (2015) and incorporated into the New Curriculum for Wales, 2022. This is further supported by Life Course theory which identifies that the time between transitions, and the factors that influence decisions during those key times (Bradley, 2012), are as important as the transition process itself (Hutchison, 2011).

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory helps shape understanding of the process of transition. This theory recognises that the individual does not exist in isolation but is constantly influenced by environment, relationships and culture.

Acknowledging the complexity of the interplay between these factors, including the emergence of new elements into the individual's system, is critical to understanding the transition process and its effects. Therefore, all stakeholders in the transition process should be empowered to be involved, to develop a cohesive approach that recognises what has been learnt through experience, thus developing "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This collaborative approach gives weight to the role of the more knowledgeable other (MKO) during the transition process which provides learners with the opportunity to question, challenge and follow (Vygostky, 1978).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model helps explore the roles and influences of the MKO on the learner's journey. It illustrates the complexity and range of transitions a learner may encounter and the necessity of listening to different perspectives. There is a clear focus on the **microsystem** of the learner and parents/caregivers, the **mesosystem**

of school (hearing the voices of practitioners), the **exosystem** of Welsh government policy and the **macrosystem** of the wider context of global research into transitions in education. While the focus of this paper is the micro and meso systems, exploring the international macrosystem has informed understanding of 3 important aspects of transition in primary education: readiness for transition from a learner, school and parent perspective; alternative pedagogies of educational transitions and their influences; and the impact of context - environment, policy and culture.

The impact of change and its significance in terms of transition has long been an area of focus by governments in the UK (The Plowden Report, 1967; Welsh Government, 2010, 2017; Public Health England, 2014; Scottish Government, 2019). Research shows that transitions have long term consequences in terms of academic and cognitive development as well as health and well-being (Sutherland et al, 2010; Tobell and O'Donnell, 2013; Fane et al, 2016). Therefore, the views of all stakeholders - learners, practitioners, schools and communities - are pivotal, especially in terms of the child's readiness to enter compulsory schooling in the early years (Ballam, Parry and Garplin, 2016). According to O'Toole, Hayes and Mhic Mhathúna (2014, p. 122) partnerships between stakeholders can be challenging since the groups are far from homogenous, but ensuring a consensual understanding of the processes around transition in order to influence effective change is critical (Kaplun, Dockett and Perry, 2017).

Transitions and Primary Education

Learner experiences of transition, particularly early ones, can have a long-term impact on educational achievement as well as general life experiences and well-being (Rosenkoetter, Hains and Fowler, 1994; Field, 2010). Pivotal transitions in Wales, (like

the other home nations), have been an area of focus in policy and have been given significant emphasis, (Hodgkin et al, 2013). For example, the transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 (between the ages of 11 and 12) when learners move from primary schools to secondary schools. Amongst changes currently underway in the Welsh education system (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2020) is the proposal that the current system of key stages is removed and replaced by a “continuum of learning” from 3 to 16, with progression measured in steps rather than levels (Donaldson, 2015, p. 53). This development aims provide an increased focus on learning by limiting the number of transition points and removing the possible hinderance to progression caused by the different key stages (Dauncey, 2015).

School readiness for effective transitions

The first transition experience a learner has may influence future experiences of transition (Dunlop, 2003) and engagement with education. Within educational research, longitudinal studies have demonstrated superior academic, motivational and well-being outcomes for children attending child-initiated, play-based pre-school programmes (Melhuish et al., 2002; McAuley, Pecora and Rose, 2006; Melhuish, 2016).

Being prepared for school, or ‘school readiness’ is an area for discussion, as ensuring the child is ready for the new environment is critical in the effective transition from pre-school to school (Puccioni, 2015). The concept of being prepared for school is “generally understood as the assessment of children’s development prior to and during the transition to school” (Fane et al, 2016, p. 127). The role played by parents/caregivers in ensuring that children are ready to attend school is key, but so is the role of high-quality pre-school settings, which is invaluable when preparing learners for transition to more formal educational provision (Packer, Watkins and Hughes,

2018). Effective support from these two stakeholders ensures engagement with learning and enables the learner to settle into the new environment with minimal disruption.

This is particularly important in the early years as incidence of school refusal is highest in children aged 5 and 6 years (Ollendick and Mayer, 1984, cited in Gaillo et al., 2010).

Practitioners in pre-school settings play a critical role in this transition process, understanding when the process needs to begin and initiating professional relationships amongst participants in the transition cycle.

In the UK, learners move from one stage of learning to another according to age.

However, lessons might be learned from several European countries where learners not considered 'ready' can defer entry to school at the request of parents, or the setting (European Commission, 2019). Proof of school readiness is focussed on the individual's maturity in managing the emotional, cognitive, psychological and physical demands required in the setting. Rouse, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan's (2005) found that learners who are prepared to enter the school environment are more likely to be employed as adults.

A holistic approach to transition

Reflecting upon transitional changes provides opportunities to amend and influence practices and approaches. A growing awareness of the importance of transition places a need for settings to ensure that the process is a smooth and successful one. Ineffective transition can have a significant effect on an individual's ability to learn (Fane et al., 2016). A holistic approach could ensure that all stakeholders are part of supporting transition into school and are not viewed separately (Packer et al., in press). Tobell and O'Donnell (2013) acknowledge that interpersonal relationships between practitioners

and learners are key to learning but this is complex to navigate and there is no fixed guidance in determining an effective relationship. In managing change and providing opportunities for reflection, it is important to consider what constitutes as effective practice in supporting the transition process. Parental/caregivers involvement in education has been identified as an important element of effective education for all children regardless of age, however there is a disparity in the way in which they are encouraged to be engaged participants in schools (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). Traditionally, parental expectations of school readiness have been based on their child's academic capabilities (Puccioni, 2015). Often parents take on the role of the MKO, helping their child to acquire new skills and knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Where this is not possible, or does not happen, the role of the pre-school in bridging the gap is essential in terms of preparing learners and in supporting and developing relationships with parents.

Voices of Transition

Research undertaken on transition has focussed upon pupil voice with regards to the social and emotional impact of the movement from one setting to another (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Dockett and Perry, 2016; Hodgkin et al, 2013; Galton and McLellan, 2018), as well as measurements in terms of academic progress made (Sutherland et al, 2010). The research has focussed upon anxiety, motivation and attitude to the new setting (Flitcroft and Kelly, 2016; Neal et al, 2016; Rice et al, 2015). Little is known about practitioner perspectives and how they perceive their role in the transition process (Cuconato, du Bois-Reymond and Lunabba, 2015). Correia and Marques-Pinto (2016) found that practitioners had varying perspectives of what makes transition successful, highlighting a need for a clear understanding between practitioners, parents/caregivers

and learners of expectations and outcomes during transition. Even less is known about the voice of parents in this process.

This research seeks to address the discrepancy in the approach to transition by presenting the ‘voices’ of transition from three perspectives: that of the practitioner, parents/caregivers and learner in a primary educational context.

The Welsh Context

Successful Futures (Donaldson 2015) is the basis of the new curriculum for Wales.

Donaldson (2015) suggests that separating the curriculum into phases and key stages is no longer appropriate with a need to minimise transition points as these cause unnecessary hiatuses in learning. This would serve to further concentrate on progression steps, set at five points in the curriculum, relating broadly to expectations at ages 5, 8, 11, 14 and 16 years with progression steps as a personal “road map” for each child (Donaldson, 2015, p.53). Recognising the value of pre-school provision in setting the foundations for “successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later health and employability” is essential in minimising the attainment gap of children living in poverty and ensuring equity (Dallimore, 2019, p.2). High quality pre-school experiences are related to better social and behavioural development as experiences of socialisation with peers promote self-regulation and autonomy, thus ensuring that children are prepared when entering formal education.

Methodology and Methods

An interpretive methodology is sympathetic to the complex nature of transitions, allowing the research team to surface different voices and experiences. All settings were in South Wales - a mixture of urban and semi-urban locations.

Transitions were investigated through the combination of a systematic literature review and a 'sense-making' process to capture the view of key stakeholders. Literature reviewed informed the construction of the research instruments and acted as a comparator to the findings of the primary data. Themes from the primary data were obtained by an inductive approach. Using a convenience sampling strategy, groups were selected who could comment on experiences from different stakeholder perspectives and where there was trust with the researchers. Convenience sampling can be defined as a type of nonprobability or non-random sampling where participants meet certain criteria, such as "easy accessibility and availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study" (Salkind, 2012, p.2). The output is a case study capturing and presenting different 'voice' perspectives. By adopting an interpretive approach, the researchers took a neutral stance during the data collection and analysis, not allowing opinion or bias to influence the coding and analysis.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological systems model helped explore stakeholder experiences. Context is a significant aspect of Bronfenbrenner's model. It was important that the data analysis focused on listening to the voices and being mindful of

their environments. Systematically discussing the question sets and the data as a research team ensured rigour, thus supporting triangulation of data collection and analysis and the interpretive approach to the research. Triangulation was achieved through three forms of primary data gathering (interviews, focus groups and questionnaire), a review of literature and shared discussions. Ethical approval for the project was agreed by the universities in which the research team are based, and permission sought before data gathering.

Data Collection

The settings were known to the research team and were trusted by them. This is a critical element of an interpretive approach and enables an open and honest dialogue about transition. The methods chosen were semi-structured to scaffold but not lead the responses. The primary data collection was framed by 3 transitions points:

- Entry into compulsory education
- Transitions between stages of education e.g. from Foundation Phase to Key Stage 2
- Moving from primary to secondary education

Data was collected via focus groups with the learners and practitioners and questionnaires for parents/caregivers from three primary schools, one private nursery setting and two secondary schools. Secondary schools were included to capture reflections on the transition out of the primary sector. Learners in the focus groups were aged between three to twelve years. 150 parental/caregiver questionnaires were distributed and a total of 30 children interviewed via focus groups. Sixteen practitioners

were interviewed including nursery and reception practitioners, year 2, 3 and 5 practitioners, heads of year, a nursery manager and SENCo.

The methods used to capture experiences focused on dialogue and discussion with participants, drawing upon Ranson's (2000, p.263) "pedagogy of voice" in reaching a shared understanding of transition. This requires active listening to the opinions and feelings of others, taking into account their perspectives (Wertsch, 1991) and actively seeking through what has been said to find ways to improve participation and teaching and learning (Wei, 2017). Data was analysed and coded using an inductive approach. The research was to surface opinion and not make assumptions about experiences. Data collected was put on a secure shared space available to the research team supporting a rich approach to data analysis and mitigated against personal bias influencing the development of themes. A discourse and thematic analysis of transcripts was undertaken to capture key themes and to interpret and deconstruct language used by participants to aid understanding. Analysis was grouped under the following headings: learner experiences; parental experiences; practitioner experiences and integrating the voices.

The research generated several case studies of experience resonating with the work of Lally and Doyle (2012) who discuss the importance of allowing stakeholders to reflect upon their transition experiences and tell their story. Findings from this research highlight the importance of giving all stakeholders agency and voice. Trodd (2013, p. 164) discussed how practitioners need to hear children's concerns and allow them to retain "their agency". This principle can be applied to all affected.

Results and Discussion

Learner Experiences

Markström (2005; cited in Ackesjö, 2013) suggests for some children moving from one setting to another is not like crossing a bridge but rather crossing a ditch which can be challenging to navigate. The research data uncovered varying experiences of and access to early years pre-education and how schools enable learners and parents to move into compulsory education. Typically, younger learners were given opportunities to visit settings with their parents or carers, prior to starting. This resonates with the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) as the child is influenced by the environment and their relationships with their families. For older learners within primary settings, the importance shifted towards developing relationships with new practitioners. This is what Bronfenbrenner (1979) terms the microsystem, where the learner is influenced by interpersonal relations.

By asking learners their views on transition, it supports their rights "to participate in decisions affecting their lives and communicate their own views" (Einarsdóttir, 2007, p. 75). Giving the learners a voice empowers them and shows that their opinions matter. This is important as research demonstrates that learners' concerns around transition are not always the same as those of adults (Fisher, 2009). It is important to give learners a voice to understand how they experience transition and to inform best practice. The data showed that learners participating in the focus groups had experienced a variety of transitions, some being more positive than others. Settings had undertaken a number of different approaches to transitions: practitioners and former pupils visiting receiving

settings; residential visits as a new cohort; and opportunities to visit the new setting. The youngest learners starting in a setting for the first time, recalled their experiences. “I was a bit sick and I had a rumbley belly. I felt scared. I was very brave, but I did cry.” Feeling upset is a normal response for children when separated from a parent, however it is the responsibility of the practitioner to support children with processing the separation and to navigate their way in the new setting (Elfer et al., 2003).

When asked about their experiences in the new setting, one learner recalled what they played with: “We played puzzles and playdough.” Another learner remembered, “I had lots of little cars and I played with the bikes. We could play with anything we wanted. I played with the dolls’ house.” Here learners recalled physical resources associated with starting at the setting rather than any adults they met. O’Connor (2010) discusses the importance of objects from home to help the learner remember the parent. Perhaps for the learners above, objects they remembered in the setting are similar to objects at home and this helped a more secure start in the setting. Giving time for learners to familiarise themselves with the new environment and being able to reference objects or activities as part of that process helps to foster a feeling of belonging.

Older children (those transitioning into Key Stage Two and moving into Key Stage 3) recalled some of the activities from the ‘moving up day’. They discussed drawing “Inside a head thing that represented you and what you liked and disliked” and “We wrote our dreams in a time capsule which we buried to dig up at the end of next year”. Learners moving from primary settings into secondary school recalled opportunities to meet new friends and participate in team building exercises during residential visits, and a chance to experience new subjects and meet teachers on the transition days.

Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2009) discuss the relationship between structure and agency throughout the processes and outcomes of transitions. This reinforces the need for learners to feel empowered and have ownership throughout their transition experiences from the onset. The examples provide occasions for learners to be given ownership of what they wanted to include a chance to forge their own relationships and to develop independence.

Reflecting upon their transition experiences, Year 7 learners commented that they were “excited” to be moving to secondary school and felt as though they had been prepared with transition days organised for them during Year 6. This provided an opportunity to meet with teachers, to begin to understand the new timetable and to familiarise themselves with the school layout. The value of being given handbooks from the school, outlining expectations and practical information for the first few weeks in the new setting was noted. When asked what they would change about their transition experiences, Year 7 learners wished for, “a chance to talk to pupils about the school – older pupils – to ask them about the school – maybe year 9 or sixth form”. Learners felt older pupils would give additional information in preparing for transition, supporting Vygostky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of the MKO.

Discourse with learners recalling transitions from the early years through to starting secondary education revealed several important points. These include the need for learners to feel a sense of ownership; a sense of security; a sense of empowerment during the transition process; and transition no longer seen as being a one-off event, but an ongoing evolving process.

Parental Experiences

Understanding and listening to the stories of parents/caregivers is particularly significant when considering effective transitions. While transitions for learners often coincide with changes in identity, construction of self and issues to do with self-esteem (Osborn, McNess and Pollard, 2006), they also impact on existing relationships. For example, the transition from primary to secondary is a systemic transition (a bigger school, more departmentalisation and tracking, greater emphasis on relative ability) and one that coincides with early adolescence, a time of marked social, biological and psychological development (Anderson et al, 2000). Parental attitudes to school play a critical part in supporting transitions. Taylor, Clayton and Rowley (2004) argue that when preparing children for school, parents' own memories are reactivated and this in turn influences the way in which they support their own children (Miller (2014).

Correia and Marques-Pinto (2016) identified that parents experienced feelings of anxiety about creating new relationships with teachers and their children's friends. The relationship that parents have with settings and practitioners has an impact upon academic achievement and general well-being. Parents/caregivers play an important part in successful transitions. While the learner is clearly at the centre of the transition experience, parents too are an integral part of the process. Our research has captured the impact of a positive parental view in encouraging children to see school as 'fun' and 'exciting'. Parental involvement, when consistent and meaningful, can affect the child's progress before and after the transition. This is vital component, not only at the beginning of the learner's educational journey but also as the learner grows older and expectations, relationships and means of communication with parents change. This concurs with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory in considering the wider context of transition and influence upon individuals involved. One parent

discussed speaking about their own experiences of secondary school, highlighting all the opportunities available to their child. Another parent stated, “We had positive discussions and involved them in purchasing uniform”.

To ensure that children are ready to enter school it is likely that parents have prepared them acting as a MKO by helping them to acquire new skills and knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Engagement with the transition process and ensuring learners are ready for the next step is critical in ensuring a smooth transfer from home to school. One parent noted that after their child had attended the new nursery setting, they “spent time going through pictures taken of the new setting, discussed worries such as where the toilets are, are my friends staying with me”. Another noted that they had “lots of discussion about what to expect will happen” with their child. Discussing possible experiences enables the learner to visualise the new setting and to see themselves as part of the environment. Ashton’s (2008) study on transition from primary to secondary school noted that learners wished to have as many social experiences of their new school as possible. This supports the bridge concept as discussed by Huser, Dockett and Perry (2016) in providing opportunities for learners and parents to traverse the ‘bridge’ from the receiving setting to the new setting.

Involving parents in the transition process often motivates the learner to engage fully with the experience (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005) and positive parental interactions with school is a key element impacting upon a child’s learning and development (Blake Berryhill, 2016). For example, one parent enrolled her daughter in the local netball team so she could meet with children attending the local secondary school. Another parent arranged for her daughter “to meet pupils who went to the school, to make friends and ask questions about the school”. Actions by parents/caregivers reinforce

positive messages about the transition process. However, it is important to recognise that parent-school relationships do not occur in isolation but through community and cultural contexts which need to be cultivated by educational settings. Including parents/caregivers and enabling them to remain a constant support to their child, monitor their activities and intervene in a positive way can help to ensure that transition is a smooth and positive experience (Hanewald, 2013). It is argued that the role of the parent/caregiver is one of support rather than a partnership role, however this function is integral to the success of the process.

Practitioner Experiences

Practitioners are the instigators and facilitators of the transition process and responsible for structuring the new environment for learners, developing meaningful relationships and communicating effectively. In this context, they are the agents of change and the means by which they effect this change is critical for both learner and parent. A child's experience prior to entering compulsory education and the impact that this can have on transition is significant (Dallimore, 2019). If transition is not conducted effectively then this can have a substantial effect on both the academic and social development of the learner (Fane et al, 2016).

Central to learner participation and engagement with transition are effective relationships between practitioner and learner. In beginning that journey, one nursery setting organises a "starter pack" for new learners, including information for learners about the setting with photographs of the staff and the environment. This is in addition to "meet the teacher sessions" where learners have opportunities to familiarise themselves with the setting, using the starter pack as a point of reference. It provides a focus for discussion for parents/caregivers too. A similar strategy is used in moving

from primary to secondary schools. One Secondary practitioner noted that they provide learners with “an information pack” and have a website dedicated to the transition process. Developing relationships with practitioners can begin early in the transition process with one Secondary school organising regular visits to the primary settings including a residential week for both Year 6 and 7 pupils.

The residential week not only provides learners with an opportunity to meet with their new teachers but also enables primary and secondary practitioners to meet with each other and to observe pupils in a more relaxed environment away from the formality of school, thus supporting the communities of learning theory (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015). Another school arranges regular half termly visits by the Head of Year with all primary settings to discuss forthcoming transition, in terms of learners’ academic, social and emotional needs. Such dialogues and processes develop relationships between practitioners, provide opportunities for building practitioner expertise and understanding while also recognising the expertise of others (Wallis and Dockett, 2015), thus enabling a community of practice approach between settings (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Relationships with parents should be ongoing, with one Head of Year 7 noting that they organise sessions for parents “on literacy, numeracy, well-being and e-safety... [parents] also have an opportunity to meet with their child’s tutor...We also have a ‘settling in evening’ in November”. Social media is used as a means of keeping parents/caregivers informed of transition events with specific accounts for transition, “allowing parents to follow events at the school and to see the success”.

Effective communication between practitioners, learners and parents/caregivers is important in alleviating concerns and potential anxiety about transition. Practitioners interviewed for this study requested receive feedback from both learners and parents/caregivers with regards to how transition is instigated and facilitated. One practitioner noted amending their transition processes following feedback from parents requesting a more “formalised open afternoon or an open session where children and parents can come and stay and play in the reception environment”. One Head of Year regularly asks Year 7 pupils for feedback on experiences of starting secondary school and amends transition activities and events as necessary, reasoning that “children are always changing, there is always room for development”. Another Early Years practitioner noted that they invite parents to eat with their children at school as “very often it is the lunch time...[parents] were most worried about”. Effective communication between stakeholders enables practitioners to be responsive to need and to address concerns directly.

From analysing data gathered from practitioners it is clear that there is an obvious concern about the impact transition might have upon learners, thus supporting Donaldson’s (2015) rationale for limiting the number of potential transition experiences during the educational trajectory. Generic transition activities are organised for learner cohorts with practitioners structuring the transition experience thus resonating with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory. However, within this framework, there is an awareness of individual need and opportunities for increased transition support is available for those learners requiring additional provision (NASEN, 2014). This is an area for further exploration, as Hughes, Banks and Teras (2013) note despite an increase

in the number of learners receiving additional support, few studies have investigated the impact of transition upon learners with Special Educational Needs.

Integrating the voices

Listening to the voices of stakeholders in the transition process is key to understanding the impact of the experience and confirms that it is not a one-off event in which the learner is a passive participant. Identifying areas of concern and activities supporting transition enable the process to be smooth and successful, whereby the learner can identify with the new setting and feel a part of it. Theory helps to inform an awareness of the roles played by the learner, the practitioner and parents/caregivers during transition, giving a rationale for the experiences voiced in the study. An interpretive methodology supported the researchers' aim of listening to the voices of all involved, to allow themes to develop that reflected the real experiences of the participants.

Similarities arising from data collected across the year groups was the importance of a shared understanding of transition by all stakeholders and engagement in the process, facilitated according to the developmental needs of the learner and equipping them with skills necessary to cope with transition. Some of the differences identified was the change in the role of the parent/caregiver in supporting the process of transition, with increased involvement in the Early Years in preparing children to enter school and physically supporting transition. Concerns were voiced by parents/caregivers as to increased expectations in new transition points. In progressing through the primary school, a gradual distancing of parental/caregiver direct involvement is evident with increased use of social media as a means of communication. Fear of change, peer acceptance and managing workload in the new setting was a concern noted particularly

by older learners, magnified by the move to a significantly larger setting. Fostering a sense of belonging, providing opportunities for learners to interact with each other, and learning experiences was key in the transition activities identified by secondary schools as a way of countering these concerns. From listening to the voices of stakeholders it is apparent that effective communication is critical in ensuring successful transition, providing opportunities to reflect on practice and experience and to adapt as necessary.

The table below presents the voices of stakeholders and summarises how they can interact and inform each other in order to ensure best practice.

Theme	Learner Voice	Practitioner Voice	Parent /Caregiver voice
Starting school	Uncertainty and feeling scared. Reluctance to be separated from parents. Having fun experiences. Importance of a familiar environment.	Children who are not physically or emotionally ready. Creating a sense of belonging. Building an understanding of setting expectations.	Anxiety from own experience of school. Concern about creating relationships with parents and teachers. Communication about academic and practical expectations.
Moving from Foundation Phase to Key Stage 2	Less fun. No information about moving class. Insecure about change. Apprehensive about different types of work. Pride in 'moving up'.	Greater curriculum demands upon the learner. Increased behavioural expectations. Increased responsibility. Fostering a sense of belonging.	Little or no information about how this would be different for their child. Communication about academic and practical expectations.

	Feeling more grown up.		
Moving from primary to secondary school	<p>Importance of visiting the new environment.</p> <p>Fear of change.</p> <p>Excitement of new experiences.</p> <p>Uncertain of how to behave.</p> <p>Apprehensive about work demands.</p> <p>Increased responsibility.</p>	<p>Importance of information sharing between settings.</p> <p>Opportunity to learn more about individuals.</p> <p>Greater demands on taking ownership and responsibility.</p>	<p>Concerns about involvement in the next stage.</p> <p>Uncertainty around expectations in terms of involvement.</p>
Opportunities for feedback	Feedback requested by practitioners.	Responding to feedback and implementing change	Feedback requested from setting.
Suggestions on improving transitions	<p>More opportunities to meet with peers and to develop new friendship groups.</p> <p>Activities/opportunities in the new environment.</p> <p>Opportunity to meet teacher for the next year before moving to the class.</p> <p>Chance to meet with learners in the year/s above to discuss expectations and demands.</p>	<p>Reviewing transition procedures regularly.</p> <p>Providing opportunities for learners to speak with older learners about transition.</p> <p>Using learner voices to inform transition.</p>	<p>Creating opportunities to discuss feelings about transition with the learner.</p> <p>Being actively engaged in the process of transition.</p>

Table 1: Listening to the voices

Conclusion

This study has confirmed that listening to the voices of stakeholders provides informed discussion about what enables and facilitates a successful transition process. It supports the need to move away from the perception of transition as a one-off event and to conceptualise the process in a more holistic way, considering the developmental and emotional needs of the learners involved. The use of an interpretive methodology provided a platform for stakeholders to share their lived experience of transition.

Examples of good practice drawn from the study include working with learners to effect change in the transition experience, talking with parents about concerns and worries and working with them to support learners. It is important to appreciate the impact of transition from an individual perspective and understand that while generic activities might suit most learners, some individuals may require more tailored support to cope with the demands of change. Capturing a range of voices with regards to transition enabled a more holistic approach to ensuring a smooth and successful transition experience for learners. It has highlighted the need for further research around how parents/caregivers can add to the transition process and how they can be supported in their own journey with their child. It is evident that practitioners understand how to plan effectively for transition, to co-ordinate activities and to build meaningful relationships with learners. Hearing the voices of others in this study allows for a reflection of own practice and to understand why transition is important and how to do it effectively.

Data taken from R. Packer, C. Jones, A. Thomas and P. Watkins. Forthcoming. *All Change! Best practice for educational transitions*. St Albans: Critical Publishing.

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