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Supporting the Transition from Primary to Postprimary Education in 2021: Perspectives from Irish Postprimary Practitioners

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Abstract: The transition from primary to postprimary education is a significant milestone in children's education and can be characterised by the multiple challenges that they experience, specifically the move from childhood to adolescence, from one institutional context to another, and from established social groups into new social relations. This research employs a theoretical framework that describes this transition from the perspective of secondary school inservice practitioners as they aim to help students to make a successful transition. An incremental, sequential mixed-methods data collection strategy took the form of an exploratory survey followed by qualitative semistructured interviews. Current transition practices in the context of the challenges presented in Irish secondary schools are reported on in five key areas: administration, social and emotional supports, curriculum support, pedagogical support, and management/autonomy of learning. The findings of this research also highlight a need to reflect on the purpose and timing of current practices, along with calls for continuing professional development programmes to be developed that specifically target the challenges faced by Irish inservice teaching practitioners. It is hoped that this paper will spark discourse relating to the development of transitional supports for students and associated training for those who are best placed to provide those supports.

Keywords: education; secondary school; transition; postprimary practitioners

1. Introduction

The transition from primary to postprimary education is a significant milestone in the lives of children and their families. Hargreaves et al. (1996) [1] believe this period is a time of triple transition for young adolescents—"in themselves, in their social relationships and in their schools" [1] (p. 7), for what is a period of adolescent cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional transformation [2]. Consequently, this educational milestone is considered a crucial point in young people's educational journey, a stage which can have a significant influence on subsequent academic and social development [3] often devoid of structured familial and school-based guidance on navigating a safe pathway between primary and secondary education [4]. For the students, this period of their lives can be tumultuous, characterised by anxiety, excitement, nervousness, and hope [3,5–7], often compounded by new environments, timetables, subjects, and norms all adding to pretransition and transition period anxieties [5,6]. However, despite anxieties around social and institutional adjustment, research has found that a minority of students experience serious and persistent difficulties in their new school, while many adjust in the first term [3,7–9]. In the Irish context, many students settle into life at second-level education with relative ease [3,8]. Pretransfer acclimatisation visits, often known as "taster days", along with postinduction activities appear to meet the social and emotional needs of many students [10]. However, it may also be the case, for some students, that the personal and social aspects of transfer may be less significant than other pressing challenges resulting in some longer-term concerns about schooling remaining in place [11].

In the case of Ireland, prior to the late 1990s, there was a dearth of research on the primary to postprimary transition from either teacher or student perspective [12]. Some research activity did emerge between 1998 and 2008 [3,6,13,14] prior to a period of significant lower secondary school curricular reform. However, since the emergence of the Junior Cycle in 2014, Ireland's lower secondary school curriculum, little dissemination has emerged that relates to supporting the transition of students at key stages of their education pathway other than a call, in the 2018 Action Plan for Education, for guidance to be provided to schools, as they plan to support students at these educational pinch points [15]. In many ways, schools have led the way by focusing on developing and delivering induction programmes to support the social and emotional needs of students during the transition from primary to secondary school, although characterising the supports that teachers provide is a little more problematic. However, work completed by Galton et al. (1999) [10] identified five "bridges" of transition particular to the holistic transition of students in educational contexts: administrative, social and emotional, curriculum, pedagogic, and management/autonomy of learning. Advancing studies highlighted a decline in effective transition practices across all five bridges [16], raising concerns around the effectiveness of current support practices and the prevalence of effective continuing professional development in this area. This may be particularly important where schools experience high enrolment numbers of students who experience socio-economic disadvantage.

In Ireland, these schools receive the designation of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). In such educational settings, the impact of a difficult transition between primary school is evidenced in low progression rates to further or higher education [3,17,18]. Given previous calls from the Irish education sector for an increase in coordination between primary and secondary level schools to improve long-term learner outcomes [19], it is apparent that inservice teachers are best placed to inform our understanding of the challenges faced by these young students and to implement informed responses [2]. Using the five bridges of transition [10] as a framework, this study presents an examination of current practice and identifies potential gaps by asking the following overarching research questions:

- What are the challenges associated with supporting Irish students in their transition from primary to postprimary education in 2021?
- How could existing responses to such challenges be improved?

2. Challenges Associated with Supporting Transition

Galton et al. (1999) [10] believe many schools are still investing their energy into efforts at smoothing the transfer process rather than ensuring that pupils' commitment to learning is sustained. This was evidenced in their research where schools scored higher under bureaucratic/administrative and social and emotional headings than curriculum, pedagogic, or management of learning. In a more detailed breakdown of the various aspects of this process, the five bridges of transition (adapted from Galton et al., 1999, [10], p. 28) provide a useful framework for planning, developing, and evaluating successful transition supports in schools:

- The administrative or bureaucratic bridge, e.g., administrative meetings between schools, school reports, and communication of student information.
- The social and emotional bridge, e.g., induction programmes which include mentor/buddy systems, bullying workshops, and tours and explanations of timetables to ensure students are comfortable in their new environment.
- The curriculum bridge, e.g., building on prior knowledge and achievement, rather than adopting a "clean slate" approach when starting postprimary school, joint primary and postprimary CPD, knowledge of curricula of both sectors, and teacher observations.
- The pedagogic bridge, e.g., teacher observations, using methodologies familiar to the students from primary school.
- The management of learning bridge, e.g., study skills workshops to create self-awareness of learning styles and identify learning needs.

2.1. Challenges Associated with Social Adjustment

While induction programmes appear to have a positive impact on the social and emotional needs of students, it is also important that they are underpinned by a positive school culture and climate [3]. It is also the case that it is necessary for school leadership teams to explicitly acknowledge that school cultures vary between primary and postprimary schools, creating a need for adjustment on the part of the students and awareness on the part of the school leadership team [3,19]. Therefore, a positive school climate is essential in the early months of second-level education, a period often referred to as a "honeymoon period", where students may see their new school through rose-tinted glasses due to the additional support and activities organised [1,10,20]. This can make this transition easier for some and provide a distraction from learning for others [21].

2.2. Challenges Associated with Interinstitutional Adjustment

Communication is an important administrative tool in supporting student transition. In Ireland, primary schools are required to report to postprimary schools on four areas: the child as a learner, the child's personal and social development, the child's progress with learning in curriculum areas or subjects, and next steps in the child's learning [22]. An important part of supporting this transition is the creation of opportunities for parents to help. In Ireland. the introduction of the Education Passport by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in 2014 aimed to improve communication between all stakeholders. This document provides a report on academic performance, parental statements. and student aspirations. However, this document has been overshadowed by several administrative or managerial practices, originally designed to ease student transition. Ultimately, student transitional practices have fallen into school enrolment advertisement practices [7]. This may have contributed to a noteworthy observation, that transfer of information between primary and postprimary schools is predominantly one-way, from the primary school to the postprimary school [23], possibly resulting in a more difficult transitional experience, particularly for students with special educational needs (SEN) [9].

Galton et al. (1999) [10] refer to the development of pupils' self-management skills and understanding ways of learning. This is viewed as a significant demand placed upon students that differs from primary school. In practice, for students, this can be getting to grips with institutional norms such as getting to the right classroom on time, bringing the correct equipment, planning homework, and following the new timetable [16]. Some postinduction programmes extend this to developing the concept of "learning to learn" with a focus on skills such as note-taking, summarising, researching, and presenting; however, this can be short-lived and the least developed of the given bridges as teachers rarely require students to use these skills in their classes [24], particularly in the context of Irish second-level classrooms that experience downward pressure from the Leaving Certificate examination process [25].

2.3. Challenges Associated with Curriculum Interest and Continuity

It is clear that new entrants to the second-level system can struggle with academic adjustment, including curriculum change and higher expectations [8,9,26]. In Ireland, as is the case internationally, this is not considered a priority issue; indeed, calls for action have been in place for quite some time [26,27]. Students often experience a decline, or "dip", in achievement following transition, with curriculum discontinuity playing a significant role [10,11]. Exploring this a little further, from the perspective of practitioners, there are often misconceptions regarding established prior knowledge and inconsistencies in adapting a "fresh start" approach upon entry within the teaching profession [3,16,28]. Indeed, Smyth et al. (2004) [3] found significant variation across postprimary school teachers' knowledge of the primary curriculum: in some schools, high levels of familiarity were reported, while in other schools, one-third expressed familiarity. It follows, therefore, that how teachers teach matters [2], and this can be traced back to initial teacher education programmes focused on different levels of education, often operating separately [3]. Ulti-

mately, this has an impact on students who experience the use of pedagogical practices at postprimary level that are at odds with their experiences in their final year of primary education [14]. Internationally, experienced inservice teachers have expressed a desire to know more about pedagogical strategies across primary and secondary schools [8]; however, in the Irish context, characterising what this might look like as continuing professional development has proven elusive to date, and this may be in part due to the publication of "Looking at our School 2016" by the Department of Education and Skills where two separate versions of the document were released: a quality framework for primary schools and a second quality framework for postprimary schools. The publication of two separate documents for primary and postprimary schools reinforces the "two tribes" concept of Sutherland et al. (2010) [23] that ultimately may continue to frustrate the development of continuing professional development opportunities [4] without a deeper understanding of the challenges that are particular to Irish inservice practitioners.

Considering the framework offered by Galton et al. (1999) [10], it is clear that there are three areas that require attention if all students are to be successfully supported as they transition from primary to secondary level education: social adjustment, institutional adjustment, and curriculum interest and continuity [8]. It is also clear that practitioners are agents of change in this context [29] and that school professionals should shape this CPD and the form it should take [30]. Informed by the framework put forward by Galton et al. (1999) [10], this paper focuses on the perspectives of postprimary teachers as the primary facilitators of student transition with a view to advancing our understating of the complex challenges faced in Irish second-level settings such as DEIS schools [31] and how providers of continuing teacher education in Ireland might respond.

3. Methodology

This research study focused on identifying current successful practices that help postprimary practitioners address the challenges experienced by new entrants to the second-level education system and how such practices might be improved in order to inform the development of future provision of CPD. Consequently, a mixed-methods research design was adopted [32–34] in the form of a sequential, explanatory design comprising two phases [35,36]. This commenced with the piloting of a questionnaire [32] prior to administration. The questionnaire required participants to indicate teaching experience, teaching subjects, and school setting. Ten 5-point Likert questions, framed by the five "bridges" of transition of Galton et al. (1999), aimed to establish the degree to which teachers felt each of the bridges applied in their school setting and more broadly the second-level education system. This was followed by a series of questionnaire-informed, thematic semistructured interviews with postprimary teachers of English, Irish, and Mathematics in DEIS schools to gain further insight into current transition practices. These interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were conducted using the Zoom platform. The video recording was then transcribed. These subjects were chosen as all students, regardless of school setting or patronage, are required to study these core topics for the full duration of their time in second-level education. Teachers who teach these subjects have more contact time with new second-level students than their colleagues. The findings of the questionnaire informed the interviews, and the interviews sought clarification, expansion, and enhancement of the results of the questionnaire [37]. Purposive sampling [38,39] was employed to recruit qualified Irish, English, and Mathematics teachers of new entrants to the second-level education system in Ireland as those who are most knowledgeable in the area under investigation [40]. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews, which have been anonymised here using pseudonyms, were conducted online using Zoom platform.

The results of this mixed-methods study are presented as a thematic narrative that is framed by the Galton et al. (1999) [10] categorisation of the five "bridges" of transition (administrative, social and emotional, curriculum, pedagogic, and management/autonomy of learning) and discussed in the context of three areas (social adjustment, interinstitutional

adjustment, and curriculum interest and continuity) that Evangelou et al. (2008) [8] identify as critical in creating the conditions to support the successful transition of primary school students into second-level education.

4. Results and Discussion

The questionnaire, which was distributed to a purposive sample of Irish, English, and Mathematics teachers in Irish secondary schools that experience significant disadvantage, DEIS schools, resulted in 71 responses. After an initial screening process to determine if respondents were teaching, or had taught in the past for a period of once a year or more, students who were in the first year of second-level education, the final number of responses was reduced to 55. Of these teachers, 27 had 10 years or less full-time teaching experience, 21 had between 11 and 21 years, and the remaining 7 had 21 years or more. The application of this condition was intended to ensure that data would be collected from full-time practitioners with experience in teaching first-year groups for an extended period of time. At the time of this study, no data were available regarding the number of teachers of Irish, English, and Mathematics in DEIS schools. As a consequence, an estimate of the population through inferential statistics or informed extrapolation was not a useful exercise. Five female teachers from the initial purposive sample, who had completed the questionnaire as part of this sequential exploratory design, agreed to engage with the in-depth semistructured interview process. All of these teachers were experienced practitioners, aged between 23 and 65, with more than five years experience of teaching first-year students in urban disadvantaged settings.

4.1. The Administration Bridge

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) introduced the Education Passport in 2014, aiming to improve communication between primary and postprimary schools in relation to four key areas: the child as a learner; the child's personal and social development; the child's progress with learning in curriculum areas or subjects; and next steps in the child's learning, including ways for parents to help. However, 72.7% of respondents to the questionnaire indicated that they were either unsure or felt that the NCCA Education Passport had not informed their practice as a first-year subject teacher. For one interviewee, despite having taught first-year students for a number of years, her participation in this study was the first time that she had heard of its existence. Tina, who teaches learning support, had heard of it but was not familiar with the concept, and Sarah, who had held the first-year head position, a senior staff position, more than once had heard of it but stated that she "wasn't massively familiar with it". Foley et al. (2016) [9], in their study of the transition from primary to postprimary for students with SEN, found that challenges regarding communication emerged as a theme, noting that while links between schools and parents/students exist pre-entry, communication between primary and postprimary schools remains an important area for improvement. The findings of the present study are consistent with those of Foley et al. (2016) [9], with the majority of interviewees citing difficulties accessing information on incoming first-year students. Indeed, Aisling felt that she had never received formal information on students unless there was something significant that needed to be shared about their personal life. This experience was echoed by Sarah, indicating that the information she receives, via email, is "very general, nothing along the lines of learning, their skills or how best they learn", suggesting that communication was often limited to students who have an SEN diagnosis. The teachers shared that their motivation for wanting information was very much student-centred and focused on ensuring that all students could experience a positive learning environment. When asked if they felt there should be a post of responsibility for the transition from primary to postprimary, 69.1% of the respondents to the survey felt there should be, 18.2% did not, and 12.7% were unsure. Out of those who felt there should be, 75.5% believed an Assistant Principal II (APII) would be most suitable, while 24.5%

selected an Assistant Principal I (API) role as most suitable for supporting the transition from primary to postprimary.

In further discussion on the roles and responsibilities linked to transition during the interviews, inconsistency in the allocation of posts of responsibility (PORs) was evident. Tina was unsure if there was a post in her school linked to the transition from primary to postprimary and said, "I know there's a few people who are doing things that are generally related to that, the first-year year head and so on . . . ". Year heads in Tina's school hold an API post but also carry out an additional responsibility such as exam coordinator, and that occasionally the year head may hold an APII post. Elaine was unsure if there was a POR currently for the transition but mentioned that transition was discussed at DEIS meetings. Elaine felt there should be a post of responsibility for supporting this transition to ensure "it could be done as smoothly as possible, really, which is the goal". Elaine shared that the year head role is voluntary in her school and noted how different this was to a previous school she worked in the role is voluntary, while some also carry out separate APII duties, and Aisling could see a possible need for a linking a POR to the role in the future if the school continues to grow. Sarah has held the first-year head role and felt she was "very much related to transition". She stated that the year head role is voluntary in her school and noted that it is a role that "not all teachers might be willing to take up because it is time consuming". Sarah felt there should be a POR for transition as this period involves "a large amount of organisation in terms of things like induction programmes" and that the workload was "quite intense" as they often began far in advance of enrolment as a process of recruitment. This was highlighted as both a positive and a negative of such work as the recruitment aspect can sometimes take over, with only 18% of respondents indicating induction programmes at their school lasting for longer than four weeks.

Only 12.7% of questionnaires respondents listed parents when asked which stakeholders were involved in induction. During the interviews, participants commented on the importance of effective communication with parents. Tina noted that parental involvement in her school was complex and noted anxiety among parents of marginalised or vulnerable students who had not attended postprimary school or who had poor English, as well as communication difficulties for students in care.

4.2. The Social and Emotional Bridge

The responses to the questionnaire indicated that teachers identified the social and emotional challenges of transition as being the most difficult to support, followed by management/autonomy of learning. However, when teachers were asked if they felt their school's induction programme supported the students' social and emotional needs, 83.6% agreed that it did, suggesting that they are supporting the emotional and social needs of students through induction programmes and practices, Smyth et al. (2004) [3] argue that these must be underpinned by a positive school culture and climate. Some of these activities were mentioned in the interviews and included "taster days" where sixth-class pupils are invited to be a "first-year student for a day". While anxieties appear to decline as time elapses during the first academic term, students enjoy school less by the end of the first year [41], with motivation and enjoyment decreasing by the end of the year to lower levels than those sustained in the final term of primary school [10]. All interview participants felt the social and emotional challenges of transition were well supported by the induction programmes in their schools, with Helen remarking "we do a great job", and indicated that the aspects of transition that needed further development were the academic elements of the transition, including curriculum, independent learning, and classroom practice. In general, this was identified as the bridge that required the least amount of formal support in the form of CPD.

4.3. The Curriculum Bridge

Evangelou et al. (2008) [8] identify curriculum continuity as an indicator of successful transition, and in the Irish context, we know that students struggle with academic adjust-

ment, including curriculum change and higher expectations [9], suggesting that curricular discontinuity is a matter that requires urgent attention at the various stages of teacher education. Tina felt there should be more links between the primary and postprimary curriculum and noted how she learned "nothing" about what students learn in primary school while at university during her initial teacher education. She remarked that while the new Junior Cycle had increased references to the primary settings it lacked explicit connections between the final year in primary school and first-year second-level education, noting that there is "very little connection at all between the two systems". This sentiment was evident across all of the interview participants. Indeed, Sarah was the only person who was aware of the learning outcomes of the primary curriculum of their subject, and this was only by chance as she had participated in a research project, indicating that otherwise, she "would have had no information whatsoever about what actually is even covered at the primary school level". This appears to shed some light on why there is often a decline, or "dip", in achievement following transition, with curriculum discontinuity playing a significant role [10,11] and impacting on what Irish students experience in the first year of their second-level education where almost a third of students felt that many subjects in the first year repeated what they had already learnt in sixth class [3].

4.4. The Pedagogy Bridge

Hargreaves et al. (1996) [1] state that "curriculum and teaching go hand in hand" (p. 8), linking the act of teaching to the successful implementation of any CPD or related curricular reform. It follows, therefore, that during a period of transition between levels of education that differences in pedagogical approaches are experienced by students resulting in instances of uncertainty often as a consequence of limited exposure during the teacher training [3]. The degree to which teachers felt that they could adapt their pedagogy was, as suggested by the interviewees, directly linked to their initial teacher education experience. Elaine had the opportunity to visit a primary school and observe classes once a week as part of a module in her programme. Helen too had the opportunity to spend two or three days observing classes in a primary school as part of her programme. Both said that outside of this experience, they had not had any opportunities since qualifying as a teacher to learn about primary-level pedagogy. The other participants did not have the same opportunities at university or as an explicit topic in the CPD that they had engaged with. For example, Tina noted that she had done quite a bit of CPD over the course of her career but that "a lot of it seems to be separate for primary or secondary". Linked to opportunities for student teachers to learn more about the experience of primary school teachers, respondents to the questionnaire noted that student teachers on professional placement as part of their training were typically assigned first-year class groups to engage. Elaine reflected on her experience as a preservice teacher and commented on the role of the cooperating teacher as "giving a helping hand" but noted that the transition from primary to postprimary had not been mentioned at university as part of her programme even though the main class groups she engaged with were first years. When asked about the number of preservice teachers who were assigned a first-year class in her school, Sarah believed it is usually "close to 100%", suggesting that this may have a significant impact on the student transition experience, particularly in relation to opportunities for inservice teachers to establish sustainable, transition-focused, pedagogical approaches. When asked if teachers would find CPD connecting primary and postprimary teachers beneficial to their teaching relating to pedagogy, 89.1% agreed that it would be beneficial.

4.5. The Management of Learning Bridge

In the questionnaire administered as part of this study, teachers were asked if they were familiar with the learning skills that pupils develop in the final year of primary school. Of the respondents, 65.4% felt they were unsure or not familiar and when asked if they felt the students' skills were sufficiently developed to commence second-level education, and 70.9% were unsure or disagreed. It became clear throughout the study that teachers felt

independent learning skills, organisational skills, and metacognitive skills need further development among new entrants to the second-level system.

4.5.1. Independent Learning

Aisling spoke about the need for students to learn how to engage in independent study and learning prior to entering secondary school. Sarah commented on the students' dependence on their sixth-class teacher to "answer all their needs" and the contrast with the number of different teachers that students will have in first year of secondary school, for much shorter periods each day, resulting in unrealistic expectations regarding support being available to them from their secondary school teachers. This was also evident in the questionnaire data where it was noted that there is a "disconnect of expectations between sixth class and first year".

4.5.2. Organisational Skills

When asked in the questionnaire which aspects of transition teachers would like to focus on if CPD was made available, the organisational challenges that students face were highlighted as a concern. The management of learning was further broken down by respondents to include a request for CPD to focus on how to support students who "often get overwhelmed with homework from different subjects throughout the day". Aisling also used the word "overwhelming" to describe the experiences of students trying to "organise books and their timetables", saying "it's a lot for them", indicating that, at the student level, this related back to the administration bridge. Aisling noted that there was a strong emphasis on organisation during the initial induction period at the beginning of September, but this was not always an aspect of the transition that lasted longer than a couple of weeks.

4.5.3. Metacognitive Skills

Interview participants discussed students' difficulties with understanding how they learn and how they study. Tina noticed that several parents were contacting the school before the Christmas assessments saying, "he doesn't know what to do, that his teacher is telling him he has to study for his history test, he doesn't know how to study". Helen also commented on the Christmas assessments in her school, stating that students are "hit with seven days of tests, and obviously this is completely new to them, it's completely foreign to them". Sarah commented on how learning how to study may not be "a strong part of learning in primary", and others also included time management as a key skill for succeeding in assessment at postprimary level. While the concerns of the participants in this study relate to grass-root experience, it should also be noted that the concept of "learning to learn" in both primary and postprimary schools is being promoted through curricular reform. However, participants in the study point to an absence of training on how to manage the development of their students' metacognitive skills.

5. Conclusions

Galton and McLellan's (2018) [16] comparative study of transition practices across all five bridges between 1975–1980, 1997–2000, and 2018 highlights a decline in effective transition practices between primary and second-level education. This study set out to explore current practices, in the Irish second-level context, and to identify potential areas for improvements in continuing professional development for teachers at that level which could improve the transitional experience of the students that they engage with. While the findings of this study are not generalisable to the broader provision of transitional supports in Irish second-level schools, the challenges and suggestions that have emerged are supported by the established literature in the field. Primarily, the findings of this study raise concerns around the purpose, efficacy, and timing of current practice and the suitability of supports that are currently available to student teachers and inservice practitioners. Notably, 89.1% of questionnaire respondents stated that CPD opportunities in collaboration with sixth-class teachers would enhance their current practice. Galton et al.

(1999) [10] believe many schools invest their energy into efforts at smoothing the transfer process rather than ensuring that pupils' commitment to learning is sustained and their progress enhanced. Over two decades later, this was also evident in the responses from the interview participants in this study. It was clearly articulated that there is a need for a continuity of excellence regarding social and emotional supports that are currently provided; however, it was also noted that a formal process of continuing professional development specific to this area is necessary. Specifically, participants called for a focus on pedagogy and management of learning as core areas of their practice that require attention. It is hoped that this paper will spark discourse relating to the development of transitional supports for students and associated opportunities for formal training for those who are best placed to provide those supports.

6. Limitations

Limitations of this work are two-fold. Initially, participants come from one country and are particular to the Irish Education system. It follows, therefore, that discussion beyond this context requires careful consideration. The second limitation of this study relates to the sample size. The authors acknowledge that further work is required to better understand how practicing teachers might inform the development of any programme of supports in the form of continuing professional development.

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