

The Pre-transition Experiences of Parents of Pupils with Additional Needs Moving from Primary to Post-primary School in an Area of Social Disadvantage in Ireland



RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the pre-transition preparation experiences of parents of 6th class children from two single sex primary schools in an area of social disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland. The findings are taken from a larger commissioned feasibility study that examined the perspectives of a number of stakeholders in primary and post primary schools (in the same area) to identify a model of support that is required for students with additional needs to make a seamless and sustainable transition from primary to post- primary school. The study was conducted within The Five Bridges of Transition framework (Galton, et al., 1999), which was chosen because of its specific relevance to the transition of pupils from primary to secondary education. During Spring 2018, ten parents of male and female 6th class primary pupils were interviewed. Data was analysed using content and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that parents were very conscious of the social, emotional and curricular challenges their child might encounter at second level. However, they were not included as co-experts in the transition process and hence were largely unaware of: pupil information that was transferred from school to school; homework practices, streaming and assessment policies; available resources and support; subject choices; and curricular provision. Parents were found to require significant levels of support and guidance in navigating admissions procedures and the delay in confirming school places also added to parental anxiety, particularly for parents of children with special educational needs. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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Transition from primary to post-primary school is a significant life event, coinciding with the physiological and emotional changes that accompany adolescence. It is a period of both loss and discovery, as young people encounter and must negotiate new friendship groups, teaching environments, teaching staff and academic material. Dockett, et al., (2017) suggest that the term 'transition' implies a "one-way, sequential movement from one stage or setting to another, often accompanied by expectations that children must adapt to the new educational environment" (p. 2), and draw attention to the more nuanced description from the Swedish 'övergång' which refers to "a zone or overlapping arena" (p. 2). Arguably, this is a more useful description which acknowledges that transition is a process, and that as a 'zone' it is a space within which many actions may take place through engagement between many actors or agents of change.

The broader school transition experience is "a process which, at its best causes slight apprehension, while at its worst provokes deeply felt anxiety" (Galton & Hargreaves, 2002, p. 1). Such apprehensions and anxieties may be magnified by a range of factors including individual differences, family resources, peer relationships, school ethos and culture, teacher attitudes, curriculum access, and socio-economic/socio-geographic variables (e.g. Barnes- Holmes et al., 2013; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Unwin, et al., 2008; Wray, 2013).

OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH TRANSITION

Internationally, there is a significant body of evidence suggesting that the transition from primary to post-primary education can impact on the quality of a pupil's educational attainment, with research suggesting negative transition experiences may potentially lead to a cycle of disengagement and underperformance (Whitby et al., 2006; Topping et al., 2011). As Anderson et al. (2000, p. 325) argue "the process of disengagement from school too often follows unsuccessful transition".

Outcomes from the Irish education system show disparities exist between different pupil cohorts in terms of school completion or educational attainment (Smyth, 2017). For example, pupils from socially disadvantaged settings, or pupils with special educational needs (SEN), have been shown to: leave school earlier (Smyth, 2017); have lower levels of educational attainment (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2004; Smyth, 2017) lower academic self-image and confidence, with greater levels of pupil disengagement noted during post primary school, particularly in second year (Maras & Aveling, 2006; Maunsell et al., 2007).

In addition, studies have found discrepancies in attitudes toward school and positive transition experiences among pupils from more socially disadvantaged populations (Smyth, 2017). Within the Irish context, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Irish Schools (DEIS) scheme targets additional funding towards schools serving more disadvantaged populations. Yet research has established that pupils transitioning from DEIS primary schools to DEIS second-level schools showed greater transition difficulties than other groups and reported more negative attitudes to school (Smyth, 2017). Importantly, recent data also showed that the majority of pupils who attended DEIS primary schools also progressed to attend DEIS band post-primary schools (Smyth, 2017), suggesting a cycle of educational disadvantage and disengagement within the Irish educational system.

There were 535,475 people from different countries of origin than Ireland living in the country in 2016, 17.1% of whom lived in Dublin city. It is noteworthy that the methodology employed by immigrant mothers, when choosing post-primary destinations, was to browse the 'educational market'. However, they were frequently hampered by language skills, lack of local knowledge and understanding of systems and procedures, meaning that "the presence of an education market does not mean that choice is open to all" (Dockett et al., 2017, p. 6). Recent research has shown that young people in Ireland from immigrant families also showed greater difficulties during the transition period but showed relatively stable levels of academic self-image (Smyth, 2017; Topping et al., 2011).

PARENTAL CONCERNS

While transition has been construed as a process predominantly impacting pupils and teachers (Bastiani, 1986), later research emphasises and acknowledges the concerns of parents and

assert that efforts to facilitate successful transition should involve parents (Scanlon et al., 2019; Akos, 2010; Whisler, 1990). For example, parents have reported several worries about how their children will manage in a new school with concerns related to bullying and making new friends (Evangelou et al., 2008; O'Brien, 2004; Smyth et al., 2004); homework (Bastiani, 1986; Worsley, 1986); and safety (Evangelou et al., 2008; National Disability Authority, 2006). Organisational factors such as school size, the potential formality of the school atmosphere, and subject and teacher diversity have also been perceived negatively (O'Brien, 2004; Smyth et al., 2004). In the latter studies, academic concerns have focused on curricular discontinuity with pupils now having greater responsibility with respect to managing their own learning. Parents of pupils with SEND tend to have additional worries about the continuity of resources (Scanlon et al., 2019), and how successfully their children will navigate the move and its associated demands (O'Brien, 2004; Scanlon et al., 2019; Smyth et al., 2004; West et al., 2010).

BENEFITS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN TRANSITION

Notwithstanding the fact that many factors influence the success of primary to post-primary transition, it is worth noting that parental involvement is seen to be generally beneficial where parents can have valuable and constructive input into the transition process (Akos, 2002; Griffin and Shevlin, 2007; Lord et al., 1994; McIver, 1990; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995; Smyth, 2016). Findings have implicated that pupils perceive parents to be more emotionally supportive than friends and teachers (Kurita and Janzen, 1996) and an important source of help and assistance in the transition process (Akos, 2002). Similarly, in a study by Evangelou, et al., (2008) 41% of pupil participants indicated that 'family alone' helped them most in preparing for transition. In addition, higher parental care has been associated with reduced academic and social concerns among pupils (West et al., 2010).

Direct parental involvement in transition can also facilitate improved communication between parents and teachers and early detection and prevention of problems (Deller, 1980, as cited in Anderson et al., 2000). Moreover, Perkins and Gelfer (1995) argue that parents' direct participation in the transition process can motivate their children to do the same (thereby acting as role models for their children's involvement in their new educational setting). Furthermore, parents who are involved in transition tend to remain involved in later schooling (McIver, 1990) and parental involvement has been associated with higher student achievement (Paulson, 1994) and a decreased likelihood of school dropout (Horn and West, 1994). While attending school events and checking homework are considered important, an increasing body of evidence suggests that it is not joint educational activities of parents and children that is considered beneficial, but the fact that these are embedded within a supportive relationship upon which pupils can draw when in need (Jindal Snape and Miller, 2008; Smyth, 2016; Rice, 1997). As many children have high support requirements in primary school and form strong relationships with their teachers and peers, the transition to second level education can be a challenging and demanding experience for both parents and children.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE FIVE BRIDGES OF TRANSITION

On balance, most pupils experience a combination of anticipation and anxiety that generally dissipates quickly following the transition (Graham and Hill, 2002; Evangelou et al., 2008; Smyth, 2017). There are also many factors that can mitigate the impact of the various challenges. Past research suggests that models of transition planning that emphasise linear and highly structured pathways are supportive for many pupils and their families (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013; Evangelou et al., 2008; Galton et al., 1999). The Five Bridges of Transition (Galton, et al., 1999) is one such model that focuses on creating administrative and curricular and pedagogical links (bridges) between primary and post-primary settings.

In the late 1990s the concept of 'building bridges' became central to the UK approach to transition from primary to post-primary school. In a review of practice and research evidence examining successful strategies for raising and maintaining standards across transition and transfer, Galton et al., (1999) identified five 'bridges' that schools used to ease the transition process namely: managerial/administrative, social and personal, curriculum, pedagogy, and managing learning.

According to Galton et al., (1999) the managerial or administrative bridge focuses on sharing and imparting information and includes activities such as: meetings with parents; meetings between heads and teachers; visits to the feeder schools by year 7 heads, special educational needs coordinators, and heads of various subject departments. The social and personal bridge focuses on activities designed to meet the social and personal needs of pupils and ease stress and anxiety that might be caused by fears of moving to a bigger school. Activities might include induction days where pupils spend the day in their new school getting to know pupils from other schools, meeting some of their new teachers and experiencing taster lessons. Open evenings are also used to make the new school as familiar as possible.

Galton et al., (1999) explain how the curriculum bridge refers to attempts to promote greater curriculum continuity. They argue that this can be achieved by sending post-primary teachers to teach lessons in feeder schools or introducing joint activities or projects spanning the final term in the feeder school and the first term in the transfer school. Summer schools have also been organised to help pupils improve their language and mathematical skills. The fourth bridge concentrates on pedagogy and according to Galton et al., mainly involves developing joint programmes where pupils are taught certain skills such as working collaboratively in groups or raising and answering challenging questions, and the fifth approach focuses on providing students with a means to develop management of their own learning.

In sum, the five bridges framework considers the variety of transition concerns experienced by stakeholders (parents, pupils, and educational personnel) and includes strategies with respect to how such concerns could be anticipated, addressed, and mitigated. Moreover, there is some evidence that schools that employ this framework facilitate better outcomes for their pupils (Galton et al., 2003; Evangelou et al., 2008). Hence, this model was selected as an appropriate lens for exploring outcomes from the current study, due to its comprehensive nature and its specific relevance to the transition of pupils from primary to secondary education.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE CURRENT STUDY

The implications that the transition process and its outcomes have particular relevance for vulnerable and marginalised populations as well as parents are important considerations for this study. The research summarised in this paper was part of a larger feasibility study with the primary aim of exploring the experiences of a number of stakeholders including pupils, their parents and educational professionals in primary DEIS and post primary schools in one area of social disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland (for full overview click here <https://doras.dcu.ie/27826/>). The purpose of this commissioned study was to assist in the identification of a model of support required for all students with additional needs including those with; special educational needs and disability (SEND); English as an additional language (EAL); and those experiencing social disadvantage to make a seamless and sustainable transition from primary to post-primary school (in an effort to improve transition outcomes). However, for the purposes of this paper, the data collected from parents will only be reported and discussed within the context of their pre- transition experiences in supporting and preparing their children for the transition from primary to post primary school. This was conceptualised and analysed through the lens of the Five Bridges of Transition Model (Galton, et al., 1999) while also facilitating the voice of parents, which has been recognised as critical in facilitating a partnership approach to transition for optimal outcomes including school retention (Scanlon et al., 2019). Consequently, the primary aim of this paper was concerned with exploring parents' experiences of pre-transition preparation and examining the factors that they consider important to support a seamless transition for their children with additional needs moving from primary to post-primary school in an area of disadvantage.

METHOD

An interview schedule was developed in order to identify the variables associated with successful primary to post-primary transition from the perspectives of parents. This schedule integrated inter-related themes based on the five bridges framework: Administration; Social and Personal Issues; Curriculum; Pedagogy; Autonomy and Managing Learning; and other factors associated with a seamless transition. Specifically, parents were asked about: the type of information they had received about their child's transition to post-primary school and when

and how they received it; their perception of their child's thoughts and feelings about moving to a different school; whether or not they had discussed differences between primary and post-primary with their child; whether or not their child had participated in any transition activities; their choice of post-primary school; the type of help they anticipated their child would need and whether or not they had discussed support needs with post-primary school personnel; their vision for their child's education and how this could be achieved; and their worries and concerns about transition.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research adhered to and was underpinned by the principles of the University Ethics Committee in Dublin City University and full ethical approval was obtained (application no. 173). Each member of the research team was committed to including the voice of all parents who were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and they were afforded to withdraw from the research at any time. All information pertaining to the study was presented both orally and in a written format that was fully accessible for each individual participant. Given the context of the research all of the researchers were fully informed about their obligations under child protection procedures in schools and Garda vetted. This is a legal requirement and process in the Republic of Ireland where criminal records are checked to see if there is any specific reason why adults (in this case researchers) might pose a threat to vulnerable populations (ie. children).

Two primary schools (one boys and one girls) participated in the project. The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) officer who is responsible for working with and supporting families in DEIS schools in each of the participating primary schools agreed to support the project by contacting parents and arranging for interviews to be conducted in a suitable space in the school. This was also supported by the principal and the special needs department where appropriate. Interviews took place in the Spring Term of 2018.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

In total, ten parents participated in this study whose children were considered to have additional needs as illustrated in Table 1 and who were currently enrolled in their final year of primary school and therefore making the transition to post-primary school in September 2018. The profile of their children's needs were as follows; two parents stated that their child had a suspected anxiety disorder and three indicated that their children were learning English as an additional language. One parent had a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, another parent indicated their child had a diagnosis of Dyspraxia and Dyslexia, a third reported that their child had an emotional and behavioural disorder and a fourth indicated that their child had a health issue that necessitated hospitalisation. While one parent indicated that their child had no additional needs they were willing to participate in the study and given the overall aim of the project were deemed suitable to participate.

PARENT ID	PRIMARY SCHOOL	CHILDREN'S SPECIAL AND/OR ADDITIONAL NEEDS
1P	Boys	Undiagnosed/suspected Anxiety Disorder (source: parent)
2P	Boys	English as an additional language
4P	Boys	None specified
7P	Boys	Autism Spectrum Disorder
8P	Boys	English as an additional language
10P	Girls	English as an additional language
11P	Girls	Undiagnosed/suspected Anxiety Disorder (sources: principal and parent)
13P	Girls	Health issue that has necessitated hospitalisation (source: Home School Community Liaison Officer)
14P	Girls	Dyspraxia and Dyslexia
18P	Girls	Emotional Behavioural Disorder

Table 1 Parent identification codes and their children's special and/or additional needs.

The pre-transition data collection took place in March/April 2018. Individual interviews were conducted for approximately 40 minutes. All interviews took place on the school premises and were digitally recorded. While it was intended that parents would take part in an interview post-transition, it was not possible to achieve this. Parents initially agreed to be contacted once their child had transitioned to their post-primary school for a follow up interview. Despite several efforts to contact the parents, the researchers made the decision (after two attempts of trying to engage parents) that ethically it would not be appropriate to continue trying to engage them. This resulted in no data being collected from parents post-transition.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts was undertaken using QDA Miner Lite, a computer assisted qualitative analysis software, which can be used for the analysis of textual data such as interview transcripts. A phenomenological perspective was adopted as a method for exploring the lived experience of parents in supporting their children to transition from primary to secondary education settings within a specific geolocation/context. Content and thematic analysis were selected as methods of measurement to provide a robust data set: thematic analysis is a common approach to data analysis where a flexible theoretical approach is required as the research is question-driven, rather than theory-driven. Content analysis permitted the researchers to inspect frequently occurring or repeating leitmotifs as they emerged from the data, for example, to establish parental worries and concerns.

In the first instance, the research team constructed a principal codebook containing definitions, inclusion, and exclusion criteria which was used to thematically analyse the transcript corpus using a priori codes based upon the theoretical framework for this study (Galton, et al., 1999), and prior transition research (Barnes-Holmes, et al, 2013; Mc Guckin et al, 2013; Scanlon and Doyle, 2018), together with themes extracted from the stated research aims of the study. The researchers conducted structured/focused coding by reading and annotating interview transcripts according to the codebook. Subsequently, the research team reviewed initial findings taking note of emerging themes such as gender factors, retention, and educational aspirations. Quantification of coded text provided visual data to support decisions around merging or collapsing themes and indicated important areas for further re-coding.

FINDINGS

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the qualitative data from individual interviews with parents of pupils exploring their experiences of pre-transition preparation and examining factors that they consider important to support a seamless transition for their children with additional needs. Findings are presented within the Five Bridges of Transition framework and are portrayed through illustrative examples from parents outlining their experiences of their children's pre-transition preparation as they approach the end of primary education to enable a seamless transition to post primary school.

BRIDGE 1: ADMINISTRATION

The Administrative Bridge focuses on the sharing and transfer of pupil information, amongst parents, primary, and post-primary school professionals, and external agents and agencies (e.g. psychologists, social workers, community initiatives and youth services) providing transition support. It is also concerned with school admissions policies and procedures that connect to choices and availability of school places, and formal transition planning, programmes, activities, and engagement.

PARENTAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Parents of primary boys were unaware of any transfer of paperwork or information about their child and associated needs, other than the results of entrance tests. Communication with parents appears to be brief and to be focused around confirming places and fees*, one parent noted:

“No, we’ve heard nothing. It was basically, as I said, it was, you know, ‘He’s been successful. You have a place. Your fee is due.’ And that was it.” Another parent said: “I was with him and they gave him a test, something like that but I didn’t receive any answer from them really.”

The general feeling is that although entrance tests inform support needs and purport to inform ability grouping or streaming, they might also determine who receives a place in school: As one parent put it: “Now, it can be very unfair. It’s a pressured thing, I feel, because it’s very much deciding. Well, you know, if we can give your child a place they have to be at a certain level or they have to know this, that or the other.”

Another parent described how she explained this process to her son: “I had to probably explain to him that the entrance exam wasn’t, you know, as my impression is, the entrance exam doesn’t determine whether you get a place or not. That’s the way I explained it to him. I had to lie to him a little bit. I just said, it’s to determine what class to put you into”.

ADMISSION PRACTICES

Lack of information and clarity is problematic for all parents and particularly for parents who have emigrated to Ireland, and whose understanding of English and grasp of procedures may be poor. However, admissions practices most significantly impacted upon parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), some of whom were left with no clear pathway to post-primary school in the last few months of 6th class. A parent of an autistic child explained:

“[He] is autistic so we applied for a few schools and we were getting refusal letters and that so ... I just kept on applying to all the schools around the area. Now the post primary over here [school] they were willing to take him, but they were saying that they didn’t know whether they would be able to cater for his needs and that. So, there is no point in sending him over there if they are not going be able to cater for him.”

In this particular case, the full weight and support of primary school staff was necessary to secure a post-primary place for September, but the stress and anxiety caused to both student and parent was evident. This parent continued: “Yeah, we were involved in a few meetings because [he] is autistic so, we applied for a few schools and we were getting refusal letters and that so... [she] came down to a few of the schools with me, and her being the liaison officer she was saying that she never seen, anything like this before.”

Parents in the girls school began their search for a post-primary school from as early as 3rd class and had similar experiences with entrance tests and offers, one parent noted: “He was explaining me what I have to do and, that I need to register my child from time, to get a place, and they are kind of fighting for the places, and he did explain to me that they will look on it, even on the profile they have from school, what is the level in school, how good they are”.

They also reported the need to source significant levels of support and guidance in navigating the admissions procedure: for example, one parent reported that: “It was quite difficult because I wouldn’t know where to go, what I have to do, what forms I need to get, to fill in, so they gave me everything, all the information needed, even the Principal, she was very helpful with me, like she was always in touch, she was always giving me details.”

However, parents appeared to be better equipped with practical information such as: “what she needs and when she’ll be starting ... how much it costs, and what her uniform will be and where to get it and when day she starts, and about the book rental”. In addition, they demonstrated knowledge about the organisation of the target secondary schools, e.g., one parent noted that;

“When the kids come in there’s 3, there’s 75 kids, and there’s 3 different classrooms, but there’s no such classroom as, the, Headmaster said, there’s no such classroom as when you’re in classroom A, because, you’re the brightest and you’re in B, because you’re not very bright, and you’re in C because, you’re sh***.”

The Social and Emotional Bridge focuses on the personal needs of pupils and parents in preparing for the challenge of transitioning to a new school. It is concerned with variables that might affect positive transitions such as maintaining friendships and making new friends, and activities that provide reassurance and confidence, and that are acquired through engagement and participation in transition programme activities. Connected to this are concerns around safety, bullying, and the challenges of maturity and preparedness.

PARENTS' ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN TRANSITION PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES

Parents expressed a range of concerns relevant to the transition of their children to post-primary school, with an overarching concern regarding levels of support prior to the change. The financial burden associated with post-primary costs was also a concern and parents felt that being sure of a school a year in advance, would allow them to begin saving towards the cost of books and uniforms. Delays in confirming allocation of a school place add to existing stresses and anxieties, and this is principally the case for parents of students with SEND. Greater awareness of the impact of uncertainty on the student is required, according to one parent:

“All the boys are saying, we are going to this school and we are going to that school and we couldn't tell the child. You might be going here, or you might be going there, and then it even affected us at home and all. He was saying, ‘Oh, I don't know where I am going’ and then my mother ... it went to the stage that me and her were snapping at each other and all because the two of us were stressed.”

The most frequently used phrase in this interview were the words: “As far as I know ...”

Parents in the boys' school expressed the need for a more longitudinal and engaging introduction to secondary education as a means of addressing the social and emotional challenges of moving from primary to post-primary school: “The primary school has done their job in teaching them while they're there, but I think now, wherever the new school be, I think it's up to them to kind of get the student involved, build up a little relationship with them even before they start”.

Commentary suggested that the one off, one-time approach currently in place is providing insufficient background detail on what young people can expect to encounter and may be the most likely reason for questions about fundamental workings of school in terms of subjects, homework, breaks, punishment, and activities.

Parents in the girls' school stated that open evenings provided students with the opportunity to talk to subject teachers: “she was very happy to go from a teacher to another one and start meeting teachers one by one and see the classes and see what she can do,” and reassurance about making new friends “she went to the open day like, she loved it, loved it, and met a few girls that she didn't know and she was all excited.”

Such positive responses to transition activities demonstrates the important role of prior knowledge and experience.

ACTIVITIES WHICH PROVIDE REASSURANCE AND CONFIDENCE

Concerns around well-being were expressed by parents in both schools, and two examples illustrate different aspects of managing the social and emotional bridge. The links between managing social relationships and their role in supporting coping and resilience for the young people transitioning to post-primary school were emphasised. Specifically, parents also worried about friendships and mental health, and in particular that boys were less likely to discuss any social difficulties; the academic pressures of the Leaving Certificate points race loomed large in the minds of parents, before transition had even taken place, according to one parent:

“I think there's a lot of pressure and I think my attitude towards not putting pressure on them came from, you know, my friend's cousin who did his Leaving Cert and all his peer, his brother and sister previous to him, did the Leaving Cert and got great

points and he actually didn't get great points and he was actually afraid to tell his mother and father ... and he actually went and hung himself."

In one case worries centred around individual coping and resilience strategies, and access to appropriate resources to manage difficulties:

"I suppose, anger management is too strong, sometimes he's hurt, he's easily hurt I suppose or he finds it hard if something is said to him to ignore it. He would react. So I kind of wanted to know what do they do in that instance. So they do have kind of a Counsellor and, you know, Career Guidance and a calming room as well ... and they would bring them for a walk and I just thought that was a lovely idea as opposed to giving out to them 'You shouldn't have done that'."

In the second case, significant anxiety was expressed by the parent in connection to the emotional safety of their young person, and how this could be managed:

"She's a very quiet in herself child, and I'm nervous for her, I'm really nervous for her, but I can't bring her to school, if I could bring her to school I'd bring her to school, but it's secondary school, I have to give her a bit of independence ... but for me, as a parent, I was just, I'm nervous to let her go cos she's so soft ... Probably follow her to school. Just to make sure she's alright."

Again, language barriers make it difficult to alleviate worries and concerns, and those parents with limited English relied upon friends or the parents of other immigrant children: "His English is not very good, he didn't understand very well," and "One mother of [his] friend, he explained to him. She is Romanian and she explained to him."

The conversation about transition does not really gain momentum until May or June of the final year of primary. Parents felt that in order for them to manage the transition, their children needed to be interested and engaged and that this is best achieved by schools communicating to students that they care about needs and individual capabilities, and that humanizing transition is fundamental to a positive experience. It was noted that a greater sensitivity is required to the emotional and behavioural needs of some children, and to be mindful of individual circumstances and characteristics which may be escalated or exacerbated by lack of information and engagement.

BRIDGE 3 CURRICULUM

The Curriculum Bridge examines the importance of making links between feeder primary and post-primary schools, by providing opportunities to experience and understand differences in teaching approaches, learning outcomes, curriculum structure and content, as well as norms and practices connected to the everyday life of the school. This awareness and understanding underpins educational choices that may impact on academic achievement and retention.

PARENTS: CURRICULUM STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Parents in the boys' school felt that their child did not sufficiently understand curriculum differences: "He said he doesn't think there is any difference ... there is a big difference when you go to secondary school, I said there is harder work ... he said, I'll be grand."

Advice from parents was mainly concerned with homework and getting into school on time, and parents described frustration with ever-changing textbooks and workbooks, meaning that it was not possible to hand these down to following siblings, and that the use of digital versions was preferable. The only aspect of the curriculum where support was anticipated was in the study of Irish, and: "I think just, you know, the handling of the more subjects would be my main worry. The pressure of it, you know?"

Parents also alluded to transition as a rite of passage in growing up, and in general felt that their child was prepared and excited, if a little nervous. These viewpoints were echoed by parents in the girls' school, and additional commentary from minority ethnic families illustrated the difficulty of managing a broader and more complex curriculum, in tandem with progressing levels of spoken and written English, and this aspect of curriculum support, is critical, according to one parent:

“So, they still need to catch, even my big daughter she still asks me sometimes and she still uses the dictionary and everything to try to catch up with her English, because it wasn’t easy, they wouldn’t know nothing, and they was coming home crying, and [saying] ‘I don’t understand, I don’t want to go to school’.”

These parents also made links between the need for increased effort and determination in order to manage differences in post-primary school: “We’ll all get where we want to be in life, if, we knuckle down.”

There was less emphasis on this bridge than might have been anticipated, given the proximity of some feeder primary schools to post-primary schools. Whether this is a function of lack of shared activities between schools, or lack of awareness of parents, is not clear. Parents anticipated that greater curriculum support would be required in Irish language as a subject and minority ethnic parents highlighted the difficulty in managing a broader and more complex curriculum whilst still grappling with English language proficiency.

BRIDGE 4 PEDAGOGY

The Pedagogical Bridge is concerned with equipping pupils with specific knowledge and skills which support successful transfer to post-primary education, and which are facilitated through joint teaching activities or projects between primary and post-primary staff. They provide students with experiences that illustrate differences in teaching and learning approaches, for example, teaching collaborative learning and critical thinking approaches frequently used in the post-primary classroom such as Think Pair Share (Lyman, 1981), or introducing new subjects and ways of learning (e.g. foreign languages) through remote/virtual learning technologies. This bridge also considers methods of providing curriculum support in specific subjects through differentiation, for example, and also ensures that specialist teaching support is provided to pupils with SEND.

There was no reference to pedagogical matters from the parents of 6th class students prior to transition, which might arguably indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of this knowledge.

BRIDGE 5 MANAGING LEARNING

The final bridge inspects factors associated with becoming autonomous learners, including an understanding of the relationship between achievement and effort, academic strengths and challenges, different approaches to learning and studying, being responsible for managing belongings, and personal characteristics of the learner.

PARENTS: AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

Awareness of increased levels of independence was expressed in parent testimony in the girls’ school: “They starting getting their own small decisions, what they do, where they go,” and these parents were also very engaged with the personal characteristics of their young people that could influence learning and achievement, in terms of effort, according to one parent:

“The teacher says ‘but she can do it’, and I know she can do a little bit better but, sometimes she’s lazy and sloppy,” and a hunger to reach higher education goals: “the only way she can do that is if she knuckles down, takes it all in, concentrates ... I can’t send her to college, she needs to earn her place in college ... We’ll all get where we want to be in life, if, we knuckle down.”

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

There is evidence that parents believe self-determination is key to managing learning in post-primary school, but this can only be developed from a foundation of self-awareness – for example being ‘strong-minded’ and a ‘strong character’, and support from external agencies is helpful here, according to one parent: “She starts with [youth service] she’s very quiet, and now when I’m collecting her she’s playing sports with two of the main leaders and she’s like, the way she’s interacting with them it’s great, she has come on a lot.”

Parents of boys described similar characteristics in their children such as ‘independent’, ‘clued in’, ‘strong’ and ‘open-minded’, and also made links between innate skills and future pathways, one parent noted: “He’ll do something with his hands, I’m certain of that. You know, something mechanical something, he’s always, since he was a baby, he was always Lego and Meccano.”

However, whilst they described hope and ambitions for their children, they also pointed out that this was not always a feature of discussion at home as commented by another parent: “Well, he wouldn’t really talk to you about anything like that.”

Fears centred around students who were less mature and less confident, and who would consequently find it difficult to take ownership of a new learning environment, according to one parent: “I just think that [she] will be able for that aspect of it, the work, but I’m just hoping she doesn’t kinda, go too into herself. I want her to make all new friends, cos she’s a loner. I’m nervous to let her go cos she’s so soft. She cries at the drop of a hat; you know what I mean?”

Only parents from the boys’ school reflected on the autonomy of students with special needs, confirming that some level of support is required to achieve inclusion and participation, but they were uncertain about the reality of actualising such support.

DISCUSSION

The primary purposes of this study were: to explore parents’ experiences of pre-transition preparation; and to examine their perspectives on factors that support a seamless primary to post-primary transition for pupils with additional needs in an area of social disadvantage. The themes that emerged from the analyses through the lens of the Five Bridges framework were: parental factors and well-being; curriculum and expectations; navigating the transition landscape; and policy and provision of school places, which are discussed below.

PARENTAL FACTORS AND STUDENT WELL-BEING

Parents are experts in understanding the needs of their children in terms of SEN, disability, medical or mental health concerns. As a result, parent participants were acutely aware of the potential for the social and emotional challenges experienced by their children to impact on well-being as they negotiated the very different landscape of their new environment. There was a general consensus that transitioning with friends and going to school in the local community could help buffer some of the social/emotional concerns. However, shortfalls in available school places meant that the opportunity to transition with known peers was compromised. The implications of this for students with additional needs is developed under the final theme ‘policy and provision of school places’.

The need for increased levels of independence was also expressed in parent testimony in the girls’ school and this was closely linked to the perceived personal characteristics of their young people that might influence learning and achievement. Parent engagement pre-transition is important in ensuring that there is an awareness and understanding of school policies and practice (e.g. around homework, streaming, assessment) so parents can support the development of independent learning (which is crucially relevant for pupils with additional needs). However, this knowledge was mostly absent. Thus, the lack of understanding of the mechanics of primary school (and in some cases language barriers) inhibited parents’ capacity to support autonomous learning.

While the five bridges framework focuses on the practicalities of transition and preparing pupils for new ways of learning, there is a view that many transition interventions are poorly timed, limited in foci, and minimal in addressing children’s emotional well-being (Bagnall, 2020). Indeed, according to parents in the current study it seems that pre-transition preparation mostly begins in June and includes limited attention to promoting their children’s well-being. Such late timing is problematic as it can lead to a build-up of anxiety (Bagnall et al., 2020) and the lack of emotional preparation is particularly relevant as according to Vassilopoulos et al., (2018) emotional well-being is directly linked with children’s academic functioning.

Given that primary-secondary school transition can strongly influence children’s school attendance, engagement, well-being and academic achievement (Riglin et al., 2013) more

support is required at this critical juncture. According to Newman and Blackburn (2002) resilience has been directly linked to children's adjustment over primary-secondary school transition. There is also empirical support for the beneficial impact of assistance from families. For example, parents have been found to be among the most salient sources of support over adolescence and primary-secondary school transition (Coffey, 2013) and according to West et al., (2010) strong parent-child support relationships can be more predictive of adjustment outcomes than factors within the school and internal factors such as self-esteem. Hence, inspired by Gilligan's (2000) resilience theory (and research in the area of transition) Bagnall (2020) developed an emotion focused intervention to support children's emotional resilience and coping skills before critical events such as primary-secondary school transition. According to Bagnall's Talking about School Transition (TaST) intervention children are supported to develop their 'inner resources' and also how they can draw on the support of others (parents, peers and teachers). The emerging evidence is encouraging (Bagnall et al., 2021) and a similar intervention might form one component of a whole school approach to transition for schools in the current study.

PARENTS' FAMILIARITY WITH CURRICULUM

The curriculum bridge emphasises the importance of providing opportunities for pupils to experience and understand different aspects of the post-primary curriculum (in terms of structure and content). It is thought that this awareness could support educational choices and subsequent academic achievement and retention. Given that parents have a key role in guiding their children's choices, it is concerning that parental knowledge and understanding of changes in curriculum and pedagogy in secondary education – apart from their own historical experience of school – were largely absent. Significant changes to the structure of curriculum and assessment in secondary education (in Ireland) have taken place since 2014, meaning that parents may be largely unaware of differences in teaching and learning.

From our analysis, it is quite apparent that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding around curriculum and pedagogy in secondary education, from a parent perspective. Post-primary curriculum and assessment matters are disseminated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and via the Curriculum Online website, however, digestible information for parents and students is scant. Curriculum overview, student expectations, learning outcomes and assessment, options and pathways for all learners needs to be provided in a dedicated space and format that can be accessed by parents (including minority ethnic and minority language parents) with and without access to the Internet.

Of course, familiarity with post-primary curriculum structure and content is not the only factor likely to impact academic achievement for immigrant students. The majority of secondary school subjects require advanced fluency in English and minority ethnic parents in the study highlighted how poor proficiency in the language of instruction could impair their children's academic engagement and success. Indeed, data from PISA 2015 show that, at 15 years of age, first generation immigrant students achieve significantly lower test scores in mathematics and reading than their native Irish counterparts (Shiel et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is emerging evidence that immigrant students are less likely to take higher level subjects in their lower secondary (Junior Certificate) examinations compared to their native peers (Ledwith and Reilly, 2013) thereby providing support for Darmody and colleagues' argument that achievement differences between Irish and immigrant children could lead to cumulative disadvantage as children move through the educational system (Darmody, et al., 2012).

Teacher attributes and expectations are also relevant with respect to their impact on educational outcomes for ethnic minority pupils and pupils with SEND (Avramidis et al., 2002; Devine, 2013; Kitching, 2014). Hence, teachers need be equipped with the knowledge and understanding to engage and stretch students' learning, and in the case of minority ethnic pupils, build on their prior literacy, cultural experiences and language learning (Bracken et al., 2017).

NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION LANDSCAPE

Parents expressed concerns about the lack of access to information and were genuinely unaware of what information was transferred from school to school but were acutely aware

that the entrance test could determine whether their child received a place or not in their school of choice. However, they reported that they were provided with little or no preparatory material for this process. Instead, they depended on the HSCL officer and the school principal to help them navigate the transition landscape. This was particularly acute for parents who were from a minority ethnic background. This dependency could have possibly impacted the high level of attrition from parents in this study where they became significantly invisible in the post-transition phase of data collection. This may imply that parents themselves require support during the transition phase if they are to become active and embedded in their child's new school community. Given that positive transitions have been associated with school retention for pupils (Smyth, 2017), findings from this study would suggest that supporting parents to support their children may have a significant role in retention which is particularly significant for this geographical area. In an effort to improve long-term transition outcomes a coordinated transition programme could help support both parents and pupils as part of a school completion programme especially given that this is already in place. This could also be assisted by providing parents with timely access to information which is well documented in the transition literature (Scanlon et al. 2018) as well as the timely transfer of information between schools especially for children with SEND and additional needs. Taken together, it would seem sensible for schools to provide targeted and specific assistance for parents to build their confidence to enable them to support their children during the period of transition and achieve sustainable transition outcomes.

POLICY AND PROVISION OF SCHOOL PLACES

Overall findings suggest that a lack of 'educational capital' available to parents may be a potentially contributory factor to poor transition and by extension, retention and progression. Indeed, earlier research by Smyth (2016) found that young people whose families had greater social and educational resources (or capital) made a smoother transition to secondary education and were more confident as learners. Smyth argues that certain groups (e.g middle class parents) have the insider knowledge to help their child negotiate the move to secondary education. Such knowledge could support decisions regarding choice of school, choice of subjects and subject levels. Hence, in order for disadvantaged and/or migrant parents to facilitate an effective transition they need to be furnished with the knowledge to make informed choices on behalf of their children. As noted above, transitioning with friends and going to school in the local community was the preferable choice for parents and pupils. However, shortfalls in available school places meant that the opportunity to transition with known peers was compromised. In particular, this research highlighted the difficulty encountered by one parent in securing a place for her son with Autism. However this is not limited to just this area and is seen as a challenge for many parents with children with SEND but specifically Autism in Ireland. After extensive lobbying by parent advocacy groups the government has enacted section 37a of the Education Act (1998) which empowers the Minister of Education to direct a school to open a special class to facilitate pupils with Autism and other additional needs. It is noted by the Minister that while it is preferable that schools volunteer to open a special class where all efforts fail, schools will be compelled to provide additional places. To date this has been enacted in two key areas in the wider Dublin region but interestingly not in an area of social disadvantage. As such, the lack of provision of school places for pupils with SEND is a wider problem that parents may encounter when trying to secure a local school place for their child. Signposting of available places and potential destinations, help with determining practical aspects such as transport and travel, facilities and staffing, and are a fundamental requirement for parents of pupils who have special educational and additional needs.

CONCLUSION

This study is limited in that it included a small sample of parents (aligned to just one geographical area) who offered their perspectives on pre-transition (rather than pre and post transition) experiences from primary to post-primary school. However, this research has highlighted parents' concerns about their children's coping skills and their need for support with developing a sense of belonging and confidence at post-primary school. It is also apparent that parents are unsure of how they might support their children throughout the transition. Including parents

in the transition process, as co-experts in what their children require in order to experience a positive transition, appears to be absent. Issues such as the lack of access to information and knowledge of: resources; available support; subject choice; the type of provision offered; and the delay in confirming places have emerged as factors that impact parents' ability to understand and support the transition process. These findings are particularly important within the overall aim of the wider feasibility study, which was to assist in the identification of a model of support required for all students in one local area of significant social disadvantage. Therefore, it would seem prudent that a coordinated effort is required to develop a strategy to enable a seamless transition for all pupils and improve transition outcomes. Parents and students might benefit from an annual, localised 'transition fair' which enables students and parents to connect with post-primary school staff and students, ask questions about the curriculum, subject choices, and extra-curricular activities. A similar strategy is in place nationally to facilitate the transition from post-primary to further and higher education, and this is a model that could be easily replicated. An emotion-focused intervention might also form one component of a transition strategy where pupils are supported to develop not only their own coping skills but also how they can draw on the support of others-particularly parents. However, as advised by Bagnall (2020) any transition interventions would need to be implemented alongside other changes to the wider system with the child at the centre.

*Notes: While secondary education is ostensibly free in the Republic of Ireland, some schools request voluntary contributions or fees as described by one parent in the study.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENTS

The data that support the findings from this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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