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An investigation into the transfer process between two schools

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Abstract

Bedfordshire is one of a handful of local authorities which still has a 3 tier system of lower, middle and upper schools throughout the authority. Other authorities in the country may have a mixture of 2 (primary and secondary) and 3 tier systems. Many local authorities have or are looking at their structure and whether they should continue with the 3 tier system.

This particular study examined the age at which children moved between schools in order to determine the influence on this upon their confidence and maturity. It also compares and contrasts the expectations and concepts of the pupils, how they settle into the schools at different ages and whether there were any differences identified between the genders. The study also looked at the induction process and how children transfer.

Findings from this study will demonstrate that it is not the age of transfer that is important but it is how the transfer is managed that affects the children involved in the process.

Introduction

Bedfordshire is one of a handful of local authorities which have a 3 tier system throughout the authority. Other authorities in the country may have a mixture of 2 and 3 tier systems. Many local authorities have or are looking at their structure and whether they should continue with the 3 tier system. The summer of 2004 saw all Northampton's middle schools close for the final time as the town's educational system moved from the three tier to a two tier system. In 2001 Northumberland County Council decided to retain the three tier system. Worcester County Council in 2002, following consultation, recommended that the three tier system in Redditch should be retained. Following a vote on Thursday 22 February 2007 Suffolk County Council decided to move from a three tier system to a two tier system.

From January to April 2006 a consultation took place in Bedfordshire to look at a proposal to move from the three tier system of lower, middle and upper schools to a two tier system of primary and secondary schools. One of the arguments put forward on the Bedfordshire School Structure Website for retaining the three tier system was that there was a worry about the huge culture change that would result from mixing 11 – 13 year olds with 14 – 18 year olds and that bullying and anti social behaviour would be likely to increase.

In 2009 the local government structure in Bedfordshire changed. Bedfordshire County Council became Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council. Central Bedfordshire decided to continue with the tree tier system but the Bedford Borough decided in November 2009 to change to the two system. The changes would take 5 years to complete. However with the change of government in 2010 the Build Schools for the Future programme was cancelled and Bedford Borough Council announced that they could not continue with the restructuring of the education provision.

The Transfer Process

Moving from primary to secondary school is, of course, an important time in the lives of children. Galton (2005a) sees the transfer at eleven as a status passage when children stop being called children and are called young adults. McGilchrist (2005) explains that it is a major milestone and children approach it with mixed emotions ranging from great anticipation to some anxiety.

The transfer process can start at the beginning of final year at the feeder school when teachers explain that the work which the children are to undertake in that year which will be built upon in their new school. Discussions take place during the year to allay any anxieties the children may have and “bridging units” are becoming more popular. These “bridging units” are projects or pieces of work which are started in the feeder school, completed in new school and support the transition and continuity of studies.

During the summer and autumn terms 2001, Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) visited 32 primary schools, and 16 secondary schools to evaluate the effectiveness of transfer arrangements for pupils changing schools at age 11.

Ofsted (2002:4) noted that the management of the transfer needed two key members of staff, such as the head of Year 7 or the lower school, with a member of the senior management team having overall responsibility.

Ofsted (2002:4) also observed that all of the primary schools recognised that good arrangements for the transfer of pupils was important; however, it was low on their list of priorities. Ofsted (2002:4) evaluated the effectiveness of transfer arrangements at the age of 11, which led directly to the formulation of the

government's Key Stage 3 Strategy (ref doc). A key objective of the strategy was to improve progression across Key Stages 2 and 3. Improving Key Stage 2/3 transfer did not, however, feature specifically in any of the school improvement plans. The position was similar in the secondary schools. Apart from the Key Stage 3 Strategy in general, very few of the secondary schools had identified transfer explicitly as an issue for the school to tackle. Nor had they included specific, costed initiatives in their action plan to improve provision.

Nevertheless, Ofsted (2002:6) have reported that nearly all the secondary schools released a member of staff responsible for primary/secondary transfer to visit partner primary schools during the summer term and before the induction days. These visits were used to help the pupils feel much more confident about transfer. At the same time, pastoral staff and subject teachers in Year 7 become better informed as information comes from the primary school teachers who know the pupils extremely well in terms of both their academic ability as well as their social predilections.

Induction day is another event that allows the pupils to allay some of the fears which they will face in September, as they can to some extent familiarise themselves with the lay out and locations of key areas of the school. However they can also get a false sense of what lessons will be like, as lesson experiences on induction days have a different context.

The induction process also equips pupils for organising themselves. In the feeder schools equipment usually remains in school but in the secondary school pupils are responsible for their own equipment. There may not be anywhere in the school for them to store their equipment and in some there may be lockers which means that books and equipment must be brought to school as required. The pupils must, therefore, become more independent.

Ofsted (2002:63) observed that most pupils in Year 6 looked forward to moving to secondary school, albeit with some apprehension. According to Fairbank and Wakefield (2005) one area of apprehension is the size of the school and the other students in the school. After being the oldest and possibly the biggest pupils in their previous schools they become, overnight, the youngest and possibly the smallest pupils. They come from a calm existence of a small school to a large school with a large amount of hustle and bustle. Concerns about bullying were the single most mentioned issue by the pupils. Another area of apprehension is the loneliness and not having any friends. Concerns will include getting lost, not having their friends and not having the correct equipment.

Nevertheless many pupils talked positively about the greater range of experiences and challenges they hoped would be available to them at secondary school. Pupils transferring as a group to a particular secondary school felt secure in the knowledge that they would be 'in it together'. Some were looking forward to making new friends and appreciated that now was the time to move on.

Ofsted (2002:7) stated that when the pupils were interviewed in Year 7, almost all were positive about the start they had made in Key Stage 3. In the main, they were confident and enjoying school. Many had found the Year 6 induction days helpful and appreciated the support they had received, had settled in well to secondary school and had soon overcome any fears they might have had about the new school.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study questionnaires were given to pupils on their induction day asking what they knew about the school and what they thought the school would be like along with any concerns that they might have. A follow up questionnaire was given to the same pupils after they had been at the school for about half a term.

The two questionnaires were analysed and data collected. Their preconceptions and perception were compared.

The head teachers of both schools in the study were fully informed at all stages and pupils anonymity was maintained.

During interviews with the Heads of Year from both schools involved in the study they were able to explain how the induction process was conducted and who the key personnel in the procedure were.

The Study

Only 7 miles apart are two schools in different Local Education Authorities. Each of these have different school structures and a transfer process at different periods of time in the student's education. One school is in Cambridgeshire where the transfer takes place at the end of Key Stage 2 (at the age of 11), the other school is in Bedfordshire where the transfer takes place in Key Stage 3 (at the age of 13).

With only 7 miles between the two schools there is the possibility that children in the villages on the county border could opt to go to the school which they do not directly feed into. This is the case for one village which is, in fact, nearer to the Cambridgeshire School than the Bedfordshire School. Parents of children in this village may wish to transfer their children at the age of 11 and not at 13 in Bedfordshire.

This study compared and contrasted the expectations, preconceptions, perceptions and anxieties of the pupils and how they settle into the schools at different ages.

Findings

a) School A

At School A in the 2-tier system the induction process was ongoing throughout year 6 at the primary school. During the year the SENCO visited the feeder schools and liaised with the staff at those schools in order to discuss any concerns or issues relating to pupils with special needs. The SENCO also made contact with the parents of those pupils to support them during the transfer process. The school also holds an open evening during the autumn term which is well attended. During May and June before the move to the school the Head of Year 7 visits the feeder schools to talk to the pupils during assembly and will discuss individual pupils with their class teacher. The visits to the feeder schools will also involve current year 7 pupils who attended that feeder school and they will also talk to small groups of pupils about the school and what the transfer will be like. At this time the SENCO will also conduct spelling and reading tests with all the pupils who will be transferring to the school.

The Head of Year then allocates pupils to tutor groups according to information provided by the feeder school regarding friendship groups and which pupils it would be advisable to keep apart. Allocation also takes into account gender balance, ability and a balance between all feeder groups. Information which is transferred will include Key Stage 2 data, Special Educational Needs and any personal information.

The induction days took place in July when the pupils from the feeder school have the opportunity to spend two days at the school. For the first hour the Head of Year takes an assembly during which the induction days will be explained and key personnel introduced. The tutor group will then spend time together so that relationships can be built. The pupils are then given an opportunity to tour the school and follow a timetable for the two days with lessons based around English, Maths, Science and Citizenship.

The induction process then continues when the pupils start in September. The start of term is staggered with year 7, 10 and 12 starting the term the day before the rest of the school. This gives the new intake the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the school before the rest of the school start. They will have all of their lessons in their tutor groups with each tutor group having a Teaching Assistant who stays with them for every lesson for the year.

b) School B

At School B (3-tier system) the induction process starts in the autumn term with visits by the Headteacher to the three feeder middle schools. Termly liaison meetings take place between the Head of Year from the Upper school and the Heads of Year from the three middle schools. At these meetings the structure of the induction are discussed and data about the pupils transferred. In the summer

term the Head of Year and Headteacher will visit the middle schools and attend assemblies where they will introduce themselves and explain a little about the school to the pupils. At this assembly year 9 pupils will accompany the staff and speak to the pupils about their new school. During the summer term the Head of Year and SENCO from the Upper School will meet with the Head of Year from the Middle School and individual pupils will be discussed, their friendship groups, behaviour problems and academic ability.

At the end of June parents and pupils are invited to the Upper School for an evening meeting where the pupils are told which tutor group they will be in and they will have the opportunity to meet their tutor and discuss any problems and concerns. The Head of Year allocates pupils to tutor groups based on friendship groups, mixed gender groups and mixed ability groups.

The induction day in School B takes place at the beginning of July when the pupils from the Middle Schools visit the Upper School and spend one day at the school. For many of the pupils they will have to travel to the Upper School by bus as a third of the pupils at the Upper School have to travel by bus. The pupils then attend a morning assembly in their tutor groups where the Head of Year introduces key staff in the school and explains the format of the day. The pupils then spend the whole day in their tutor groups so they can get to know each other as well as their tutor. A number of team building activities then take place in each of the tutor groups before the pupils move on to a rotation of maths, science and PE activities. The final assembly takes place in the afternoon.

c) Overall findings on the induction process

All students had been given the opportunity to visit the school that they were moving to. Both schools have an open evening in the Autumn Term and if pupils and parents are unable to attend then they may visit during the working day and see the school at work. Both schools hold concerts and plays and pupils from feeder schools have the opportunity to visit the school to see the matinee performances of these productions. Both schools have excellent sporting facilities and feeder schools have the opportunity to take part in sporting events at the schools.

Liaison between all schools involved in the process was thought to have been essential. It was also noted that Bridging units were becoming more popular. These are projects or pieces of work which are started before transfer and completed after transfer to support the transition and continuity.

d) Student responses

During their induction day the first questionnaire was completed by all pupils. When asked "You have been the oldest pupils in your current school, what do you think it will be like to be the youngest at your new school?" the pupils were able to give a

free choice of response as no suggestions were made to them. Although many put “scary” as an answer most pupils at school A answered “Being the youngest again”

When asked “Is there anything you are looking forward to at the new school?” “Making new friends” was the most popular response.

The next question was “Is there anything you are not looking forward to?” A number of different responses were given to this question. At School A the more popular answers were “Being bullied” “Homework” and “Work” whereas at School B more responses were given to “Getting lost” and like School A “Homework”

Finally during the induction day the pupils were asked “Do you think the new school will give you a fresh start to learning?” Although they weren’t asked why they needed a fresh start many thought that they would have a fresh start to learning.

After being at the school for half a term the second questionnaire was completed. One of the first questions was “Are you attending the school you wanted to go to?” All but four of the pupils at School A were attending the school they wanted to go to whereas all the students at School B said that this was the one they wanted to go to.

The majority of pupils at both schools were with the same friends they had had at their previous school and many of them were in the same tutor group. The Heads of Year at both schools had allocated pupils to tutor groups according to information provided by the feeder school regarding friendship groups and which pupils it would be advisable to keep apart. Allocation had also taken into account gender balance, ability and a balance between all feeder groups.

The pupils were then asked to list all the things they liked at their new school. The lunch routine and cafeteria system at both schools was something that many pupils stated that they liked and this could be because it would be different from their previous school where they would not have a cafeteria system. Although they didn’t state which new subjects they liked many gave this as an answer in both schools.

In School A many pupils stated that detentions were something that they did not like at the new school.

When looking at the responses in the first questionnaire by gender for the questions about what they were looking forward to and their concerns it would appear that the statement with the most responses was “making new friends” more girls than boys said they were looking forward to making new friends. A variety of responses were given about the concerns. More girls than boys were not looking forward to the homework. Being bullied was a worry but with little gender difference. More girls were worried about getting lost but most of these came from one school.

There appears to be little or no difference between genders when asked in the second questionnaire what they liked and disliked about their new school

Hargreaves and Wall (2002:35-36) explain that in their study the boys' and girls' responses were surprisingly similar in most categories. They put one of their worries about moving to the new school as getting lost and bullying was quite low in their concerns. Boys were more concerned than girls about the strict teachers. Girls appeared to be less likely to use the words "scared" or "nervous" than the boys.

Galton, Gray and Rudduck (1999:2) explain that for transfer, problems included difficulties in adjusting to routine aspects of the new environment such as travelling by bus to school, managing school meals, losing old and making new friends, coping with a variety of teachers and different expectations about work, managing to concentrate and learn across a wider range of subjects during the school day and week. Most of the anxieties associated with settling in appear, however, to be relatively short-lived.

Conclusion

What has come across during this investigation is that it is the induction process and the manner in which the children are involved in the process that has been important.

It has also confirmed that in line with Hargreaves and Galton (2002) the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary school needs to include:

- listening to what pupils have to say about transfer
- making information about pupils' attainment more accessible to teachers in secondary schools by collating and passing on information about primary pupils' attitudes, motivation and behaviour
- making available more details about primary pupils' cultural and social experiences
- making pupils' experiences of secondary school sufficiently different from primary school to help mark the status passage of becoming a young adolescent
- establishing extended induction programmes in the first week of the new term
- ensuring pupils' expectations of more challenging learning experiences are fulfilled.

However, as with the main findings of Ofsted (2002) this study found that the schools understood that there was a need to improve continuity and progression, but few of them were giving priority to this task. The induction programmes and the liaison between the feeder schools and the secondary school were effective and supportive of the pupils involved in the transfer. Teachers from the secondary

school visited the feeder schools and all the pupils had the opportunity to visit their new school on induction days in the summer term.

When the pupils were interviewed they spoke positively about their experiences in their primary schools and most of them looked forward to changing schools and they found the induction days a positive experience. In Year 7, almost all these same pupils were still positive and their expectations were still high and they said that they were keen to do well.

Recommendations

It is important that schools place emphasis on the transfer process. Many at the moment are concerned with the transfer of data and do not consider the pupils involved. Schools must look at the emotional side of the transfer, for many pupils it is an enormous step they are taking and they will need a lot of support. This support should not stop after the first few weeks at the new school but should be reviewed at regular intervals throughout the first year. It shouldn't always be down to the members of staff to support the pupils but should include other pupils in the school. Most schools now have school councils and peer mentoring support and these older pupils could be trained in a counselling role. Some schools will support the new year group with peer support in the tutor groups. It shouldn't only be the remit of the Head of Year and tutor of the new intake who are concerned with their welfare during the induction time but also every member of staff the pupils will encounter.

Schools should look at addressing the key concerns of pupils and alleviate those fears early in the transfer process

What this study has shown has been supported by the Galton and Willcocks (1983) Oracle Survey, the Hargreaves and Galton (2002) study and the Ofsted (2002) report in that it is not the age of transfer which is important but the process of induction implemented by the schools involved in the transfer itself.

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