

Methodology module: The primary to secondary transition



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A few years after finishing a degree in Psychology, Nicholas Beare trained as an EFL teacher – and realised that, at last, he had found something he really wanted to do. He planned to travel round the world as a teacher, with the first stop in Mexico. After some major changes to the plan – getting married and having children – he stayed in Mexico for 22 years.

In Mexico, he worked as an English Language teacher and teacher trainer in a variety of institutes and schools and he also started writing textbooks and doing teacher training for Macmillan. In 2002 he came back to England, and he now works in materials production and teacher training in three very different regions of the world: the Middle East, Latin America, and Europe.

His publications with Macmillan ELT besides the *English World* Grammar Practice Books include primary-level series such as *Sunrise for Kurdistan* and *Evolution*, and secondary-level series such as *Stepping Up*.

“ On their first day at secondary school, pupils aren’t just walking into a new classroom – they’re taking a huge and sometimes frightening jump into a completely new world. ”

The primary to secondary transition

Most of us can remember our first day at ‘Big School’ – the day when we walked into the rather scary, rather grown-up world of secondary school. It was all very different from primary school with its brightly-coloured classroom and the friendly, familiar teacher you saw every day. Suddenly it felt like a very different place altogether. The question that arises for parents and teachers is how to equip pupils to deal with the transition from primary to secondary school.

Of course, the transition affects different pupils in different ways. For some, it may be a period of excitement and discovery; for others, a period of anxiety and stress. Many pupils experience the academic ‘transition dip’ – their levels of achievement and involvement in the class go down, sometimes substantially, and they may not recover until the end of the first year or even later.

In the past, the transition was just ‘a difficult phase’. However, that changed after a large-scale study in the UK by Maria Evangelou and others. Now many teachers want to understand the problems of the transition and to help their pupils through it.

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How does the transition affect pupils?

There are at least three different aspects to the transition and they affect different pupils in different ways.

- **Changes in feelings** – about themselves and their school. Pupils may feel less confident, their self-esteem may be lowered and they may feel anxious about schoolwork, friends and other pupils.
- **Changes in behaviour** – both inside and outside the classroom. Some pupils may become more isolated and participate less in class; others may start acting up and seeking attention in class.
- **Changes in achievement and grades** – compared with their career in primary school, pupils' general level of achievement experiences an academic 'dip' when they enter secondary school.

These changes are the result of several factors, which we can categorise as **external**, **intrapersonal**, **interpersonal** and **academic**.

External factors

The pupils are actually moving from a familiar place to an unfamiliar one – a scary world of other children who seem incredibly tall and grown-up.

Intrapersonal factors

The pupils go from being top of the mountain in primary school – the oldest, the tallest and the cleverest – to the bottom in secondary school – they're the youngest, the smallest and the ones who have the most to learn. It's an intimidating position to be in.

Interpersonal factors

Friendship groups are split, and new children come into the classroom. All the transitioning pupils have to adapt and make new circles of friends.

Academic factors

The pupils go from having one teacher to having many teachers. In primary school, they stayed in the same classroom for most of their lessons, whereas they now move from one classroom to another. Not only does the style of teaching and the type of work vary, but the whole classroom atmosphere is different.

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How does *English World* help with the transition?

Maria Evangelou's group identified a key tool in the transition from primary to secondary school: the use of bridging materials. These are classroom materials – textbooks and other aids – that are similar in style to primary teaching materials. *English World* identifies and addresses this use. It's not exactly the same, of course – it's more challenging and age appropriate – but for learners, it's like having an old friend back in the classroom again.

Even if the pupils didn't use *English World* at primary level, they will find the style of Level 7 easy to adapt to. *English World* gently provides learners with more advanced skills techniques such as reading, writing, listening and speaking, and learning strategies to help them adapt.

What can teachers do to help the transition?

There are several ways in which teachers can make the transition as easy as possible for pupils.

Let's first look at what Level 6 teachers can do to help pupils who will be going to secondary school next year.

Knowing the place they are going

In an ideal world, the pupils would visit the school they are going to and see the classrooms. Then there would be a show-and-tell session in their primary class, with pupils showing pictures of their future school and classrooms, and talking about them.

Getting an idea of classes in secondary school

You can talk with the pupils about the different styles of classes and learning in secondary school. Pupils need to be aware that they may be moving from one classroom to another many times during the day, and that they will have different teachers for each subject. You can even set up a 'Moving On Club' in school (see Dalton, 2009).



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Teacher observation and reflection notes

To get a clear view of the transition problem, it helps to reflect on your own experience when you were making the transition as a child.

Don't idealise your experiences – try to see the school through your eyes as a child, as you walked in, as you talked to the teacher and so on. Consider these questions:

- How did you feel about leaving primary school?
- Did you have positive feelings about secondary school? Were you excited, interested and confident?
- Did you have negative feelings about it? Were you nervous or perhaps frightened?
- Were you familiar with your new school before the start of term?
- When you walked into the school, how did you feel?
- What experiences can you remember from your first day?

Here are some points to consider if you are sending your pupils from primary to secondary school:

- Which children are mainly positive about the move?
- Which children are mainly negative about the move?
- Which children have mixed feelings?
- Are any children familiar with the school they are going to? Can anything be done to help them become more familiar with their new school?
- Do the children understand the ways that secondary school is different? Can anything be done to help them become more independent learners?

And finally, here are some points to consider if you are receiving new pupils into your secondary class:

- Are there any children who seem nervous and uncomfortable?
- Are there any children who are acting up? This can be an attempt to cover nervousness or anxiety.
- Have the children started forming friendship groups?
- Are there any children who seem isolated?
- Have any children spoken about problems they are having? Is a conversation with these pupils needed?
- Has any progress been made in establishing a class identity?

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Action points

The transition from primary to secondary can be problematic, but it doesn't have to be. Teachers can help in a variety of ways by being aware of:

- the causes and effects of the transition.
- the emotional effects of leaving primary school.
- how to equip and help the pupils with the transition.

By addressing all three points, teachers can help to make the pupils' first year at secondary school more of an exciting opportunity for them. This in turn means a more enjoyable, useful and fulfilling year for teachers, since pupils then have the skills they need to move forward.

References:

Aiding in the Transition from Primary School to Secondary School, Dalton, A. (The Plymouth Student Educator, 2009), available at <https://studentjournals.plymouth.ac.uk/index.php/educator/article/viewFile/59/123>

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