An Investigation into Secondary School's Approach to Collaboration and Communication with their Feeder Primary Schools

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KEYWORDS: Post Primary Education; Transition; Collaboration; Education Passport

INTRODUCTION

This article is a snapshot of a larger piece of research conducted as part of my programme of study, which focuses on the management of information transfer from primary to secondary school on all incoming first years. The research investigates how secondary schools use data on new students to inform teaching and learning specifically the data collected from the Education Passport.

The transition from primary to post-primary school is regarded as one of the most difficult in pupils' educational careers (Zeedijk et al., 2003). Waters et al., (2012) and Zeedijk et al., (2003) both argue that success in navigating this transition cannot only affect children's academic performance, but also their general sense of wellbeing and mental health. Research suggests that the transition should be a collaborative process with strong lines of communication to ensure a smooth transfer. Strnadova et al (2016) maintain that collaboration between relevant stakeholders is a necessary condition for successful transition.

This research was undertaken to investigate practices devised by secondary schools to manage information on their incoming first years.

The aim of the study is to build a picture on how schools manage the collection, analysis and dissemination of this information to enhance teaching and learning for the child and help teachers better understand their new pupils each September. Furthermore, the study reviewed the NCCA's Education Passport, a new initiative aimed at providing a more systematic approach to information transfer. It focused on how secondary schools have been merging the passport with its own local practices to enhance the transition experience for students, parents and staff. Neal et al (2016) states a successful transition from primary to post primary education can only be achieved with a combination of strong collaboration between schools, a joined-up approach to assessment and a firm grip on effective data management. This is echoed by Evangelou et al (2008) "A key element to a good transition is the importance given to the completeness of the information collected about each child" (p.8).

CONTEXT

The 'National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2011' sought to "address significant concerns about how well young people are developing the literacy and numeracy skills that they will need to participate fully in the education system" (p.7). The policy has indicated that the continuity of learning is of importance to the child's development from early education to the completion of secondary. The key to improving this continuity is to build a rounded picture of the child's learning and create fluidity of strategy and assessment between the primary and secondary "the timing of the transfer of information is important ensuring there are no 'stakes' attached, it should happen immediately after enrolment and when first year is under way" (p.78).

To improve this transfer of information the NCCA created the Education Passport which aims to collate information that paints a holistic view of the transitioning pupil for their next school. Its key objective is to create a more formalised approach and structure to information transfer. This promotes "consistency in the information received by a post-primary school from its feeder primary schools." (DES, 2011c). The NCCA sees the role of the Education Passport as facilitating the sharing of information about children's learning to support their transition "continuity for the learner across all stages of education" (p.11). In 2012 the Education Minister, Ruari Quinn noted "that this sharing of information between primary and post primary schools is a common-sense approach that will benefit both students and teachers". The NCCA have designed the Education Passport "to complement local practices and eventually replace some" (NCCA, 2010).

From a practitioner's perspective there are a lot of flaws and inadequacies in the transfer of information to date. This results in the risk of some students 'falling through the net' especially students with additional needs. According to Foley et al (2016) there is a need for co-ordination across schools to ensure a continuum of support to address the individual needs of students and create a complete transition. To date Ireland's educational policies have failed to create a document that adequately guides and supports schools in the management of data transfer at transition periods. Some of the central problems identified in research and

experiential data is the fact that the transfer of information in Ireland remains localised, informal and for the most part shared verbally through school visits.

METHODOLOGY

Data required for this research was qualitative in nature therefore, the author chose data collection methods that would provide relevant and enough information with cost and time effectiveness. The method that fulfilled this criterion was semi-structured interviews. The researcher chose a sample of nine schools from three backgrounds in order to incorporate as wide a range as possible in regards structure and ethos of schools across the spectrum of the Irish educational landscape. The purpose of this kind of sample design is to provide as much insight as possible into the management of data on new students entering second level.

The interviews involved principals and teachers from the different backgrounds of DEIS, Voluntary and ETB. The researcher chose only secondary schools to understand how management and middle management create systems to administer new student information and build relationships with their feeder primary schools. The researcher acknowledged the absolute value of the in-depth information from interviews and the rich source of data it can bring to the research and theory development in this area. The interview is the most prominent data collection tool in qualitative research and is a good way of exploring people's perceptions, meanings and constructions of reality (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p. 182).

Limitations of the study include the sample size of nine participants, due to the fact the researcher was limited by resources and time, the sample size was small, consequently, the findings might not be assignable to a representative population and the generalizations suggested may not be well-founded. In addition to this the research was limited by the fact only second level perspective was examined. A primary level perspective could be a possibility for further research to get a deeper understanding of the transfer of information at transitions from both sides.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

LOCAL PRACTICES DEVELOPED TO GATHER AND DISSEMINATE INFORMATION ON INCOMING 1ST YEARS

From the data it emerged that systems for managing transitions remain localised with no defined centralised systems from the DES. Each school interviewed has designed and managed their own methods for administering the transfer of information from their primary school feeders.

> We facilitate a transition-planning meeting and we use our own self-designed post primary transfer form (Participant 2). I developed a template going to the school to find out key pieces of information. (Participant 8).

> Yes, we would meet our main feeder schools roughly six that would make up the bulk of our students, the smaller feeder schools we tend to call, we would generally meet with the principal, 6th class teachers and SEN teachers of these feeder schools. (Participant 9)

Despite the fact the schools have self-designed and adjusted systems to suit their own needs, their timeline and methods were very similar. At the early stages of information gathering, representatives from every school visit their main feeder schools and ring their smaller feeder schools i.e. primary schools that supply two or three children. "*Yes, I would go and visit all the main feeder primary schools and then ring the other schools to get information*" *(Participant 1).*

Most information is verbally exchanged with some of the schools bringing transition forms to fill as they listen. All the interviewees place huge importance on the visits, describing the information they receive as invaluable. Such accounts would certainly seem to confirm Looney's description of the transitions in Ireland as "locally organised and generally ad hoc with post primary schools more likely to receive verbal communications than written reports" (p.349). The research revealed that relationships with feeder schools are highly valued.

With all participants indicating they only visit their main feeder schools and ring the smaller ones, indicating there are a percentage of students every year that do not benefit from these visits. Schools have reiterated the value in these face to face meetings, therefore, a child coming from a 'smaller feeder' school could be at a disadvantage to a child from a 'main feeder'. It also highlighted that there are inconsistencies within the primary sector in terms of the quality of data delivered, and very importantly, when this information is sent to secondary schools.

THE IMPACT OF THE NCCA'S EDUCATION PASSPORT ON THE TRANSFER OF INFORMATION

As policy surrounding the transfer of information at transitions progresses and evolves, the newest policy introduced the 'Education Passport' in 2015. The research investigated how this latest addition has been received by secondary school teachers, and how they have integrated it into their local practices. The passport's main objective is to complement and eventually replace some of the local systems, consequently, the data revealed the passport is not fulfilling its main objective. The research highlights that secondary schools are not using the passports as part of their systems, and the main reason is they are receiving them too late.

> They come in over the summer and September and I haven't time to read them at that stage. They need to come in the last couple weeks of May to make an impact otherwise they're too late and we are gone when they arrive. (Participant 2)

> When it arrives in June, I have all the information I need I know all their scores and class groups have been organised. (Participant 7)

Seven of the nine schools reported some passports do not arrive into the school until November, if ever. On a practical level the schools are preparing timetables and resources for new students from February when registration is confirmed. Therefore, the valuable information the passport can supply is arriving too late so the secondary schools collect the information themselves which results in a lot of overlap of data collection. As one teacher noted *"They are tested by us in March or April and again by the primary school at the end of May realistically collecting near identical informatio*n" *(Participant 2)*.

The deadlines set out in policy are too late for it to have any meaningful impact as it is set for the second week in June when secondary schools are on holidays, so nobody is there to facilitate them into a designated system. It was also revealed that secondary schools do not feel supported by policy and CPD has not been offered explicitly in the area on how to manage the passport and good practice for its uses and mergence with local practice. One teacher revealed *"I have never been told about their uses and how I should be handling them once they arrive". (Participant 4)*

On a positive note, schools do use the passport to get the test scores in order to get a rounded picture of a child's ability. Two of the nine schools reported that the profiles from the student and parent are very beneficial in understanding the new student better. However, the other seven found the information to be too 'fluffy' and 'aspirational' therefore, did not use the profiles. As put by one school *"It feels like the schools are putting emphasis on the filling of it and it feels the information can be trivial". (Participant 3)*

ROLE OF ASSESSMENT AT TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY

The data underlined that schools consider self-administered assessment as the most significant of all the information gathered on their new pupils. This information is used to create class groups and identify any educational needs to guide timetabling. The reason for the strong reliance on these tests is the trust the secondary schools place in their own data. Results are reported in standardised age scores (SAS) which is consistent with all second level standardised testing. Therefore, it creates a baseline for trends and measuring progress in learning in a familiar manner. SAS is also required by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the State Examinations Commission (SEC). In contrast primary schools report all standardised tests in STen so the incompatibility in information collating systems makes the merging of transfer information very difficult. As one teacher expressed *"we are very familiar with SAS results and unfamiliar with the meaning of STen so it wouldn't have the same impact on understanding the child." (Participant 6)*.

Despite this fact the DES have requested that secondary schools stop testing 6th class students prior to entry (0045/2015). Nonetheless, the interview data reveals second level schools are not willing to stop the testing process, as they value their own test scores and require them for the future educational needs of the student. In 2004 Smyth who was commissioned by the ERSI to conduct research on transitions from primary to secondary level, reported that there were twenty-six different tests being used by secondary schools to test

their incoming students, her research highlighted that a lot of these tests were "self-designed and unstandardised". However, the interview sample in this study demonstrated that the choice of tests has reduced significantly, with all the schools now opting for standardised testing as opposed to the self-designed tests previously used as part of the 'entrance' style exam. The most popular choices amongst the interview sample were the CAT4 and the Woodcock Johnson. There are drawbacks to these two tests however, namely, that neither are Irish-normed being British and American in origin respectively, and also the lack of homogeneity prevents the compilation of a set of national statistics on the results.

The schools interviewed were asked if they valued a standard transition test that was Irish normed and ran collaboratively with the primary schools. The objective of such a goal would be the reduction in the level of testing 6th class students are subjected to in a short space of time by both sectors. The results were very much in favour of this as it would reduce the workload for both primary and secondary sectors and would also reduce costs and resources involved., *"I would be first to put my hand up and say I don't want to be doing tests on a Saturday and also the expense involved in it." (Participant 1)*

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to determine the nature of the relationships built between primary and secondary schools and how partnerships have been built to create a collaborative approach to transition. In summary, it has revealed that schools have worked hard to develop their own systems of data collection on new students, however they are tailored to their own needs so that their structures and systems are built around the independent requirements of the school i.e. no national structures recognised. Frustration has been expressed by the secondary schools that there is no protocol or policy to follow especially if transfer information like the Education Passport is not passed over to them. There are no definitive lines of inquiry to follow with the DES.

Relationships built between the primary and secondary schools have a huge influence on the depth of information gathered on the students. What is apparent is that schools build better relationships with their main feeder schools which tend to be the ones in close-proximity. This has a negative impact on students coming from smaller feeders as schools do not put the same emphasis on the data collected from these schools as relations are weaker. Although schools create their own transition forms to fill when visiting the schools, they still rely heavily on verbal information and face to face meetings are central to the data collection methods. This outlines a second problem as verbal information lacks record and is open to human error, omission and subjectivity.

Schools place great value on their own testing and results show they are the best source of information for schools in building baseline scores for mixed ability class groups. The education passport has been introduced by the NCCA to aid the information gathering at transition times. Its main focus is

intended to complement local practices and put national structure to them, relieve the level of testing carried out on 6th class pupils by providing test scores and creating a voice for students and parents in the profiles they fill in the passport. Nonetheless, the passport has been described by secondary schools as aspirational and 'fluffy'. This research illustrates that the main obstacle to their acceptance into secondary systems is the transfer deadline, as they arrive so late management have already gathered the data. Teachers require support and training to deal with the passport and allow its potential to grow. Policy and practice is not meeting in this area and information collection at transition points still remains incomplete.

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