

"MIND THE GAP": STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Overview of Research

This research explores the transition from primary to post-primary education taking particular account of the perspective of students and examining also the views of primary and post-primary teachers and of parents. The study is based on a group of students and is focused on three primary schools and one post-primary school. The study considers the concerns and needs of young people during transition while available structures and supports are reviewed. Mindful of various recommendations concerning transition, the study stems from the responsibility that school leaders and teachers have to do everything possible to ease the transition process and provide for greater continuity for students.

Research Design and Methodology

The study outlines aims and objectives and provides information on the schools involved in the research. Detailed arrangements associated with transition in the various schools are described. A review of the literature that examines transfer from primary to post-primary school from a student perspective is furnished. The methodological strategies used are mainly qualitative and these include multiple data collection strategies, interviews, consideration of social, economic and educational milieu and background information. The research methodology includes focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews and telephone interviews. The empirical research and the analysis of data are outlined. The study identifies a number of key themes from the literature review and presents the findings and conclusions arising from the research. Appropriate ethical procedures were adopted for the study and anonymity was assured for the participating schools and all those connected with the research.

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

The findings are structured around three themes that derive from the literature review. These were the personal and social factors influencing the transition process, the organisational and institutional changes that impact on students, and the academic issues relating to the transition. The three key social challenges for students as they transfer from primary to post-primary are concerned with making and keeping friends at their new school, fitting in to the broader social context of their new environs and dealing with bullying. Differences in school culture from primary to post-primary are also considered. Coping with a longer day, trying to read maps and timetables, having more teachers and subjects, and being the youngest in their new school are among the organisational aspects of transition that cause concern for students especially in the first few weeks. More homework at the post-primary level was found to be a feature of note for students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study are linked to existing research on transition. The findings are generally in keeping with the existing literature. A number of recommendations are made and these include to seek better links between primary and post-primary schools, to improve internal school organisational features, to develop support programmes for pupils and parents, and to have the issue of continuity in education from primary to post-primary provided for the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers. The provision of an optimum transition experience for students is understood to be a shared responsibility between the primary and post-primary schools and one where parents can contribute significantly also.