

BRIDGING THE CHASM: HOW CAN I IMPROVE THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE OF SIXTH CLASS STUDENTS MOVING INTO POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL?

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Research Overview

This action research was conducted as a leadership-focused project. It aimed to achieve specific objectives. These included an exploration of the rationale for a transition programme, the development of a programme to meet the needs of a group of sixth class pupils, providing a summation of the programme and determining the degree of its effectiveness as well as making recommendations to inform future development.

Methodology

The project sought to establish the needs of pupils and teachers, to formalise any ad-hoc procedures that were already in operation and to develop new approaches for working together to fulfil the transition needs of all involved. The project centred on a group of 22 sixth class pupils whose needs were assessed initially using questionnaires. These were designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from pupils, teachers and principal on a variety of issues associated with transition in general. Analysis of this data identified issues that required attention to meet the needs of the pupils as well as provide direction as to how an intervention programme might be developed. A formal programme with a focus on school visits, timetables and new subjects was implemented. A key element was the formation of a transition steering committee comprising a number of staff to oversee and advise on aspects of implementation. The programme was evaluated through focus group discussions and questionnaires for pupils and teachers. Features to ensure validity and accuracy of the findings included research diary, critical friend, independent delivery of the transition programme and elimination of teacher/researcher presence where possible.

Ethical considerations were taken into account in the arrangement of the research.

Overview of Findings

The research offers insights into transition from the perspective of both pupils and teachers and provides an overview of the agreed intervention programme as well as a summary of its perceived effectiveness and its limitations. Among the positive aspects that pupils identified about their primary school were sport, friends, feeling safe in school, understanding the rules and the friendly nature of teachers. Homework was identified as the least liked aspect of primary school while less than half the pupils stated that they found their schoolwork interesting.

The predominant mechanism for post-primary school selection was through a consultative process involving the pupils themselves and most often their mothers and less often their fathers or male guardian. The main reasons for particular school selection included the presence of friends, school

facilities and proximity to home. The majority of pupils involved in this research project were looking forward to moving to post-primary school, anticipating new friends, learning new things, having more freedom, with a greater variety of activities and practical subjects.

Areas highlighted as helpful for transition by pupils included getting a tour of the post-primary school, seeing a sample timetable, getting information about new subjects and meeting their future year-head. The teachers surveyed as part of the research associated importance with areas broadly in line with those highlighted by the pupils.

These areas were taken into consideration when devising the pupil transition programme which was designed to provide a more structured approach to transition within the school. However, the short timeframe of the project meant that not all areas identified in the data could be addressed that year and instead priority areas were identified for inclusion in the structured transition programme. This incorporated a formal in-class programme to be delivered to pupils over a four week period, visits to local post-primary schools/third level colleges for pupils, a parent information night to present an overview of post-primary schools and offer advice on school selection.

Conclusion

The overall finding was that the intervention had made good progress. However, based on analysis of the data gathered it was accepted that following on from this research, there would be need to undertake further initiatives in a new school year to modify and enhance the intervention programme for improved effectiveness.

While small in scale with a short timeframe in one primary school and having the input of one post-primary school, this case-study of an intervention should be of interest to teachers, principals and other policy stakeholders.