The primary-secondary school transition: children as competent citizens or citizens in the making?

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Introduction

- Presentation concentrates on **empirical findings** from a study of children's/young people's views on participation and voice across the primary-secondary transition

- To date, research which investigates the extent to which policy endorsement of pupil participation is enacted in Scottish schools shows it is uneven and "patchy" (Hulme 2011)

- Present study confirms this

Education in Scotland

- Children attend *primary schools* between **5-12** years of age and *secondary school* between **13-18** years

- Primary-secondary transition tends to be straightforward (i.e. children likely to move with friends/peers, as in other European systems)

- Since devolution (1999), citizenship at the heart of education in Scotland

- Today major policy initiative: *Curriculum for Excellence* (2004) where "*responsible citizenship*" is one of 4 core capacities promoted by Scottish schools

Research design

- Mixed method study: self-report questionnaires (n = **740** children) and focus group (n=**124** children)

- Sample included children at end of primary school (P7) and pupils in second year (S2) at secondary school

- Included representative sample of **25** schools (15 primary and 10 secondary), situated in 4 areas in Scotland

- **Questionnaires:** we asked about school ethos/teacher/child relations, opportunities for decision-making/responsibility at school, what activities were on offer, participation in them, thoughts about transition

- **Focus groups:** we asked about when/where children felt more responsible at school, the purposes of participation and what helped them take part

Research questions

- To explore what is authentic and meaningful participation (i.e. voice, responsibility), from the point of view of pupils

- To investigate pupil's views on participatory opportunities on either side of primary-secondary transition

- To identify to what extent children view themselves as responsible members of their school community

A framework for understanding "active citizenship" in schools

- We focused on "*pragmatic dimension*" of active citizenship drawing on Schereen's conceptual model which highlights students taking action and "hands on" experience

- Described as: "*informal learning embedded in school context*" (Schereen, 2011: 202)

- Non-formal curriculum included school ethos, decision-making structures (i.e. pupil councils), informal leadership (i.e. peer mentoring), extra curricular clubs/activities and pupil participation

General overview of findings

- Taking part identified as integral to experience of primary school but more complex picture emerged in terms of secondary pupils

- Clear differences found between sectors in a) participatory opportunities on offer, and b) direct involvement of pupils

- Social relations with teacher, peers and parents key to facilitating (and restricting) participation at school

- Responsibility for **others** ("younger ones") found to be significant for primary pupils while responsibility for **self**, highly valued by secondary pupils but this responsibility for self was not enacted in classrooms

School ethos and pupil engagement

- Overall, **68%** of primary children and **66%** of young people at secondary school agreed with the statement: *I mostly enjoy school*

- A link was found between a participatory school ethos and children's/young people's satisfaction with school

- In schools with a developed participatory ethos (on a number of measures) children/young people more likely to say that they: *mostly enjoyed school*

- Pupils (mainly boys) with "low activity scores" were much more likely to disagree with: *I mostly enjoy school,* and agree with: *I am not the kind of person that joins clubs and teams*

Decision-making in the classroom

- On questionnaire items which asked about the classroom, clear differences found between sectors

- *"Teachers mainly decide what happens in class"* - **85%** of secondary pupils agreed with this statement, compared to **64%** at primary school

- Choosing topics to work on: secondary - **31%** compared to **60%** at primary; how pupils worked in class (i.e. group work) - **47%** secondary pupils said they had a say while **61%** of children at primary agreed they had input

- In focus groups secondary pupils described feeling disempowered in the classroom by the use of worksheets, didactic teaching styles. Drama, technical subjects as well as noteworthy teachers were identified as exceptions to this

Input into decision-making at school

- ***Voting***: overall, only **42%** of children/young people agreed they had a chance to do this at school

- ***Pupil council/parliament***: **89%** of pupils said their school had a pupil council but only **17%** said that they had taken part in it

- ***Influence of councils***: **61%** primary children and **55%** agreed it had an impact on what happened in school but high level of uncertainty, particularly among girls

- In focus groups girls said they would not put themselves forward and to self excluded

Leadership and responsibility at school

- **Key finding:** in terms of responsibility, primary children talked about responsibility for *others*, whereas secondary pupils discussed responsibility for *self*

- In focus groups primary children raised being a "buddy" to the youngest pupils as a significant way that they behaved responsibly

- Questionnaire findings show differences between sectors i.e. **48%** primary children said they took part in this activity, compared to **11%** of secondary pupils

Being a buddy at primary school

- Children derived considerable satisfaction/confidence from being a "buddy" to younger pupils

- The said that they enjoyed the special bond they developed with younger pupils and the fact that the "younger ones":

  "listen to what you say and look up to you" and,

  "you make sure they are doing the right thing"

Responsibility for self at secondary school

*There are more subjects and clubs. I have more **independence** at secondary school. There is more maturity shown. (Girl, urban school)*

*In secondary you are intrusted with **responsibility** and **freedom**, a feeling that I have hardly ever felt during my years at primary school. (Boy, urban school)*

*We can go out for lunch and I love that idea because it gives me more of a **choice** and I like that because it gives me **freedom** as well. The whole aspect of switching classes, it's smart instead of the whole year learning the same thing. (Boy, non urban school)*

Participation and social relations

- Now widely accepted that "*participation is a relational process*" (Jupp Kina 2012: 2001, Mannion et al 2015)

- Children/young people identified "special teachers" as promoting participation at school and primary pupils indicated that it would be very difficult **NOT** to take part at primary school with expectations of teachers

- Our findings show how relationships with juniors were vital for children's sense of responsibility at school whereas young people at secondary school derived a sense of responsibility/independence from freedom of movement and association with a wider network of peers

Final comments

- **Key finding**: variable opportunities for participation across school sectors which poses questions about:

- Whether opportunities for taking part in primary school are superseded by new, more exciting experiences at secondary school – i.e. more choice, independence and spatial freedom

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