Negotiating the primary-secondary transition: what children say about opportunities for participation and responsibility at school

VII Conference on Childhood Studies

6-8th June 2016

University of Turku

Finland

Jane Brown & Linda Croxford

Moray House School of Education

University of Edinburgh

Introduction

- Presentation concentrates on an **empirical findings** from a study of children's views regarding participation across a key school transition (primary-secondary) in Scotland. Currently, in middle of data analysis

- Builds on a study of teachers' views about citizenship and transitions (Ross and Brown, 2013)

- Main focus: children's participatory opportunities in each institutional setting

School transitions, participation and citizenship

- Very little is known about participation across the primary-secondary transition from the perspectives of children. Deuchar's (2009) small-scale study suggests that opportunities diminish when children change schools

- Previous research has looked at achievement (Topping 2007), well-being (Graham & Hill 2003; West *et al.* 2010), friendships (Weller 2007) but not civic engagement and participation

- What happens when children move schools can illuminate how children's everyday experiences are bound by institutional cultures i.e. teacher beliefs, contrasting relational environments and curriculum imperatives

Schooling and citizenship in Scotland

- **95%** of children in Scotland attend state schools (Murphy et al 2015)

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

- School transitions tend to be fairly straightforward in Scotland (i.e. children likely to move with friends/peers)

- Since devolved Parliament in 1999, citizenship at the heart of the development of education

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

The study: research design

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

- Included **25** schools (15 primary and 10 secondary) situated in 4 geographical areas across 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, as well as 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 at school

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

An overview of what we have found so far

- Very clear differences in participatory opportunities reported between sectors

- While taking part identified as integral to being at primary school, the views of secondary pupils more variable

- The relational aspect of responsibility rated very highly by primary pupils while feeling more responsible (for self, spatial freedom inside/outside of school) stressed by secondary pupils

- Teacher and peer relationships (and sometimes parents) key to facilitating participation at schoo

Differences between primary and secondary pupils in perceptions of their school

About your school	Primary	Secondary	Total	% point difference
Teachers and pupils work together	84	57	69	27
Teachers respect pupils	89	66	76	23
Pupils respect teachers	68	47	56	22
My teachers help and encourage me to join in activities	79	61	69	19
My school expects me to look after myself	69	70	70	0
Some of the rules at my school are not fair	25	36	31	-11
Pupils should be told more about what is happening	45	59	53	-14

We asked: who has a say at your school?

- On "*Getting a chance to vote at school*" **60%** of primary children indicated that they had a chance to vote compared with **29%** of secondary pupils

- "*Older and younger pupils get an equal say at my school*" **53%** of primary pupils agreed with this statement while only **28%** of secondary pupils did so

- "*Older pupils have more of a say at my school*" only **40%** agreed with this statement at primary whereas **63%** did so at secondary

The classroom: who decides?

- In response to questionnaire item: *"Teachers mainly decide what happens in class"* - **85%** of secondary pupils agreed, compared to **64%** at primary school

- Similarly, clear differences found in response to question whether children could choose topics to work on in class. Fewer agreed in secondary - **31%** compared to **60%** at primary level

- Also, on how work is organized in class - **47%** secondary pupils said they had a say whereas considerably more children at primary agreed they had an input **61%**

- Focus group discussions helped illuminate these differences

What young people said in focus groups

- In contrast to primary children, the classroom was raised as a site of tension when secondary pupils were asked about where they felt responsible at school

- Specific subjects i.e. drama, PE, creative writing and technical subjects were identified as exceptions to this where young people described having a sense of self-determination and learner autonomy

Feeling responsibility at secondary school

Jane: *Is there anything else you can think of [re being more responsible at school]*

Jack: *Maybe techie [technical]*

Paul: *Aye, techie*

Jack: *Techie, yeah*

Paul: *Cos you're allowed, like - they tell you what to do and you just have your independence to get on with it yourself. You make sure you do it and then go away and do it and ask them [teachers] what to do next and that's you.* **You're not getting ordered around everywhere**

Buddying and children at primary school

- Buddying and mentoring schemes widely implemented across Scottish schools and elsewhere in UK

- In FGs older children raised being a "buddy" to the youngest pupils as a significant way that they engaged as a responsible person

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

Being a senior and buddying (cont.)

- Older pupils at primary school said they derived great satisfaction and confidence from being a "buddy" to younger children

- They enjoyed having a special bond with a younger pupil

- They liked the fact that younger children: *"listen to what you say and look up to you"*

- They also indicated they took on a socialising role:

    "You make sure they are doing the right thing"

Final comments on the relational aspects of participation

- Manion's (2007, 2015) work shows the significance of relationships for facilitating participation at school

- Our research shows how relationships with juniors were vital for children's sense of responsibility at school whereas young people at secondary school seemed to derive a sense of responsibility and independence from freedom of movement and association with a wider network of peers

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

To sum up

Particularly strong evidence for different attitudes towards school and opportunities for participation at primary school, as compared with secondary school. This substantive finding prompts important questions:

1) How can we explain the disparities between sectors?

2) What are the implications of reported differences i.e. in terms *of our theoretical understanding of childhood*, children's *rights to participation* at school, as well as *educational policy*. Are children citizens now or citizens of the future?

References

Deuchar, R. 2009. Seen and heard, and then not heard: Scottish pupils' experience of democratic educational practice during the transition from primary to secondary school. *Oxford Review of Education,* 35**,** 23-40.

Graham, C. & Hill, M. (2003) *Negotiating the transition to secondary school*, Scottish Council for Research in Education.

Manion, G. (2007). Going Spatial going relational why listening to children and children's participation needs reframing. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 28*(3): 405–420.

Mannion, G., Sowerby, M., & l'Anson, J. (2015). *How young people's participation in school supports achievement and attainment*. Edinburgh: Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP) [online]. Retrieved from http://www.sccyp.org.uk/ufiles/achievement-and-attainment.pdf.

Ross, H. & Brown, J. (2013) ***Teachers' Perceptions of pupil active citizenship and the transition from primary to secondary school*** A Gordon Cook Foundation Commissioned Research Project http://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/12564933/RossBrown2013_GCFProjectReport_AsDelivered.pdf

Topping, K. J., Thurston, A., Tolmie, A., Christie, D., Murray, P., & Karagiannidou, E. (2007). *Group work: transition into secondary*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Weller, S. (2007) 'Sticking with your Mates?' Children's Friendship Trajectories during the Transition from Primary to Secondary School ***Children & Society*** Vol. 21: 339-351.