The Primary-secondary transition: the significance of children's sense of space and place in their accounts of transition

"Children in Space, Place and Time"

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Introduction

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

- **Focus today**: what children at primary school said about moving up to secondary school, as well as young people's experiences of primary and secondary school

- Mainly looks at question of **space**

Overview of research design

- Mixed method study: self-report questionnaires (n = **740** children) and focus group (n=**130** 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 (4 localities in Scotland)

- **Questionnaires:** we asked about school ethos/teacher/child relations, opportunities for decision-making at school, activities **thoughts about transition**

- **Focus groups:** asked about when/where children felt more responsible at school and **thoughts about transition**

Open-ended questions (questionnaire)

- **To primary pupils (aged 11-13 years):**

What do you think will be the main differences between primary and secondary school? How do you feel about it?

- **To secondary pupils (aged 13-14 years):**

What are the main differences between secondary school and primary school? How do you feel about being at secondary school?

- **Responses analysed with SSPS**

Literature on primary-secondary transition

- The 'primary-secondary transition' critical point in childhood and widely understood concept in educational research (Topping, 2011; Mackenzie *et al*., 2012).

- Well-established literature on topic

- Early research which considered children and young people's criticised for stressing negative aspects (Weller 2007; Lucey & Reay 2011)

- This includes bullying, friendships, harder work and stricter discipline

Some examples

Bullying

I think we are a bit vulnerable as we are the youngest. We are also the easiest to pick on. This is a bit nerve racking (Boy, primary, rural)

Friendships

In secondary you get a different teacher each period. You get split up from your friends because you're not in the same classes and you drift from them. (Girl, secondary, non urban)

Harder work

Secondary is harder than primary and a lot more is expected of you. It also has a lot more opportunities for learning and activities. (Boy, secondary, non urban)

Literature on children's experiences and views cont.

- '**Getting lost**' at much larger secondary school identified as a common concern in previous studies e.g. **70%** of children in Graham & Hill's survey (2003)

- Associated with **'scary'** and negative feelings, as were fears about finding way around more generally

- Little explicit attention paid to impact of space on children and young people in their adjustment to new environment

- Gap surprising given the contribution of children's geographies to understanding children's lived experiences at school/home/in community

Findings

- In our questionnaire sample (n=740), **50%** children highlighted space-related issues in their open-ended responses. This was the most frequently cited category

- Examples: size of secondary school, moving between classrooms/teachers, allowed to go out of school

- This compared with **33%** of children who raised peer relations and making friends while **25%** identified the new curriculum; **24%** highlighted teacher relations while **22%** mentioned concerns about academic pressure

'Secondary is bigger!'

- As one would expect significantly larger building/site at secondary school was mentioned frequently

- Pupils notion of a '*bigger*' and a '*much larger*' school was linked to a range of spaces

- **Inside/indoor spaces** (classrooms, walls and doors, food areas) **transitional spaces** (corridors, stairs), **outside** and **off-site locations** i.e. namely local food outlets /takeaways

- Extensive space often linked with **opportunities**

Classrooms

Adjusting to the transient nature of learning spaces was an issue cited by children in both positive and negative ways:

For the following boy being mobile and regularly changing classrooms was said to enhance his self esteem:

Moving from class to class, different seats in different classes ....I feel more grown up.

(Boy, secondary, non urban)

Another boy anticipated problems with finding the right classroom at secondary:

It will be hard cos there will be a lot more space and hard to get to classes. *(Boy, primary, urban)*

Negotiating space

- More opportunities to move around and explore was highly valued by children

- This is understandable given institutional differences: closer scrutiny of children at primary, confinement to a single classroom and so on. As one girl put it: *I definitely prefer secondary, as we had a lot less **freedom** at primary (Girl, secondary, non urban)*

- The following shows how more space is linked with possibilities:

Everything is bigger. ….More walking around than sitting in one classroom. You get more opportunities…. Secondary school is full of fun. *(Girl, secondary, urban)*

Trust, independance and space

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

*Some of the main differences between primary and secondary are: you feel more free from teachers because it changes every period…..You're more independent so you don't have to wait on your teachers' convenience….... I feel relieved that I am in secondary because **I have more room to expand** and many of the classes are interesting. (Girl, secondary, non urban)*

Summary points

- Maturity and independence clearly connected to negotiating a more extensive school site providing new opportunities at secondary school

- Findings need to be situated in an understanding of modern childhood which imposes limits on children's mobility and freedom to explore

- Secondary schools provided vital opportunities for self determination and autonomy unlikely to be experienced elsewhere (in public spaces) and at primary school . As one boy put it: *I prefer secondary school for its freedom*

Final comments

- Children's negotiation of space a neglected aspect of children's experience of transition and a fruitful area for investigation

- It also contributes to a more textured and multifaceted understanding of this key school transition, including the neglected positive dimensions

- Finally, we believe that exploring how children think about and negotiate space on their transition adds to the growing evidence of how children can find niches and places to express themselves - a main concern of children's geographies

References

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