



# Changing childhood and the primary-secondary transition: the significance of children's everyday freedoms, self-governance and autonomy

BERA ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2018

11th-13th September

Northumbria University

Newcastle

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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 and young people's accounts of primary and secondary school
- Explore sense of **freedom** and **autonomy** children express upon transition and implications for understanding contemporary childhood

# 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 teacher/child relations, where power resides in school, 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 SPSS***

# Literature on primary-secondary transition



- The 'primary-secondary transition' widely understood concept in educational research (Topping, 2011; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2012)
- Well-established literature on topic
- Early research which includes children and young people's views criticised for stressing less negative aspects at expense of positive experiences (Weller 2007; Lucey & Reay 2011)
- E.G. bullying, concerns about friendships, harder work, 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)*

*Bullying happens more often at secondary. Students are better behaved in primary. (Boy, secondary, urban)*

## 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)*

# Examples cont.



The complexity of children's feelings captured by concept of '**anxious readiness**' used in Lucey & Reay's work (2011). We found similar assessments made by children:

*I feel **nervous**, but **excited**. (Boy, primary, urban)*

*I feel **really nervous** about the new people but **very excited** about the new classes. (Girl, primary, non-urban)*

*Bigger school=**anxious**. More classes/activities=**excited**.  
(Girl, primary, urban)*

# Findings



- In our questionnaire sample (**n=740**), **50%** children identified school size/issues related to space as a key issue. Invariably, this was linked with a new found sense of freedom. Most frequently cited category
- Examples: going out of school premises, moving between classrooms/teachers, negotiating corridors
- This compared with **33%** of children who raised peer relations and making friends as a concern; **25%** identified the new curriculum; **24%** highlighted teacher relations while **22%** mentioned concerns about academic pressure



# *“Its much bigger and there’s more freedom!”*



*Everything is bigger. You get more **independent** and join more school clubs. More walking around than sitting in one classroom. **More freedom.** More opportunities. Secondary school is full of fun. (Boy, secondary, non urban)*

Exercising choice and being able to venture out of school premises was highlighted by the following girl:

*You get **more opportunities** to go up the town and your lunch because you can be trusted but at primary you can't. (Girl, secondary, non urban)*



# Moving around

Changing, and moving between learning spaces was an important issue raised by many children.

For the following boy regularly changing classrooms enhanced his self esteem and self-confidence:

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

*(Boy, secondary, non urban)*

*A girl explains her position:*

***I feel like I have more space in high school than primary and you get to go out for lunch. You don't need to sit in the same class for the whole day. (Girl, secondary, urban)***



# Independence

The keen sense of freedom reported is understandable given distinct institutional differences between primary/secondary: closer scrutiny at primary, confinement to a single classroom etc. 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 this new found autonomy was linked with possibilities:

***It's a lot bigger and there's a lot more people and you don't stay in a class for long. You get more opportunities. (Girl, secondary, urban)***

# Trust and self-determination



*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

- Independence and responsibility for self connected to negotiating a more extensive school site providing new, often exciting opportunities at secondary school
- Findings need to be situated in an understanding of modern childhood which imposes limits on children's mobility and freedoms
- Secondary schools afford vital opportunities for self determination and autonomy less likely to be experienced elsewhere (i.e. in public spaces) and at primary school. As one boy succinctly put it: ***I prefer secondary school for its freedom.***

# Final comments



- Children's positive sense of freedom and expanded horizons at secondary a relatively neglected aspect of children's experience of the primary-secondary transition
- This focus contributes to a more textured and multifaceted understanding of its confidence enhancing potential
- Finally, we believe that exploring how children enjoy greater independence and mobility on transition adds to the evidence of how children find niches and places to express themselves. It is plausible that secondary schools are assuming more significance as places of freedom given the conditions of modern childhood.



# References

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