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moving up

THE EXPERIENCES OF
FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN
POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION



Information for schools, teachers and parents

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POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION

Every year, more than 50,000 young people in Ireland move from primary to post-primary education. What helps them to settle into their new school? What enables them to do well? To find answers to these questions, researchers from the Economic and Social Research Institute began a study of over 900 students in their first three years of post-primary school. The story of their first year is now complete.

This booklet summarises the main findings of the research and suggests ways in which schools and teachers can support students during this important time in their education. It also provides useful information for parents whose children have just begun, or are about to begin, post-primary school.



MAIN FINDINGS

Settling into post-primary school

The study showed that students have both positive and negative feelings about moving into post-primary school. Most tend to feel excited, but nervous.

- The main changes experienced by students include: having more teachers and subjects, being one of the youngest students in the school, having different interactions with teachers, being in a 'big' school and having a longer day.
- In general, students settle quickly into post-primary school. Most feel they have settled in by the end of the first week, but for a quarter of students it takes about a month. One student in six takes longer than a month to settle in.
- Even though they settle in fairly quickly, many students continue to miss their primary school, especially their friends and social activities such as school trips.

Who experiences difficulties?

- Girls take longer to settle in than boys.
- Students who are less self-confident and have a more negative view of themselves experience more difficulties.
- Students from ethnic minorities, including Travellers take longer to settle in than other students.

What happens before students enter post-primary school?

- In many cases, sixth class students meet the principal or other staff from the post-primary school during their visits to the primary school. Most students attend an open day before they begin in their new school.
- Having contact with the post-primary school and having a good idea what to expect helps to reduce students' anxiety about moving to a new school.

- Few post-primary schools receive information on all students moving up from primary school. Information that is received is more likely to be verbal than written and generally concerns students' academic performance, behaviour and special educational needs.
- When the information is received, many post-primary schools have no formal arrangement for passing the information on to those who may need it.
- The vast majority of post-primary schools use tests, either before or after entry, to identify students who need learning support, to track progress during first year or to assign students to classes.

What happens after students start post-primary school?

- Almost all schools have an induction day for students at the start of the school year. In most schools, class tutors play a key role in helping first years to settle into school life.
- In around half of all schools, there is a student mentor system, with older students acting as 'buddy' for first years.

They (the students) know that they can approach them (the student mentors) if they have any problems and we feel that sometimes they might approach them more easily than they would approach a teacher if there were any questions of bullying or anything like that (school principal).

- A positive climate within the school, particularly positive teacher-student interaction, ensures that measures put in place to ease transition actually work.
- Many first year students reported having been bullied by other students. Students from ethnic minorities (including Travellers) were more likely than other students to report being bullied.
- Having friends from primary school, being involved in extra curricular activities, and having an older brother or sister in the school were seen by students as helping them settle into post-primary school. Nearly two-thirds of students saw school personnel, such as the class tutor, student mentors or subject teachers, as playing a key role in their transition.



Moving from primary to post-primary school: a different curriculum?

Moving to post-primary school means taking many new subjects and engaging in familiar subjects in new ways. For most students, this is a stimulating and challenging experience. However, the study showed that there can be a considerable 'mismatch' between the primary and post-primary curricula, and this mismatch can cause difficulties for students.

- Students are generally positive about the new subjects they take in post-primary school, especially those with more practical elements, such as Materials Technology (Wood), Physical Education, Art, Science and Home Economics. They also enjoy classes in computer studies organised by the school.

- Students find some subjects difficult and a significant number feel that there is a ‘mismatch’ between primary and post-primary schools when it comes to Irish, English and mathematics. Students who feel there is a mismatch tend to take longer to settle into the post-primary school.
- While many students reported that primary school prepared them well for post-primary school, a significant minority felt that the curriculum at primary level had not provided them with a good foundation for their post-primary studies.
- Only half of post-primary teachers feel they are familiar with the primary school curriculum and almost a third of students say that many subjects in first year just repeat what they have already learned in primary school.

Subject choice in first year

- Many schools give students the opportunity to try out different subjects before selecting the ones they will take for the Junior Certificate Examination. Over half of schools delay subject selection until the end of first year; others allow students to take shorter 'taster' programmes before making their subject choices.
- This approach is seen as positive by most school principals and by students as it allows students to make more informed decisions.
“When I came here I was thinking I would do French but I don't really like French now. I think I prefer German so it's good to see which one you prefer and decide after that.” (student)
- In a fifth of schools, students choose their subjects before or immediately on entry to the school, while students are allowed no choice of subjects in a minority of schools.
- Trying out subjects in first year does not have any negative effect on students' progress in reading and mathematics or on how well they settle in.

Ability grouping

- Streaming (grouping students into classes on the basis of their ability) is now practised in only a minority of post-primary schools and is less common than in the 1990s.
- Where streaming does occur, it tends to result in the labelling of students as ‘smart’ or ‘stupid’.

“They are clever and we are dumb”. (student in a streamed school)

- Many students in streamed groups say that their teachers move too quickly or too slowly when covering subject material in class.
- Students in the higher stream classes take longer to settle in to post-primary school. Many experience difficulty in handling the increased pace of learning and volume of work alongside all the other transition challenges.
- Students in streamed schools, especially those in the lower streams, make less progress in reading and mathematics during first year.
- More schools now ensure that each first year class group is made up of students with a wide range of abilities. This mixed-ability approach has been adopted by schools knowing that students can develop over the course of the year and in the belief that mixed-ability grouping can help students to become more confident as learners.

Teaching, learning and attitudes to school

- Some post-primary teachers report that they take a different approach to teaching first-year students than with students in other years of junior cycle. Generally, however, teachers tend to rely on traditional teaching methods.
- As part of the study, the researchers followed the students' progress in reading and mathematics in first year. For the majority of students, test scores in reading and mathematics do not improve over the course of first year. Similar results have been found in other countries.

- First year students make more progress in reading and mathematics in schools where there is a strong emphasis on helping them to settle in.
- At the beginning of first year, students are generally positive about school and their teachers. By the end of the year, however, they are somewhat less likely to find school interesting; they have a less positive attitude to school and to teachers. They are also less positive about their own academic abilities. Again, research in other countries has reached similar conclusions.

Learning support

- One in ten students surveyed received learning support in first year, most frequently in small groups or on a one-to-one basis.
- Almost two thirds of students said that this helped them a lot. However, a third of those who did not receive such help would have liked extra support with their lessons.

Views of parents

Transition from primary to post-primary education is a significant event for parents as well as for their children. Parents want their children to make new friends, to be free from bullying, and to adjust successfully to the level and variety of schoolwork at post-primary level.

- Parents emphasised the importance of a positive relationship and co-operation between their child's primary and post-primary school.
- Parents reported that contact with the new school before the start of first year was important for reducing anxiety in their children.
- A factor contributing to nervousness, according to the parents, was not knowing what to expect in the new school and not knowing anybody in the school.

“It's like starting in a job for the first time, you are nervous. You don't know what way you are going to react or how other people are going to react around you”. (parent)

- On the other hand, knowing somebody in the school beforehand or having an older brother or sister already there was seen to have a positive impact on children's adjustment.
- Open days and open nights for parents were popular. According to parents, the topics discussed at such meetings included school discipline, rules on school uniforms, sports facilities and other activities in the school, along with information on the subjects taken by students.
- Some parents did not feel very well informed as to what support is available for their child in the post-primary school.
- A combination of induction programmes for first year students along with a class tutor system was seen as a useful approach.
- The majority of parents felt that it was 'natural' for post-primary school to be academically more challenging for their children. Some, however, perceived a mismatch in standards between primary and post-primary level in some subjects.
- A number of parents mentioned bullying as a concern during the transition process. The concern was heightened if the child had already been bullied in primary school. However, many of the parents seemed to see 'teasing' and 'messing' as a normal part of the transition process rather than serious problems.
- Students who are being bullied are most likely to go to their family about the problem. Within school, the year head, class tutors and student mentors are seen as the main sources of help. However, students who are being bullied are often reluctant to involve anyone for fear of the problem getting worse.



WHAT CAN SCHOOLS LEARN FROM THIS STUDY?

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the factors that help or hinder students in moving up to and doing well at post-primary school. These insights suggest a number of issues for consideration by schools when planning the curriculum and support structures for first year students.

- Pre-entry contact between the post-primary school, incoming students and their parents or guardians is important, as it helps reduce students' anxiety and smoothes the transition process.
- Good information flow between the 'feeder' primary school and the post-primary school is essential, particularly in relation to students' achievement, learning strengths and material covered at primary level.

- From the perspective of the post-primary school, it is important that subject teachers understand the teaching and learning approaches that characterise students' experiences in primary school.
- When post-primary teachers are familiar with the Primary School Curriculum they can help students to make connections with and build on the learning that has taken place in primary school.
- Open days, parent evenings, induction events, and the provision of class tutors and student mentors can make a positive contribution to successful transition.
- Having a positive school climate that encourages good relationships among students and between students and teachers helps students to settle into and do well at school.
- Mixed-ability grouping in first year is a better alternative to streaming as it leads to improved progress in literacy and numeracy and can give students more confidence as learners.
- It is important for schools to have a clear and effective anti-bullying policy in place. In this regard, guidance counsellors, student mentors and programmes such as Social, Personal and Health Education have a particular role to play.
- Making a variety of subjects available to all students, including subjects with a practical emphasis, can encourage and sustain first year students' interest in and engagement with school.
- By offering students a range of 'taster' subjects as part of first year, schools can help students to make a more informed choice of subjects.
- Careful monitoring of student progress in first year can help to identify those who need extra support.
- Support from home is important when students are moving from one school setting to another. It is important to provide parents and guardians with accessible information on all aspects of first year.

WHAT CAN PARENTS LEARN FROM THIS STUDY?

Most parents will be well aware of their children's fears and anxieties as they move up to post-primary school and the challenges they face in adjusting to the longer day, to a greater number of subjects and to an increased amount of homework. Parental support and involvement is particularly important at this time.

- By encouraging contact with the school before the official start of the school year, such as through an open day, parents can help reduce their children's anxiety about moving up to 'big school'.
- Encouraging students to participate in extra-curricular activities can help them to build new friendships and prevent them becoming isolated.
- Parents have an important role to play in helping their children choose subjects in first year. Many schools provide booklets or leaflets to assist students and parents in making informed choices. If information is not readily available they should seek advice from the school.
- Bullying is a continuing cause of concern for parents and for schools. Parents are encouraged to inform the class tutor or other school personnel if they suspect that their child is being bullied.

What will happen next?

There is still much more to learn about this stage in a young person's education. The ESRI is currently recording the experiences of the students as they go through their second year of post-primary school. This phase of the work will provide more information about how best to plan for and organise the junior cycle in schools for the benefit of all students.

Moving Up, by Emer Smyth, Selina McCoy and Merike Darmody, is published by Liffey Press in association with the Economic and Social Research Institute and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Copies of the book are available from bookshops or directly from the publisher. A summary, in English and Irish, of the main findings, can be downloaded from the NCCA website: www.ncca.ie

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