The Experiences of Pupils with SEN and their Parents at the stage of Pre-Transition from Primary to Post-Primary School

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Abstract

The experiences of pupils with Special Education Needs (SEN) and their parents at pre-transition from primary to post-primary school have received little attention in the literature. The current study investigated these experiences using a mixed methods approach within the Irish educational system. Thirty two pupils with Special Education Needs (SEN) and 42 parents of pupils with SEN participated in focus groups, and also completed a questionnaire which qualitatively complemented the parental focus groups. Emergent themes for pupils included: things I will miss; fitting in and performing as well as others; laying the groundwork: getting to know new people; and experiencing and talking about 'going to the new school'. Emergent themes for parents included: losing ground?; information is critical: "I'm not asking for the moon, but a bit more information"; I'd like help but I don't want to make trouble for my child; and challenge and support. Critical issues emerging from the data concerning pre-transition experiences for both pupils and parents are discussed.

Introduction

The transition from primary to post-primary school is a distinct turning point in every educational career. This transition involves changes in pupil-teacher relationships, peer relationships and learning demands, inter alia. Hence, the implications are much more than academic (Sirsch, 2003). This research is particularly concerned with the experiences of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Pre-Transition Emotions

Most pupils experience pre-transition anxiety e.g.[Galton and Hargreaves, 2002; Measor & Woods, 1984], particularly around the formal academic and school environment and the informal peer system (Anderson et al., 2000; Fouracre, 1993; West et al., 2008). School worries typically involve: level of schoolwork and homework difficulty, and amount of work (Cheng and Ziegler, 1986); navigating a large school (Zeedyk et al., 2003); level of teacher support (Delamont & Galton 1986); discipline (Galton, 2010); and timetable organisation (West et al.). Peer worries typically involve: possible aggression and bullying by older pupils (Zeedyk et al.); changes in existing friendships; and new friends (Delamont and Galton). These concerns, however, do not fully reflect the mixed bag of emotions which the evidence suggests, in that pupils experience both anticipation and worry about the same issues (Naughton, 2000).

Pupils with Special Educational Needs

Only a handful of studies have investigated the transition experiences of pupils with SEN [e.g. Forgan and Vaughn, 2000; Maunsell, Barrett and Candon. 2007]. This heterogeneous group show susceptibility to low academic attainment, low self-esteem, problem behaviour and social deficits (Maras and Aveling, 2006), risk factors associated with increased

transition stress and anxiety (West et al., 2008). Furthermore, certain systemic factors affect the experiences of pupils with SEN during transition in unique ways, including legislative and policy imperatives relating to assessment, identification, resource allocation and effective service provision.

Themes recorded across existing international and national studies on the transition experiences of pupils with SEN bear strong similarity with pupils in general in terms of concerns about the formal school environment and the new social context (Forgan and Vaughn, 2000; Lovitt et al., 2009; Maras and Aveling, 2006). However, evidence also reveals a number of factors unique to this group, including continuity of resources, accessing support (Maras and Aveling, 2006); Individual Education Plans (IEP's) (Rose and Shevlin, 2010); curricular continuity (McCauley, 2009); bullying (Evangelou et al., 2008); and peer rejection (Tur-Kaspa, 2002).

Parental Transition Experiences

Transition affects not only pupils and teachers, but also parents (Bastiani, 1986). Two studies of parental transition experiences recorded a range of concerns: pupil relationships with teachers and peers; organisation of time; school size; school system; pupil and teacher diversity; school support structures; curricular discontinuity; academic difficulties; and continuity of resources (O'Brien, 2004; Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004).

Current Study

Taken together, the experiences of pupils with SEN and their parents at pre-transition from primary to post-primary school are investigated in the current study.

Method

Mixed methods (i.e. focus groups and questionnaires) were used to investigate the pre-transition experiences of pupils and their parents.

Samples

Schools

A sample of 50 schools was generated by a database provided by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and other contacts known to the Research Team. These were stratified according to geographical region (North West, West, East and South of Ireland) and rural versus urbanised. All 50 schools were contacted to take part in the research, of which 30 schools agreed (22 mainstream and eight special).

Pupils

All sixth class pupils with identified educational and psychological needs (but excluding severe cognitive and/or social deficits, and those not deemed appropriate by the school teacher to participate in the research) were eligible. These pupils' parents were subsequently contacted to give informed consent. A sample of 41 pupils with SEN was generated, 21 were male and 20 female. The distribution of the pupils' SEN characteristics was as follows: Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD; N=6); Moderate Learning Disability (MoGLD; N=2); Emotional and Behavioural Disability (EBD; N=1); Hearing Impairment (N=2); Multiple Disabilities (N=17); Assessed Syndrome (N=7); Physical Disability (N=1); and Specific Learning Disability (SLD; N=5). Nine pupils' data were excluded because they did not complete all stages of the study, generating a final sample of 32 pupils, 17 male and 15 female. The mean age was 12 years, 2 months.

Parents

Forty-two parents with SEN participated, 32 were parents of the 32 pupils, and nine were parents of SEN pupils which were excluded from the final sample. In all cases, the parent directly involved was a mother (only two fathers of two of the sample pupils also attended the focus groups).

Materials

The materials used comprised of: questions to guide pupil focus groups; questions to guide parental focus groups; and a parental questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to complement the qualitative data from the parents' focus groups and examined: current school resources (including IEPs); choice of post-primary school; parental involvement in transition planning; transfer of information; and nature of parental experience.

Setting

Pupils

The 32 pupils each attended one of seven focus groups, each of which contained 3-8 children. Allocation to focus groups was governed by logistics. All discussions took place in quiet rooms of seven of the schools involved. Only the researcher, the researcher's assistant and the pupils were generally present. Where focus groups were conducted in a special school, an SNA was also present.

Parents

Of the 42 parents, only 28 agreed to attend one of six focus groups, each of which contained 3-6 parents. Three mothers opted instead for individual interviews. Parental focus groups and interviews were conducted in the same schools as the pupil focus groups. *All* 42 parents

completed the questionnaires distributed by post and the majority were returned during focus groups or by post.

Procedure

Following initial expressions of interest (via relevant school contacts), parents were contacted directly by the researcher, who then met parents and pupils to discuss participation. Participation occurred between March and June of 2009 in the final four months of sixth class.

Focus groups

All focus groups ranged in duration between 40 and 60 minutes, depending on level of pupil/parent input and number of breaks requested. The focus groups followed a semi-structured interview format. The themes guiding pupil focus groups were: 1. Pupils' expectations of transition. 2. Information about the new school. 3. Worries/anxieties. The themes guiding parental focus groups and interviews were: 1. Levels of primary support and how much parents expect these to transfer. 2. Parents' involvement in, and satisfaction with, transition planning. 3. Parental worries and stresses about transition. *s*

Data collection

Three pupil focus groups and the three parental interviews were audio taped (consent was not provided by *all* participants or parents). This data was transcribed verbatim and the audio material subsequently erased. The remaining four focus groups were attended by a research assistant who took a verbatim 'short-hand' record of verbal exchanges. These notes were subsequently transcribed longhand. All notes were edited to replace names and

personal identifiers with participant codes. Associated details and the original verbatim transcripts were then destroyed. Anonymised transcripts were subsequently analysed.

Data analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS 17.0 and qualitative data was analysed using the following methods. Open coding, theoretical memo writing and constant comparison were applied to the data using a recursive and reflexive style by reading the transcripts numerous times. The analysis began with open coding which involved providing theory-relevant summary descriptions of the transcripts. As the analyses progressed, abstract themes were developed to capture more functional relationships among the concrete categories identified during open coding. These abstract themes were written as theoretical memos and the method of constant comparison was used to filter out redundancies or any incoherence among earlier open codings and theoretical memos. At the point at which no new theoretical memos emerged, convergent theoretical memos were grouped into higher level thematic codings and these were accompanied by quotations that characterised each memo. Through constant comparison, themes that were once individually refined and distinct began to emerge into coherent themes. Emergent themes were repeatedly honed against the data to ensure that they were fully and accurately grounded in participants' accounts.

Feedback

Feedback of results on a non-clinical basis was offered to parents of participating pupils, but no parents opted for this.

Results

Pupils

Four interrelated themes emerged from data analyses: (1) Things I will miss; (2) Fitting in and performing as well as others; (3) Laying the groundwork: Getting to know new people; and (4) Experiencing and talking about 'going to the new school'.

Things I will miss

Much pupil concern centred around the potential loss of familiarity and security from primary school, especially the understanding, trust and care of teachers and SNAs. However, while many pupils were anxious about getting to know post-primary teachers, some did anticipate positive relationships.

> P5 (Pupil with Asperger's Syndrome): Well Mrs X [resource teacher] really looks after me. If I'm having a bad day, you know, she helps me and helps me not to be so anxious and I can go to her room and that makes me feel ok…….. I will miss Mrs X because she understands me. But I will be alright once I find my new Mrs X when I go over there [post-primary school].

Similarly, pupils had concerns about losing the stability of existing friendships, the prestige of being the eldest and related loss of stature.

> P5: I might make new friends, 'though I really like my friends here and I think that I will miss them if we are not together, 'cos, like, everybody minds you and looks out for you.

> P12 (Pupil with Dyslexia): Sometimes we get to mind them [the younger classes] and we won't get to do anything like that because we will be the youngest and we might have older fellas minding us.

As a result of the loss in social standing, post-primary school was perceived by some as potentially hazardous.

> P13 (Pupil with Dyspraxia): I suppose you just have to get used to it and then it will be ok but, the only thing is, like, we will be the youngest and we might get bullied and that, and I heard that some boys got their heads put down the toilet and then they flush it, and on your first day you get beaten up, especially the boys. I don't think it happens to the girls.

> P10 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): Yeah, I heard that about our school too. You'll just have to learn to run fast

Pupils recognised the end of primary school traditions, such as not getting homework on Fridays, 'belonging to a teacher' and staying in the same classroom. Reluctance emerged even after visiting the new school.

> P5: It was a bit strange 'cos, like, the teachers just came in and started the class and gave you homework at the end and we had to write it down and they only gave us a few minutes 'cos in the community school they only do that, like, give you a few minutes and then you had to pack up really quick and go to the next class.

On balance, some pupils believed this change would be positive.

> P6 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): I'm looking forward to changing classrooms 'cos I get really bored and that's how I get into trouble.

It is evident from this theme that self-organisation and self-reliance were significant issues. Specifically, pupils reported concerns about the expectations of the new school system, including operating under new rules and traditions while fitting in and staying out of trouble.

Fitting in and performing as well as others

Overall, pupil concerns about transition were predominantly social, especially fitting in and performing as well as others.

> P32 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): … getting bullied and people not being nice to me. I wouldn't like that.

Observed signs of social anxiety also surrounded the new social space.

> P5: I think it's going to be really scary and noisy especially at the lockers 'cos it can get really busy. My brother told me, he is there already and there's loads of pushing and shoving and you have to really mind where your locker is going to be and some of the boys are really big.

Indeed, pupils had significant anxiety that putative social standing would be lost if they failed to follow either social or organisational rules. For example, many pupils referenced fears about inadvertently interrupting a class. More broadly, concerns about forgetting or breaking rules and coming into conflict with teachers was evident from pupil accounts.

> P7 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): You will have loads of teachers and they might all have different rules and if you don't do what you are supposed to do you will be sent to the principal.

> P5: I will be afraid that I'm going to be late and the teachers will give out to me. So I will have to be up really early so I can make sure I am on my time. But my mam sometimes doesn't hurry up and I'm saying 'come on mam hurry up we are going to be late'. But it's

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> ok here because they know me, but they won't know me over there and they won't know that I really try hard not to be late.

For many pupils, 'getting in trouble' for inadvertent rule breaking implied that teachers did not recognise their individuality and would readily label them as 'bad'. The following exchange illustrates this perceived dynamic, especially among pupils who reported experiences of teacher disapproval at primary school.

> P27 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): I won't miss anything here [in primary school]. Ah well, I might miss the little ones, like and that, but I can't wait to get out of here 'cos my teacher and the principal they hate me. So I won't miss them.

> P25 (Pupil with Dyslexia): They don't hate you [pupil's name], you just are always talking and getting into trouble.

Concerns about being able to keep up with the school curriculum were also intertwined with fears of teacher disapproval and rejection.

> P39 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): It's great doing subjects, but what about all the books and the homework? My friend says there is loads to do and its hard and the teachers get cross with ya if ya don't do it right.

> P34 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): I think people will be nice but I just think that there will be lots of work and I won't be able to do it and it's not that I don't want to do it I just find it hard.

Specifically, doing homework 'on your own' was a significant concern for many.

> P22 (Pupil with ADHD): …and I hate doing homework ... I get into trouble for not doing it ... there is going to be more isn't there in the X school.

Paradoxically, pupils expressed reticence to explicitly seek help in fear of appearing different to peers.

> P6: . . maths is really hard over there and you have loads of exams and all that [pause] and if I don't take my tablet, like sometimes I forget and that, I will get myself into trouble, but I won't tell them [teacher] that I didn't take it because I just want to be the same as everybody else and I don't want to be treated any differently, that why I want to do those things.

Laying the groundwork: Getting to know new people

While the importance of a sense of belonging was evident from preceding themes, pupils

recognised the importance of establishing relationships with both teachers and peers as a

way forward in this regard.

> P34: I think it would be good if we met some of the teachers before we start and they
> might get to know our names and they would know who we are when we start.

Unfortunately however, the range of transition activities reported varied

considerably, and pupils with multiple disabilities generally reported most activity. For

instance, some had visited the new school more than three times, while others had attended

only once. For the former, new academic challenges and social rules appeared less

intimidating because a sense of trust had been fostered.

> P26 (Pupil with EBD): The girls that were there on the day of the exam, they were nice,
> they told us not to be so worried.

Some pupils believed that meeting peers prior to transition would ease friendship

anxieties.

> P34: It would be good to know a few more people before we go, so if we met them
> beforehand that would help, because when you started you would get to know them more.

There was a strong contrast between the security of belonging to a social network and

the risks of not.

> P38 (Pupil with ADHD): The older lads, some of them are huge and they might beat you
> up.

> P22 (Pupil with ADHD): Nobody is going to touch me... I have loads of friends in that
> school.

Experiencing and Talking about 'Going to the New School'

Although pupils welcomed visits to the new school, a strong desire for more information remained.

> P31 (Pupil with Hearing Impairment): That was good when we went to the school, but there was loads of us and you couldn't ask any questions. So it would be good if you could ask some questions, like our parents did.

And, lack of knowledge instilled fear in many pupils.

> P28 (Pupil with Dyslexia): I can't really imagine what it's going to be like 'cos our parents were with us [when visiting the school] and, like, they're not going to be there when we are going to the school.

This fear was enhanced for pupils who had not yet received confirmation about resources, including SNAs.

> P6: I don't know I think they are trying to get me a laptop but I don't know yet but I won't have to do Irish so then maybe I could do something when everybody else is doing Irish but I don't know and anyway I don't think they give you help over there like they do here.

> P25: I don't know if I will get any help cause like I think for me like that there's none and I'm really nervous and worried about that cause I might fail my exams cause I found the entrance exam hard and I didn't get to finish the English and the maths was really really hard but everybody said it was hard

> P5: I'd like to know who is going to help me and where I will be able to go when I get upset and that or if I am worried about something. Like who am I going to talk to and who is going to help me?

On balance, pupils also had mixed feelings about SNAs at post-primary school. That is, some believed they could not cope without one, while others perceived SNAs as incompatible with fitting in. Some pupils were broadly uncertain about the availability of resources.

> P22: My ma was over too and we had to go to see the principal as well but I don't know either... I mean its secondary school so maybe you don't get that there.

> Navigating the new physical environment raised logistical concerns for pupils with

physical disabilities, including carrying heavy school bags.

> P2 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): I'm not looking forward to ehm to fi, trying to find to, to the new, to the new way to the bathrooms ... its a longer walk than usual ... if your coming in from break and you have to go in the bathroom you have to go up the stairs up the stairs and up through another stairs **...** an' and go, turn in.

When pupils recalled information about post-primary school they had received from primary teachers and parents, they emphasised: 1. how difficult post-primary school would be; and 2. how they should not let the school down by under-performing or behaving badly.

> P6: The teachers keep telling you and going on about it and, like, about not letting the school down and behave yourself.

> P16 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): Even me ma is telling me there will be more work.

A key feature of these concerns was the increased number of subjects.

> P6: …there will be so much to get used to, like the new subjects and if I don't get the subjects that I want I'm not going… I want to do metalwork and woodwork because I want to do things like that and not all that learning stuff that is going to be really hard.

> P7: I do be thinking about my new subjects. Like, what if I don't like them and then I can't change them? 'Cos you have to make a choice now and that's it you have to them forever then.

However, new subjects were also a source of excitement.

> P19 (Pupil with Multiple Disabilities): The woodwork and art looked good. They have rooms just for you to do them in and you get to make things.

In particular, pupils were enthusiastic about subjects which offered the promise of 'making' tangible objects, rather than 'learning' abstract concepts. Their enthusiasm illustrated a sense of choice and ownership over a process that encouraged praise and esteem from others.

Parents

Parental questionnaire

The majority of parents received assistance from primary school staff in making post-primary school applications, especially sixth class teachers (*N*=15), school principals (*N*=9) and resource teachers (*N*=7).

Seven parents (17%) reported no pre-transition contact with staff from the post-primary school regarding their child's SEN, while all remaining parents had contact with one staff member (median). Sixty-one percent of parents had contact with the principal; 37% with a learning support teacher; and less than 1% with a first year head, school guidance counsellor or Special Educational Needs Support Team (SENST). Attending a school open

day was the most common type of contact reported (93%), followed by information meetings (not just for parents of pupils with SEN, 46%). Eighteen parents were unhappy with the level of contact and some explained their dissatisfaction.

> I feel the school was not interested in finding out about my daughter's special needs and that they expect her to "fit in" rather than making any accommodations.

> I would like to have spoken to the RT [resource teacher] for the best plan to put in place for my child.

> I haven't heard about the supports my child will receive.

In rating their *overall experience* of transition planning, 51% rated the experience as either 'Positive' or 'Very Positive'; 32% reported 'Very Negative' or 'Negative' experiences; and the remaining 17% rated the experience as 'Neither Negative nor Positive'. Twenty nine parents (70%) felt *anxious* during transition planning, 15 (37%) reported the experience as *stressful,* and 13 (32%) were *content.*

Parents reported upon aspects of transition planning they found most helpful (*N*=6) and unhelpful (*N*=9). Difficulties in the communication and transfer of information were key concerns. Receiving information about available supports led parents to feel reassured, while the absence of this information was problematic. For example, some aspects deemed most helpful for parents were as follows:

> ….knowing what will be put in place for my child, what supports he will receive, knowing what involvement both schools have in the transition.

> I am assured that there is a lot of support in his new school.

And some aspects deemed most unhelpful were as follows:

> Not knowing that each teacher dealing with my child knows the level of work he is able for and what his weaknesses are. Not having the support network needed or a specific person to talk to in his new school if work is getting too much.

> Lack of assurance that child will have attention he needs.

> Lack of information coming out early (i.e. information going from primary to secondary) and then getting back to me to allow support to be addressed earlier.

Three parents noted the direct benefits of transition activities for their children, especially familiarisation with the new social and physical environment. The aspects deemed most helpful for children were:

> ... getting organised, meeting teachers, getting to know his way around, being introduced to other kids in school, meeting his *Buddy*.

> He went down [to the new school] four times, now my child can understand better where he is going in September.

Focus group and interview data

Four distinct but interrelated themes emerged during data analyses: (1) 'Losing ground?'; (2) 'Information is critical: "I'm not asking for the moon, but a bit more information"'; (3) 'I'd like help but I don't want to make trouble for my child'; and (4) 'Challenge and support'. All parents are referred to using the same identifier number as their own child (i.e. PA10 is the parent of P10).

Losing ground? Parents were nervous and uneasy that transition might represent a retrograde step for their children in terms of social integration and overall happiness, for which they had fought hard at primary school. Indeed, focus groups were frequently briefly suspended as parents became upset in contemplating this possibility. Anxieties and fears specifically stemmed from loss of familiarity, comfort, support, security, understanding and esteem.

> PA35: Oh I am very nervous about it all especially as he [child with Multiple Disabilities] has been so well looked after here. She [SNA] knows what upsets him and how to calm him down. Now he has his bad days and he can get upset sometimes, but they understand him here and so do the other children, it will be different and he will be with other students who will be much older than him.

> PA5: Mrs X [teacher] is very good to her. Actually she is very good to all of us and X [child with Asperger's Syndrome] is used to that and even thinking about getting used to new people and other kids and older kids and that - well it just makes me worry and that. I really do worry. I do.

Paradoxically, some parents ruminated on how these positive experiences left their children ill-equipped for post-primary school.

> PA5: She will always work hard at school and doing well is important for her. So I know that she will do as well as she can. Sure, in some ways they are like lambs to the slaughter. I'm sorry [at this point the parent became upset and needed to take a break].

Although concerns about academic success were evident, social integration was paramount.

> PA43: You know, I'm not that worried about the subjects, but more about the social side of things for X [child with Asperger's Syndrome]. If that clicks for him, then everything else will settle down for him. I mean, if he gets very anxious, then you can forget about anything else because he just will find it very hard to even get himself there...and being bullied as well. I mean, it's hard enough for kids, but for kids like X, well, he just doesn't read situations like other kids and he is very vulnerable to that. So that's more on my mind than anything else.

In particular, parents reported that their children found it difficult to make friends of their own age and may find it difficult to be the youngest pupils.

> PA18: He [child with Multiple Disabilities] is probably a little bit more immature than the others in his class and he doesn't really have any firm friends in the school or anything like that. He, em, plays with the younger kids and it's the same at home. X [child] is so innocent, compared to some of the lads his age. He wouldn't stand a chance against a bully at all. The school that he is going to will have over 1,000 pupils and coming from a primary school, well I just think that's very daunting for anybody.

Parents clearly believed that the new school had a vital role to play in facilitating their children's social integration.

> PA25: The primary school where X [child with Dyslexia] goes has been good for her and she is doing well. She gets her support, and that, but I don't think she will get that in the secondary school and I mean I think she will need it more than ever then.

And, they believed that teachers should 'get to know them' and appreciate differences between pupils with and without SEN.

> PA7: … But what I think might be different for X [child with Multiple Disabilities] is that it will take him longer than the others to settle in because he finds organising himself so hard and it's then that you will see the difference. Like, if you have no problems to start with then, yes of course, it will be hard at first but then you get used to it. But it takes him a good while to learn anything new and to get to grips with new routines and so that's where I see the problems. And then he might get left behind and teachers expecting him to be up to par with everybody else. If they take the time to get to know him, then that's ok, but, sure, do they have the time to do all of that?

At the heart of these concerns was the importance of 'getting off on the right foot' and fear that teachers may misinterpret their child's SEN-related behaviour as trouble-making.

> PA34: "I would just hope that all of the teachers would know about X's [child with Multiple Disabilities] problems and not put too many demands on him and know what he can do, and that, and them not thinking that he is just being lazy.

PA6: So, it's good for them to get off on the right foot from the beginning and you don't want them getting a reputation with different teachers, like.

Information is critical: "I'm not asking for the moon, but a bit more information." Parents

related fears about their children being stigmatised and disadvantaged to a lack of

information being distributed to teachers.

PA27: Ah sure, I had a path worn to the school over my other daughter and she has mental health issues and attends X clinic. But, she gets very depressed and she self-harms as well. Now she's in treatment and I sent all of the information to the school before she started and when she started, then sure, when I went to the parent teacher meeting, none of them know anything. And she had gone downhill. Sure then, I knew why - they hadn't a clue. They were saying she wasn't motivated and gave in no homework and, sure, I knew nothing about this at all. And I made sure that I brought everything up to the school, but it just ends up in a drawer somewhere or in the principal's office.

Similarly, parents reported considerable distress and frustration in receiving little

information or reassurance on resources.

PA7: But, it would be great if we could just have an appointment with somebody to talk about them going over and that….it's the not knowing. Like, if you knew there was a system, then you would say 'ok well they know what they are doing and everybody else has to do that as well so that's alright'. But we don't and that's my point.

Some parents interpreted this lack of information as a 'wait and see' policy in conjunction

with the DES and believed this undermined the schools' competency and commitment to

accommodating their child's SEN.

PA17: … they [the post-primary school] have also said that they would have to wait and see what type of support X [child with MGLD] would need and that this probably wouldn't happen for a few months. So naturally, I'm worried about this…I'm just not sure why they say 'they will have to see what type of support he will need'. Maybe they know what they are doing.

This situation led some parents to feel angry and disenfranchised from transition planning.

PA2: She [the Home School Liaison Officer] said that we would just have to 'wait and see' because the school applies to the Department of Education. But they decide who gets the help, like and that, and so we won't know until September until they start, like. I think its disgraceful leaving people waiting to see if their child is going to get only what they are entitled to like.

In a similar vein, participants strongly criticised the seemingly automatic, unfair and

needless loss of support they had petitioned so hard for at primary school.

> PA39: But, like I said, we have had to fight to get everything for X [child with Multiple Disabilities]. So, now we have to do it again because his services don't automatically go with him to X [post-primary school] - which makes life very difficult. I mean. X's [child's] condition is not going to change. If anything, it's getting worse and the older he gets that is the way it's going to be. So he has to go for all the assessments again and then also to the HSE for medical things, and that. So, we have been busy since last January getting all of that done. The real thing I am worried about is the SNA. We still don't know if he will get one and I think that if he does not get one I will be getting called up to the school to help out with the toilet, and that, and I don't think that is fair at all. I mean X [child] is entitled to his education like everybody else and you don't see other parents having to go up to the school and doing those things and I said that at the meeting. So no, I suppose I'm not happy. I'm a bit stressed and very cross still at the SENO and to be honest you get so tired having to fight all of the time. I mean we shouldn't have to.

Lack of information regarding resources was exacerbated by uncertainty and frustration about responsibilities for transition. Indeed, parents were very eager for post-primary schools to streamline and co-ordinate transition planning through a single contact person who could communicate with all relevant parties.

> PA39: It would make it easier if it could all be done together….. I mean, the HSE and the education people do not talk to each other. So, every time you go to see somebody you have to tell them the whole story over and over and over again. And now we have to do that all again. I don't see why they cannot work together, surely it would make everything easier especially for us, but I don't suppose they think that way? They don't know what it is like, they just have to do their jobs and sometimes they can be very difficult.

I'd like help, but I don't want to make trouble for my child. While parents' expressed broad frustration with the education system as convoluted and bureaucratic, their main concern was always how children with SEN would be accommodated. In fact, some parents concluded that schools perceive these pupils as an unnecessary imposition.

> PA27: … it's only when you have a child with problems that you realise the system is set up for those that don't have problems. So, when teachers see somebody like my X [child] coming in they don't want to have to deal with her.

Again, parents worried that accessing supports for their child's SEN inadvertently stigmatised the children and parents.

> PA28: I know some parents who don't want to tell the school in case their child gets picked on by the teachers.

> PA34: …you don't want to single out your own kid, or yourself even.

> PA6: Well, although I want X [child with ADHD] to have support and that, I don't want him to be labelled by the new school as a troublemaker or that because he

> actually isn't. But when people see ADHD they just think 'Here comes trouble'. And he's grand once he takes his tablets. Like I would like the school to take that into consideration instead of labelling him before they even get to meet him.

Indeed, parents were conscious not to be overly-involved because they believed that this was not appreciated by schools.

> PA2: I don't think the school really wants to involve the parents…schools don't like you telling them what to do.

Some involvement had led to feelings of insecurity and intimidation.

> PA3: I'd like to go, but I dunno. I'm not very good in things like dat, especially in schools. Sure, I wouldn't know what to be saying at all. But I think it's good.

> PA26 added: I'd find that very hard now going up to the school all the time. Like Mrs X [teacher] in the primary school has always been a great help to me. I'm not very good with teachers, and that. I always feel, eh, you know, a bit intimidated.

Parents also expressed unwillingness to discuss their children's SEN with others, especially parents whose children did not have SEN, and most indicated a preference to meet a school representative in a more confidential and sensitive setting.

> PA25: To be honest now I don't think that a meeting like that is the place to discuss those things 'though... I mean X [child] would die if she was sitting there beside me and I asked a question about something about support or anything like that.

> PA7: I would prefer to do it on my own or maybe with other parents whose kids also had some problems not in front of everybody else.

Challenge and support. When asked about aspirations for their children at post-primary school, parents emphasised sense of belonging above academic attainment.

> PA27: I'm more concerned that X [child] will settle. That is more important to me than the academic side of things, because if she is upset she won't do anything anyway. But, if she settles in, then I will be happy with that. I know I should be thinking about her academics as well, but just at the moment that's not my priority for her. If she settles and has a group of friends around her, that's what is important for her at the moment.

Nonetheless, they recognised the importance of sense of achievement and the need for challenge.

> PA7: I would hope that he [child] can get some more confidence in himself and achieve at something that makes him feel like a success and I think that's down to the system...if the system sets you up to fail then that's what will happen. I think that X's [child's] expectations of himself are lower because he finds school difficult.

Parents believed that teachers and SNAs had a potential role to play in cultivating their children's confidence in schoolwork.

> PA25: Ah yes, X's [child] resource teacher has been very good. And she always tell X that she is not stupid and well able to do all of her work and just try. X will miss her alright. She has definitely benefited from it. Her confidence came back and everything. Just like you say X [other parent's name], they do suffer if they think they can't do the work all the time.

Parents believed that this confidence would ultimately give the children more choices about how to live independently.

> PA6: I just want X [child] to be happy and become independent so whatever that might mean for him. I mean, like, an apprenticeship or something. Well then, that's ok by me. I mean once he can get a job and have a life, then that's ok.

> PA4: I'll just be happy if he [child] stays in school and gets some exams so that he can get a job or do whatever he likes, but at least he will have a choice, like.

Discussion

A number of key issues emerged at pre-transition. For pupils, there was a strong sense of loss of *security* provided by primary school, clearly evident in the theme *"things I will miss"*. This reflected international studies on pupils with and without SEN. This sense of loss primarily concerned elevated stature and feeling understood by primary teachers. In addition, no longer being the eldest pupils generated worries about personal security and stature in the new school, as reflected *"fitting in"*. This finding appears to be unique to pupils with SEN who socialise more often with younger peers. Pupil-teacher relationships seemed inextricably linked to sense of security. Furthermore, while intimacy of the primary teacher-pupil relationship appeared to be independent of academic performance, this was not the perception of post-primary school. Indeed, parents reported similar concerns. For them, their child's social and academic matters were intricately bound through strong pupil-teacher relationships at primary school, but not at post-primary. *"Performing as well as others"* further reflected the fear of post-primary teacher reproach. And the possibility of lower academic attainment, coupled with potential limitations rule-following appeared to make these concerns greater for pupils with SEN.

Pupils indicated concerns about getting off on the right foot with teachers through *"experiencing and talking about 'going to the new school".* In some cases, these concerns were ameliorated through pre-entry transition programmes. In contrast, many perceived this contact as less than positive in terms of an over-emphasis on academic challenge and risks of underperforming or misbehaving. Thus, pupil concerns about getting into trouble and academic competence were inadvertently reinforced by pre-entry contact. In short, pupils were not fully aware of what would be expected. These latter findings suggest that pre-entry programmes should not emphasise academic attainment, and the former findings suggest instead focusing on a strong sense of security. The current data from both pupils and parents also illustrate that these families are highly sensitive to information and provision regarding the continuation of resources.

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