



 **Pathways**

ASCL Association
of School and
College Leaders

A Guide to Continuity of Learning between Phases

Written by Julie McCulloch and Suzanne O'Farrell



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About the author



Julie McCulloch is Primary and Governance Specialist at ASCL. She focuses on all aspects of primary education and on governance-related issues across both the primary and secondary phases. Julie previously worked in educational publishing, is an experienced school governor, a trustee of a multi-academy trust and a board member of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.



Suzanne O'Farrell is the Association of School and College Leader's (ASCL) Curriculum and Assessment Specialist. Before joining ASCL, Suzanne was headteacher of a large secondary school in Staffordshire for seven years. During her 27-year teaching career, Suzanne's roles included Head of Modern Languages, Head of 6th form, Deputy Headteacher, Local Leader of Education and Tutor Fellow at Keele University.

Who is this guide for?

This report is intended to support primary leaders in planning effective academic transition and continuity of learning between the primary and secondary phases.

Updated: November 2018

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The troublesome transfer

The Cambridge Primary Review,¹ the most comprehensive inquiry into primary education for half a century, described the move from primary to secondary school as “the troublesome transfer”. Highlighting the way in which “curriculum discontinuity and variations in teaching practice tripped pupils up while they were adjusting to the new social environment of secondary school”, it recommended that “the sudden curricular and pedagogical changes that mark [pupils’] moves between schools and between key stage ‘compartments’ need to be eased. Transition must become a process, rather than an event”.

Managing change

Many primary and secondary schools have worked extremely hard to ensure that children feel comfortable and confident as they make what, for most, will be the biggest change in their educational journey so far. Most secondary schools visit Year 6s in their main feeder primaries, and run well-regarded induction days and summer schools to help children get to know their new environment, teachers and classmates. Most children start Year 7 feeling nervous, but not completely in the dark about what to expect when they walk through the door of their new school in September.



Examples of primary and secondary schools working together effectively on academic (as opposed to pastoral) transition, however, are less common. Examples of primary and secondary schools seeing academic transition as, to use the Cambridge Primary Review’s terms, a “process, rather than an event”, are rarer still.



This report seeks to explore the reasons behind this disconnect and to suggest practical ways in which primary school leaders can engage with their secondary counterparts to help create genuine continuity of learning for pupils. It highlights effective practice, explores the opportunities and

potential barriers in creating successful partnerships focused on academic transition and suggests some steps schools might take to move towards effective and sustainable continuity of learning.

Continuity of learning

By “continuity of learning” we mean building sequentially on previous learning, finding out what specific subject knowledge has been taught across the curriculum and aiming to build on this incrementally, with the level of challenge gradually increasing year-on-year. Continuing learning is carefully planned to avoid gaps in pupils’ learning, unnecessary repetition and low expectations.

Working together

The key to successful continuity of learning is for all teachers, in both primary and secondary schools, to understand the pupil’s journey. Secondary teachers need to understand what pupils have learnt and studied across different subject areas in primary school and primary teachers need to know the overarching long term curriculum plan for pupils in secondary school. The overall aim of a successful transition process should ensure that secondary teachers are aware of what pupils have mastered and what gaps still need fixing. With expectations on pupils of all ages ramping up, the case for schools working together to ensure progress is as smooth as possible has never been stronger.

A complete picture

It is not just about knowledge, though. Children's success at school depends on a whole host of factors including their home life, their attitude to learning, their experience of school so far, their ability to work with their peers, their resilience. The single class teacher model of most primary schools means that Year 6 teachers know their pupils inside out. The most effective approaches to continuity of learning create opportunities for primary teachers to share this less tangible knowledge about their pupils, alongside knowledge of their academic achievements.

The current picture

The wasted years?

Ofsted's provocatively titled report, *Key Stage 3: the wasted years?*² brought into sharp relief how far we are from achieving this joined-up approach. Pulling no punches, Ofsted claimed that, based on its inspection findings, continuity between phases could be better managed.

“too often, the transition from primary to secondary school was poorly handled. Consequently, the gains made by pupils at primary school were not embedded and developed at Key Stage 3.”

Warming to its theme, the report argued that too often curriculum repetition across phases was accepted as the norm.

“too many secondary schools did not work effectively with partner primary schools to understand pupils' prior learning and ensure that they built on this during Key Stage 3. Worryingly, some secondary leaders simply accepted that pupils would repeat what they had already done in primary school during the early part of Key Stage 3, particularly in Year 7.”

Finally, the report claimed, that academic needs weren't given enough attention during the transition between phases.

“Leaders prioritise the pastoral over the academic needs of pupils during transition from primary school. While this affects all pupils, it can have a particularly detrimental effect on the progress and engagement of the most able.”

A fair assessment?

Is this a fair assessment? Yes and no. It is a timely reminder of the problem, and a useful provocation to schools to consider their approach. What it doesn't do, however, is delve very deeply into why this issue so often arises, and what barriers schools may need to overcome in order to improve the situation.



The key challenges

There are many reasons why the transition from primary to secondary school can be problematic. What is it that makes genuine continuity of learning so challenging?

Common factors

Different curriculum models

One significant difference between primary and secondary is the approach to the curriculum; in primary this tends to be reasonably broad right through from Reception to the end of Year 6 whereas in secondary, the curriculum as a whole is less connected across subjects and eventually narrows as pupils make their options, sometimes as early as half way through Year 8. Moving from a generalist approach to a specialist approach is one of the challenges pupils have to adjust to and make sense of.

Historic mistrust

The lack of connection between the primary and secondary sector in the UK, the pressures on all schools to meet increasingly challenging standards and the high stakes implications for schools that do not meet them do not naturally build professional trust and collaboration. Many secondary teachers, rightly or wrongly, distrust the data they receive about their incoming pupils' attainment. A culture of mistrust leads to missed opportunities to share valuable information about pupils.

Human development

Humans are complex creatures – and pre-teens and teenagers doubly so! An approach to continuity of learning that fails to recognise the significant and rapid changes that take place as children mature is doomed to failure. The fact that the common “Year 7 dip” is found in many countries, including those with different school structures and different transition points, suggests that there may be more going on here than just a lack of communication between schools.

Ways forward

So far, so negative. Continuity of learning is not something that can be achieved overnight. But many schools and multi-academy trusts are finding innovative and inspiring ways to tackle the challenge, to change mindsets and to create a better, more coherent curriculum experience for their pupils. Read the inspiring case studies on the following pages.



Case studies

1 Focus on English

A two-way process

Primary and secondary colleagues from one partnership set about strengthening their academic transition. They focused on their English/literacy departments initially. From the outset, they were clear this had to be a two-way process. The first step was a discussion between teachers of literacy/English in both settings where they exchanged information about how they had selected their content for the curriculum and why. Armed with this knowledge, the primary teachers first observed the Year 7s in the secondary settings, focusing particularly on lower ability pupils. Their first reaction was, "they can do better than that".

This led to a review and detailed collaborative planning on teaching strategies to engage and challenge pupils to develop their extended writing in both settings.

Longer-term success

This project has led to the raising of expectations in pupils' extended writing in secondary school, as teachers have incorporated some of the familiar techniques used in primary such as using video, incorporating drama and exploring options for cross-curricular work. The schools have now begun to link other subjects, which has led to increased professional trust across the schools and even team teaching where possible (in art and science) to develop their own practice. The primary schools have been given access to the core knowledge laid out in the key stage 3 curriculum to ensure they have a long term view

of their pupils' expected growth in understanding and knowledge in the key subjects.

Both groups of teachers have started to look in more detail at each other's progression models or curriculum maps. They have discussed how some of the key concepts initially introduced in primary but later developed in secondary can be shaped effectively, building in familiar terms or examples.

Wider impact

Another successful partnership was really keen on ensuring that the impact for pupils was wider than just reading and writing. They had always had a strong liaison between their art and design departments and had shared many of the successful peer assessment approaches. Their transition project focused on Van Gogh templates and the project began in primary, with secondary colleagues coming to view the gallery of work in primary school. Then the techniques were built on within the half term at secondary and a similar exhibition was arranged. This second exhibition now involves parents and younger pupils in the primary schools as a way of preparing younger pupils and exposing them to the vibrant dynamic world of a secondary school art department.



2 Focus on science

A partnership focused on science as a starting point for establishing effective academic transition. Prior to this collaboration, there had been an erosion of trust between primary and secondary colleagues. However, when secondary colleagues began to work with their primary colleagues, they soon saw a noticeable difference.

“[They] were blown away with the pupils’ work considering the resources the school has.”

They realised that the key area for development at primary was chemistry knowledge and skills, and worked together to plan an effective science curriculum spanning Years 5 to 8. The group realised that pupils were lacking confidence in practical skills, as they had not had much opportunity to develop and practise these at primary. So they developed between them a set of easy practical experiments to practise the skills required which did not require a huge amount of specialist equipment. As a result, primary colleagues felt supported to deliver a coherent scheme of work which not only built up scientific skills gradually but also emphasised the strong links with maths.

Key learning

What emerged as key learning from this partnership was that collaboration must be more than just teaching a class in a different setting; it needed to be a professional dialogue between colleagues and an appreciation of both start and end points and barriers along the way.

A noticeable benefit was a greater understanding of the core scientific concepts that needed to be fully mastered across the year 5 to 8 setting. What started out as being a sharing of resources ended up with the development of a progression model spanning these years with key concepts carefully introduced and subsequently revisited. Primary teachers could see how the content taught in their setting had a clear relationship with what was studied later – all part of a coherent curriculum.

3 Focus on maths

Maths is always a difficult subject at transition due to the different way key concepts may be taught. Three schools – one secondary and two primaries – came together in this collaboration. The project started with secondary colleagues coming together to learn from their primary colleagues when and how certain mathematical concepts were being first introduced; for example, they learnt the method used to teach three-digit column subtraction, and how it was revisited across the primary curriculum so that pupils were able to use it effortlessly.

Shared pedagogy

Their collaborative work not only focused on the “what” that was being taught but the “how”, and the implementation of standard methods across the partnership. The secondary teachers reported that for some groups of pupils, lower ability in particular, referring back to the method used to introduce a key mathematical concept in a primary setting and building on this was beneficial. Having had considerable impact with low attainers, the second year of the project focused on high attainers as well. Levels of motivation were extremely high for this group. They benefited from the input of secondary specialists who ran a series of mathematics masterclasses in the summer term to whet pupils’ appetite for secondary school. Maths leads engaged with each other, shared development opportunities, continued to visit each other in their schools and talked to pupils about their learning and their progress.

Key learning

This shared approach had many benefits. Teachers in both settings could:

- agree on the most important concepts for children to learn at each stage
- prioritise finding out what pupils already knew and how connections with new material could be made
- agree to prioritise depth over breadth
- share approaches on the most effective retrieval strategies in problem-solving and cross-curricular activities.

4 Focus on modern foreign languages

This is one of the most difficult areas with regards to transition, and there is a genuine risk of disengagement through repeating work, particularly when pupils arrive in secondary school from many different primary schools. One project which has been successful across a growing number of primaries is ASCL's *Discovering Language* programme.

A cross-curricular approach

The model adopted in this programme involves the primary class teacher (a non-specialist language teacher) learning the rudiments of a range of foreign languages alongside their pupils. It is recommended that languages are selected from a range of language families. Teachers are guided towards commercially-produced resources intended for non-specialists which include videos and DVDs showing aspects of life in the countries where the languages are spoken. The resources are selected to enable the teacher to take a cross-curricular approach, bringing in geography, history and citizenship, and to provide pupils with some intercultural insight. All these resources are freely available on the [ASCL website](#).



Teachers described how the Discovering Language programme represented a realistic and practical solution to the existing multiple problems surrounding the primary to secondary transition in languages.



Sustained learning

Teachers reported that the multilingual programme sustained pupils' interest in the long term; it excited curiosity about culture as well as language. Teachers also felt that pupils' literacy skills had benefited. Pupils drew links between English and foreign language structures and had an improved understanding of meta-language. They also had an increased awareness of the origins and meanings of words in English. Latin was cited as especially helpful in improving literacy, in raising awareness of gender, grammar and word order.

“... the pupils now consider grammar and the way language works. In that way, I think it has helped their understanding of the English language.”

Teacher taking part in Discovering Language programme.

Making the change

Different approaches

Every school is different, and the context in which school leaders and teachers are operating will vary. The suggestions below are offered in this spirit, recognising that not every idea will work in every situation. They are arranged in rough order of commitment, from quick wins to major structural changes. Some can be implemented by primary schools alone, but most involve working in collaboration with secondary colleagues.

We hope that they will provide food for thought, and encourage primary leaders and teachers to think differently about how they might work with their secondary colleagues.

1. Understand each other's curriculum map or progression model

Make time to ensure that both primary and secondary teachers understand which elements of the curriculum map are being covered at which points, from Year 5 to key stage 3. For example, you could discuss which key geographical or historical concepts and skills are taught in a primary setting and why. Secondary colleagues can then ensure these are built on sequentially and incrementally in the early years of secondary. Secondary schools that develop knowledge organisers could share these with primary colleagues.

2. Invite pupils to showcase their best Year 6 work

Do you worry that your pupils' secondary teachers will not realise what they are capable of? Why not ensure every child leaves your school with a portfolio of their best piece of work in each subject, to remind themselves and show their new teachers what they can do? (This is even more effective if their secondary school is aware of what you are doing, and proactively asks their incoming pupils to show them their portfolio; or if the "best" piece of work is pasted inside the cover of all subject books, so that other teachers can see how well the pupils can write.)

3. Get to know your secondary counterparts

How well do you know the leadership team at your main destination secondary schools? How well do your Year 6 teachers know the Year 7 teachers there? Do your subject coordinators ever talk to the relevant subject leads? Building these sorts of relationships can not only deepen your understanding of the journey your pupils are on, it can also open up useful channels of communication about the needs of individual children.

4. Observe your counterparts in action

Once you have got to know your secondary counterparts a little, why not invite them to observe some lessons in your school, and ask if you can do the same in their school? Open lines of communication between primary and secondary schools; mutual respect and a willingness to learn from each other can make a big difference.

5. Invite secondary colleagues to your moderation meetings

Observing primary colleagues discussing the standard of work they expect from children at different ages will give secondary teachers an invaluable insight into what their pupils should be able to achieve.



6. Initiate a cross-phase curriculum planning project

Some of the most powerful case studies in this guide involved primary and secondary teachers getting together to plan a joined-up curriculum which spanned the primary to secondary transition point. Could you initiate a project, probably focused on one subject initially, to explore ways in which learning could be structured and developed in a strategic way over a number of years? It is worth remembering that a curriculum in either setting will be dynamic and constantly changing – curriculum work is never finished.

7. Develop common assessment approaches

Sharing approaches to assessment is an invaluable way of gaining an understanding of each other's curriculum. Schools plan assessment through first deciding what they want their pupils to learn, and then deciding how they are going to assess it. Gaining a first-hand knowledge of what is selected for assessment in each other's settings will give teachers a good insight into the core knowledge and skills pupils are expected to master.

8. Explore team teaching options

Some groups of schools are finding interesting and innovative ways to share staff in order to improve transition and build capacity. How might your school benefit, for example, from a secondary language or science teacher spending a day a week working with your Year 5s and 6s? And how might your local secondary school benefit from one of your teachers sharing with them how you plan cross-curricular links in order to reinforce learning across subjects or working with lower-attaining readers to improve their reading skills?

9. Explore the possibility of formal partnerships

Finally, and very much at the “structural change” end of the spectrum, how might a more formal partnership with one or more secondary schools enable you to really exploit some of these possibilities? With the rise of the multi-academy trust, increasing numbers of schools are becoming part of cross-phase “families”. The potential for such groups to blur the boundaries between primary and secondary is hugely exciting, and so far most groups have really only scratched the surface of what they might do.

Conclusion

There is a real appetite among both primary and secondary school leaders and teachers to find new ways to tackle the thorny issue of transition and to think more cohesively about the educational journey of children through primary and secondary school. We hope that the suggestions here have provided a framework for tackling the “troublesome transfer”.

Further reading

Useful resources

The following resources cover a range of issues relating to transition:

University of Bristol (2010) *Supporting learning in the transition from primary to secondary schools*. Bristol: University of Bristol.

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/education/migrated/documents/transition-bristoluniversity.pdf>

EPPSE/DCSF (2008) *What Makes a Successful Transition from Primary to Secondary School?* (DCSF-RR019). London: DCSF, © Institute of Education, University of London 2008.

<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8618/>

ASCL *Discovering Language* project

<https://www.ascl.org.uk/about-us/ascl-projects/discovering-language/>

About the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

ASCL aims to be the first choice professional association and union for all school, college and system leaders. It works to shape national education policy, provide advice and support to members and deliver first class professional development.

Find out more about how ASCL supports primary school leaders [here](#).

Endnotes

- 1 Robin Alexander (Editor) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Routledge.
- 2 Ofsted (2015) *Key stage 3: the wasted years?* (150106), p4. London: Ofsted, © Crown Copyright 2015. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/key-stage-3-the-wasted-years>

Oxford University Press resources



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